

# WHY YOGA?

Børge Madsen

A photograph of a person performing a complex yoga asana, possibly a variation of a handstand or a highly balanced pose, against a soft-focus blue background.

A CULTURAL  
HISTORY OF YOGA

“We all have some vague ideas about yogic poses, the accompanying breathing and meditation. We also all understand that yoga can have an amazing effect on the individual. People seem to love it. Many books explain the principles of yoga. But *A Cultural History of Yoga* zooms in on *yoga culture* instead of *yoga principles*. The result is a totally different picture from that with which we are usually presented. It has encouraged me to rethink why ancient Indians and we today are captivated by yoga. Reading this book has been a very interesting and astonishing journey into ancient cultures, Indian history, colonialism, the function of symbols, the role of religion and the social fabric of modern and ancient society. This is not just a book for people interested in yoga. It is for anyone interested in understanding *culture* and what role culture has in an individual’s life and in society. Yoga becomes a lens through which we experience history and culture. For those yogis who decide to study this book I can only say that after reading it you most probably will ask yourself why you actually are practising. Things (and your motives) might not be what they appear to be.”

**Peter Schär**  
**Yoga Instructor**

“Often we pride ourselves on the achievements and icons of our culture and history. Cultural forms like art, music, theatre, literature, philosophy, religion, science – and yoga - are seen to represent something *great, universal and timeless*. Those specialists and followers who maintain, spread and prize such cultural forms claim that they are elevated *above day-to-day practical and commercial concerns*. They claim that these noble cultural forms and that those participating in them are *disinterested* in egocentric and worldly affairs (expressed in rhetoric like *art for art’s sake*). This book steps into a critical style of historiography where such dignified culture is not accepted as an “*innocent and neutral pursuit of ultimate values*”. Sociologists like P. Bourdieu have shown how cultural forms like art and academic science despite claims of only pursuing universal values are actually deeply formed by and interact with society. In a similar way this book pulls yoga discourse – its practices and signs - back into the politics and economy of society. An imperative step for the yoga discourse.”

**Ole Wøide**  
**lector**  
**Cand. Mag. philosophy**

“Any discourse benefits from debate and questioning of underlying assumptions. This is what philosophy and reflexivity is about. Until this book the yoga discourse shows a remarkable lack of such critical investigations of core premises and beliefs. In particular there seems to be too little examination of yoga’s involvement with society, power and social conflict. *A Cultural History of Yoga* rectifies this omission. Some readers deeply committed to yoga might feel hurt by the philosophical attitude and ideological criticism expressed in this book. However on second thoughts they will probably welcome this contribution to a debate of yoga’s role in society. It is through such philosophical debate that we sharpen our knowledge and understanding – this includes yoga. This pioneering book has invited the yoga discourse into the forum of critical philosophical scrutiny. I warmly welcome this.

"This is a really interesting manuscript. It occupies an unusual – even unique - space in that it situates itself between popularising accounts of Yoga and strictly scholarly works insofar as it seeks to bring academic insights and methods to bear on its subject matter but to maintain a level of accessibility that is open to the general interested reader. I see this as a very positive aspect of this book. ..... I read *A Cultural History of Yoga* as an important bridge. As such rather than view the book as a strictly academic work I see it as a critical perspective on the popular and academic literature as a whole. In that regard I think there is nothing like this out there."

**Professor Richard King**  
**Professor of Buddhist and Asian Studies**  
**University of Kent.**

*Why Yoga?*

**A cultural history of yoga**

Børge Madsen

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# Introduction – Why this Book?

## 1. What is the Book About?

### **Yoga Texts and Adverts**

Let us start this introduction with a short reflection on an advertisement for a watch. This strangely enough will enable the reader to get an initial idea about what this book is about and how it is trying to establish a new way of understanding the history of Yoga.



The watch in the advert probably costs a hundred times more than an ordinary and inexpensive watch. Why pay so much? In order to tempt and persuade, the advert does not tell us about the technical qualities of the watch – the materials, the mechanics, the precision, the longevity, the quality control, or the extended warranty. There is not a single word or hint about this: the technical aspect of the watch. The advert confirms what we all know: we are *not* paying a fortune for such a watch because we are obsessed with for instance extreme precise time keeping. The advertisers know that, and we the readers also know that.

The clue to what makes you want to buy the watch is of course the person depicted: one of Hollywood's most famous star celebrities. He is the key. He is rich, he is successful, he is powerful and he probably lives a life we ordinary people can only dream about. In other words, through the actor the watch becomes *associated* with extreme success. This watch – the advert tells us indirectly – is made for and worn by only the best: people who can afford it,

people who want to wear and *display* a symbol of their success. By wearing this watch, the owner similarly becomes *associated* with success. Hence the advert it is not communicating *technical superiority* – this is not significant in our choice of such products – but instead its message is a *symbol*, a difference, a fantasy, a dream. This is what we are primarily buying.

Exactly as the watch has a technical and a symbolic aspect to it, so has yoga<sup>1</sup>. What they have in common is they both have *use-value* (the technical aspect) and, at the same time, they radiate and communicate meaning, value and difference (the symbolic aspect). The latter is called *symbolic-value* – as opposed to use-value. Thus the advert above is creating symbolic-value: it is encoding the watch with symbolic messages *by linking* it to cherished cultural icons and beliefs.

As I studied the history of yoga, it became clear to me when I was reading old yoga texts that they were actually in some respects similar to this advert: They stated almost nothing about the technical aspects of yoga – the use-value. It was clearly not in the mind of the authors of yoga texts to provide technical insights. As in the advert above, the yoga texts were instead concerned with communicating *symbols* to their contemporary society. So if yoga texts seemed mostly occupied with communicating symbolic messages, why not make this symbolic-value the subject of a study? What symbolic messages did yoga texts send to their contemporary societies and why were they so occupied with communicating symbols (instead of technical information, for instance)? How and to what degree is contemporary yoga culture orientated by symbolic-value?

Thus the guiding tenet of this book is to investigate the symbolic aspect of yoga – or more precisely to investigate yoga as a *sign*. The notion ‘sign’ is central to this study. Signs – like for instance road signs or national flags - are ‘anything conveying messages to us’.

By this I mean that not only the advert above, but also the actual physical watch and the actual actor all *refer to something outside themselves*. Hence - according to semiotics - they are ‘*signs*’. Anything can be a sign as long as someone interprets it as meaning ('signifying') something - referring to or *standing for* something other than itself. *In other words something becomes a sign when we encode it with messages*. Above we have seen how the advert is a sign encoded with messages. The guiding idea for this study is to investigate yoga as a sign – yoga as something encoded with cultural messages.

### Symbols only exist within a culture

Further, I could see as I travelled through history that as society and cultures were changing, the symbolic signals of yoga *had* to adjust to this. Each epoch had its mind set, fantasies, dreams, perceptions, aspirations and worldviews – its own *culture*. And the yoga sign *had* to change and become a part of a specific historical culture in order to be meaningful for this given epoch. If we think about it, symbolic communication is an intrinsic part of a given culture and society and it cannot be lifted out of this context. If done so the symbol utterly loses its meaning. An example.

Take the watch advert and, within your fantasy, time-travel five hundred years into the future. Will the people of the future react to this advertising sign in the same way as those of

today – will they attribute the same symbolic meaning to the watch? The celebrity in the advert would only be known to very few if any people and hence the advert’s symbolic communication would be meaningless: “*It is a photo of some guy who is wearing something they called a watch and a shirt in those days*”, people might say. Or travel five hundred years back in time and people would not even comprehend what kind of “*strange jewellery*” was displayed: “*It is a depiction of how the man, using mind power, can make this jewel fly in the air*”, people might say as they see the watch hovering in the foreground. Not many sales would be generated on such an interpretation.

Thus yoga’s symbolic-value – its encoded messages - *must* change as culture and society change – otherwise ‘the yoga sign’ like the advert would be incomprehensible to different societies. Hence if we agree that symbols are central to society and if we want to understand *yoga as a sign (a conveyor of messages)*, we need to investigate each specific historical culture and society of which the yoga sign is a part. We can only understand the symbolic messages of yoga by putting the yoga sign into its *cultural and social context* - which turns this book into a *cultural sociological study* of yoga.

### **Our relation to yoga**

In this book, the *cultural history yoga* – the study of the ever changing meaning of ‘the yoga sign’ – I will of course discuss not *only* symbolic-value, culture and society but also explain the shifting technical meanings of yoga through history. However, I will not try to identify innovative and new-fangled interpretations of the *technical meanings* of yoga. This is not the thrust of the book. The technical aspect of yoga is only a supporting actor in my narrative. Instead the leading actor – the true protagonist, who drives the history of yoga as I see it, is the *symbolic aspect* of yoga. The cultural messages encoded in the yoga sign.

Thus paradoxically my answer to the question “*why* are people today, for instance, buying incredibly expensive items like carrier-bags, fragrances, cars, yachts, houses and clothes?” is on an abstract level the same as my answer to the question “*why* have people practised yoga throughout history?” Our relationship to such signs is primarily driven by symbolic-value (cultural messages), not use-value (technical excellence). Yes, there are various *use-values* in all those mentioned signs, but what really engage people are the *symbolic-values* of those ‘signs’.

Symbols are expressions of our *relation* to things – what they mean to us. Hence a cultural study of yoga enquires into our *relation to yoga* – what does yoga *mean* to us as *a society*? In my understanding of cultural studies, we are studying ‘yoga culture’ as we would study for instance ‘body culture’ or ‘consumer culture’: How do we relate to body and consumption? What meaning do we ascribe to body and to consumption? How have the roles of body and consumption changed through history? When the same questions are asked of yoga, they will reveal *the yoga culture* of a given society. In other words we are studying the *role of yoga in various societies*.

## The subject of the book defined

Let me finally define the subject of “*Why Yoga?*” in as few and precise words as possible: It is a *critical cultural-sociological investigation of the yoga sign throughout its entire history*. Let me explain the words used.

**Critical:** Many popular and academic books on yoga tend to be written in a spirit ranging from implicit to strongly explicit endorsement of yoga ideas and practices. Often they do not challenge the validity and logic of the claims and assumptions they have identified as central to yoga. This uncritical acceptance of a text is sometimes called ‘*the dominant reading*’ or ‘*the preferred reading*’, as this style of reading endorses the dominance and power often embedded in the text. In contrast ‘*a critical reading*’ scrutinises and asks sceptical and unwarranted questions. A special variety of the critical reading style is sometimes called ‘*oppositional reading*’. The purpose of this particular type of critical reading, to which I and most cultural sociology adhere, is to reveal and challenge the underlying assumptions, ideologies of dominance, power games and myths, which the ‘*preferred reading*’ style has rationalised and replicated.

**Cultural:** By ‘culture’ I understand a shared (but never totally agreed) way of living. It is about how we experience the world. It is a software program or an app, which enables us to make sense of ourselves and the world around us. In this book ‘culture’ is mainly about the creation of meaning, self-identity, symbols and discourses (‘discourses’ are the actual practice of talking and writing, resulting in bringing an object - like for instance an ‘electron’ or a ‘saint’ - into being for us).

**Sociological:** This book makes it a central theme to explain how yoga was formed by, changed by and took part in social conflicts and changes; the role of ‘yoga culture’ in society. Yoga is seen here as a part of a specific cultural sub-system of society – *a cultural know-how system empowering certain groups* - what is sometimes called a *cultural field*. From a sociological point of view, any culture - especially cultural fields - is closely interlinked with power, conflict and society.

**Yoga sign:** This book reveals that the yoga sign is without eternal nature or meaning but is instead fluid and evolving. In the words of semiotics (the study of signs) we can say that the yoga word – the physical sound – has stayed relatively stable over thousands of years. However the meaning – ‘the signified’ – of this word and the physical reality it pointed to – the practice or ‘the referent’ – were both utterly unstable. So even if the word *yoga* was often used, the meaning and the practice associated varied not only between different epochs but also varied between groups within a given historical epoch.

**History:** The *yoga sign* – or the *yoga discourse* – is followed from when it first appeared in India, about 400 BC, to its present usage in the 21 Century. Hence a history – or *genealogy* – of *yoga* is about the specific historical processes, which made possible (i.e. conditioned) the *yoga discourse* in different historical epochs.

In short, the book frames and discusses *yoga* in an entirely new way. It approaches *yoga* as *culture*: a site for the creation of meaning, symbols, self-identities and discourses. Let me talk about some of the background to the approach and conclusion I arrived at above.

## 2. What inspired this book?

### **Yoga popularisers and yoga history**

A modern reader interested in the history of yoga has in my view two principal different sources. One source is to consult the many popular yoga books we find in well-stocked bookshops and on web sites. Many websites will actually produce listings sorted according to popularity.

Most popular yoga books are written by people I label '*yoga popularisers*', practitioners and adherents who have made a business out of yoga. Often popularisers are Western *professional* yoga instructors or Indian gurus with a group of followers. Sometimes the popularisers are '*yoga amateurs*' – non-professional practitioners - with a passionate and lifelong dedication to yoga practice. In their books the yoga popularisers promote yoga philosophy and practice. Often the reader will find a separate chapter or two on yoga history, which will suffice for a short introduction to the subject, but not for a thorough and detailed understanding.

Such books are often limited by commercial reality. They address a general market which publishers perceive not to be interested in an extended and detailed scrutiny of the history and concepts of yoga. Further, as most popular books basically are manuals of yoga poses, they are, understandably, primarily occupied with physical instructions and Western anatomical issues (like how not to injure your ligaments).

Thus there is in the general book market little information about the history of yoga. The yoga philosophy presented often consists of a conglomeration of fragments of ideas picked up on the romantic-spiritual circuits: the meaning and concepts of yoga are in many cases presented as a blend of therapeutic and 'spiritual' rewards; explanations are repeatedly spiced with mystic and alien Sanskrit terms, and are regularly framed by various New-Age worldviews.

The main sources for contemporary popular writers are mainly other yoga popularisers. Reading and referring to critical academic literature is, so to speak, non-existent. Thus no comparisons of conflicting views, no critical investigations of core yoga assumptions, no philosophical and political confrontations with some of the obscure yoga ideas and practices are deemed necessary as a part of disseminating yoga knowledge.

Popular yoga discourse at its best will give the interested reader a brief, romanticised and fragmented introduction to the history of yoga. At its worst it claims there is an 'ancient yoga tradition' – maybe 5000 years old – where primordial yoga sages in deep meditation

developed yoga philosophy and yoga poses. Modern yoga in this view is thought to be a direct descendant of that mythical tradition.

### Academic yoga history

Alternatively the reader can decide to look deeper into the matter by reading *academic books* about yoga and Hinduism. We could call these sources the intellectual or academic yoga discourse.

Since the renaissance (around 1350 AD) there has been in Europe an on-going so-called humanist research tradition of conducting historical, philosophical critical investigations of the cultural past. The first humanists were renaissance Italians and their subject was the legacy of the cultures of the Roman Empire and Classical Greece. What is good about such humanist critical research (which later was included in all academic research) is that it is supposed to proceed like a lawyer or a judge in a court case: to present open documentation which can be critically and rationally examined and controlled. The process involves carrying out a probing investigation; producing and scrutinising the evidence; delivering arguments for and against; evaluating the case from many points whilst not accepting the first or best version, and so on.<sup>2</sup> These methods have not been adopted by today's popular yoga discourse.

From about 1800 AD there emerged such a European humanist writing tradition on India's religio-culture. It was called *Orientalism*. It had its zenith in the 1930-40s. The cultural-historical studies of the Orientalists are mainly dry, detailed and often concerned with translation issues of ancient Sanskrit scriptures and signs (i.e. their work was mainly *philological*). Any educated reader can read the Orientalists – but you will need much patience, diligence and a special interest. These books provide many interesting details, but their style of writing and conclusions are in many cases marked by the signs of time. They reflect an era where yoga was relatively new and unknown to Western elites.

Today, the main academic yoga discourse is found within university departments of Religious Studies. This research is often today labelled *Indology*. Within modern Indology the interested reader will only find a few *general* books about yoga history and philosophy in English. The oldest of them is the towering classic written by the influential religious scholar Mircea Eliade: *Yoga –Immortality and Freedom* (1958). This book has been re-published numerous times, but is little known today among yoga popularisers and 'yoga sympathisers' (amateurs, who practice yoga). Modern 'yoga sympathisers' – as I tend to call non-professional yoga enthusiasts - are probably better acquainted with Georg Feuerstein: *The Yoga Tradition* (1998). At first glance these two extraordinary historiographies clearly stand in the humanist research tradition and throw a great deal of light on the history of yoga. However closer reading reveals that they belong to the 'preferred readings' approach of yoga writing: They do not provide any *critical* evaluation of fundamental yoga notions. They foster undertones of religio-philosophical agendas, promoting yoga as the cure for the ailments of our civilisation and humanity in general.

A more recent opus is Peter Connolly: *A Student's Guide to the History and Philosophy of Yoga* (2007). It understands and propounds yoga as signifying 'spiritual practice', which is

a usual conception within modern Western yoga discourse. Accordingly Connolly's historiography of yoga turns into a broad and general review of India's religio-philosophical ("spiritual") systems. Regrettable it further tends to treat these "spiritual systems" as isolated from history and sociology.

Finally, there is Geoffrey Samuel: *The Origins of Yoga and Tantra* (2008), which is an impressive account of various scholars' views on India's religions up to the thirteenth century. It is clearly written for the undergraduate student of religion and anthropology and is the only one of the yoga historical accounts to focus on history, politics, sociology and anthropology. Samuel, an anthropologist, digs deeper into social and cultural issues. His book is however mainly a historical-anthropological study of Indian religion *as such* and barely addresses specific ideas of yoga.

None of the four historiographies mentioned has any significant contribution to the yoga history after say 1500 AD. There are however a few works focusing on contemporary yoga forms. Joseph S. Alter: *Yoga in Modern India – The Body between Science and Philosophy* (2004) gives an anthropological account of the development of yoga in Colonial India. Elizabeth de Michelis: *A History of Modern Yoga - Patanjali and Western Esotericism* (2004) focusses on how Colonial yoga merged with Western esotericism. Finally there is Mark Singleton's *Yoga Body – The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (2010) focussing on modern yoga's relation to Western body practices and discourses. All three works are clearly not conceived as general and comprehensive yoga historiographies.

In general we could say there seems to be a sharp dividing line in historical yoga research between pre-modern and modern yoga forms. Hence there is no general yoga history covering both eras. Experts in Sanskrit and religious studies mainly cover pre-modern yoga, while modern yoga forms are covered by academics leaning towards anthropology and cultural studies. Between the two groups there seems to be a historical research gap: pre-modern yoga forms in India under foreign rule in the period circa 1500 to 1850.

### Post-modern expectations

Considering the enormous interest in yoga we have witnessed since the 1990s, there is, in my opinion, a lack of an accessible, general and critical socio-cultural history of yoga. This is the background for writing this book: it should be *comprehensive* and it should be *critical*. Of course there are the aforementioned critical reviews of *modern* yoga produced by academics like Alter, de Michelis and Singleton. But they are not *comprehensive* histories of yoga.

Secondly there is no general history of yoga, which reflects the outlook and methodologies of what is often termed our 'post-modern life conditions'. Let me expand on this because this is where the disregard of the *critical* element - the so-called 'oppositional reading' - becomes an issue.

Based on our experiences in a world of globalisation, mass media, the internet, anonymous urban life, instant news, mobile technology, casino banking, Watergate style political scandals, corporate fraud (Enron), spin, and public relation management contemporary, readers have different expectations of historiography and the documentary.

Most modern educated readers are guided by a sceptical and probing outlook which anticipates investigative research to look beneath the polished surface of things in order to reveal concealed interests and power structures. The admiration that former historical periods have attributed to cultural icons and symbols is often seen as misguided or even naïve.

To illustrate what I mean, take modern political discourse as an example. Through mass media, movies, literature and education we have today developed a very sceptical and transparent view on the political elites and their power games. These elites are not the celebrated public figures they used to be. Any modern observer would agree that political speeches and pamphlets cannot just be evaluated on their words and semantics. How powerful and wonderful politicians would then appear, if judged on their own utterances. Instead, we know that we need to analyse critically political statements for *spin*; for what they are not talking about; for the timing of their publication; for their change of subject; for the omissions and twisting of events; for the audience they are addressing; for the underlying power game; and for symbolic messages. We *expect* a discrepancy between presented reality and underlying reality.

Today many educated readers presume ancient yoga texts similarly to be full of spin, distortions, signs, power and politics. We carry this sceptical attitude with us when we encounter cultural icons and symbols like yoga. For us such cultural signs and discourses *also* need to be critically evaluated in their political and sociological context. We need to discover their symbolic signals – their implicit messages to society and their entanglement in power and politics. Otherwise we recognise that we will never grasp why such signs and discourses were conceived and what they were trying to achieve.

Take for instance the extraordinary claims of many yoga texts: that super-human powers are achieved through yoga – e.g. postulating that a highly advanced yogi can fly or experience god. A modern observer would immediately start to question such claims: why do the yogis claim this; what do they want to get out of this? A modern reader would assume that such an account about ‘magic power’ and ‘god access’ could be an expression of the discourse trying to attribute fearsome power to the yogi.

### The aim of this book

The purpose of this book about the cultural history of yoga is firstly to address such post-modern sensibilities. Many of the methodologies of contemporary cultural sociology reflect such post-modern attitudes and orientations.

The methodologies, which have guided this study, are often labelled ‘post-structuralist’. Central to much post-structuralism is to *challenge and criticise implicit ideologies of dominance and power structures* embedded in our cultural and social world (this effort is often within semiotics labelled ‘oppositional-‘ or ‘counter-hegemonic readings’). Let me explain this.

There is a shared belief among many cultural sociologists like myself that cultural systems and signs often work as instruments for what is termed ‘symbolic violence’ (Bourdieu 1984). By this rather harsh term is meant that members of subordinate groups - or the

population in general - tend to adopt the beliefs, values and outlooks of the groups dominating the social hierarchy. An example would be an Indian woman claiming that “*only men can achieve yogic liberation and following union with god. We women are too polluted to achieve this. Hence the aim of my life is to serve my (male) guru in such a way that I am purified and reborn as a male*”. Here the ‘male’ sign is clearly ascribed superiority. This symbolic-value (the message encoded in the ‘male’ sign) is in this example even adopted by the female speaker, who in fact is suffering under the ‘symbolic violence’ of the ‘male’ sign and the accompanying discourse of ‘purity’. This internalisation is ‘symbolic violence’.

It is a central motive for contemporary cultural sociology to reveal the ways in which cultural repression – ‘symbolic violence’ – works through cultural signs, discourses and practices. How they protect dominant groups and how subordinate groups face misery because they have internalised such violent cultural signs and discourses. Hence it became a central aim of this book to identify and reveal any eventual cultural violence – internalised ideological repression – intrinsic to the yoga sign in a given historical époque<sup>3</sup>.

The second aim is, with the help of cultural sociology, to produce a historical account of yoga’s *entire* cultural history: a narrative of the cultural history of yoga, where both pre-modern and modern yoga naturally fit in. This should enable us for the first time in the historiography of yoga to create a vision where the last centuries of yoga are reassessed as crucial and *symptomatic* within general yoga history. The aim is to create a cultural history where *any* yoga form is accepted as a valid expression of yoga culture and where *no* form is deemed to be ‘more true’ than any other.

By using existing scholarly research, we will generate a new and different yoga history based on genealogy and change. So there will be no need to uncover any new-and-never-before-seen-evidence to establish such a historio-sociological account of yoga. By deconstructing, re-combining and re-interpreting existing research by means of cultural sociological (post-structuralist) methodologies and inter-disciplinary academic disciplines, we will take steps in the direction of a *counter-hegemonic understanding of the yoga sign*. In short the aim is not to present new historical data and translations but to find a *new critical way of talking about yoga*<sup>4</sup>.

This new way of framing and talking about yoga – my oppositional reading – may be perceived as disrespectful, profane and misleading by the specialists in the cultural field. However, delving into history and society and discussing their impact on the yoga sign will place a cherished sign in an interesting new light.

### 3. Yoga seen through the lens of Cultural Studies

## Method and Approach

I mentioned that I would use some of the insights of *post-modern, post-structuralist or social constructionist philosophies*<sup>5</sup>, which have influenced our contemporary outlook so much. Post-modernism and social-constructionism recently have been seriously and rightly criticised for a range of issues<sup>6</sup>. Despite the criticism, there is still a range of approaches and viewpoints, which I feel can be used constructively to draw up a new vision of yoga. Many scholars would find my approach more precisely being based on *post-structuralism*<sup>7</sup>. Personally, I perceive myself as a contributor to what is called *Cultural Sociology* or *Cultural Studies* and such studies are today highly influenced by post-structuralism<sup>8</sup>.

Some researchers in social science and historiography, specialising in Indian studies, have since the mid-1980s already used these post-modern philosophies.<sup>9</sup> But I have found very little in their texts directly relating to yoga. In the post-structuralist worldview one observes any system of knowledge (or discourse) - including yoga - as closely connected to power. So a central method of post-structuralism is *discourse analysis*: critical investigations demonstrating how discourse and power create and support each other.

Central to critical discourse analysis is to *deconstruct* yoga. Deconstruction is a method where – in our case - it is demonstrated how yoga's various ideas and practices create social differences and power hierarchies. In this context yoga discourse is shown to be an integral part of a specific *cultural field*, with its own specialists, hierarchies, myths, ideologies, power discourses, and economic exchange.

Further it will be demonstrated how the meaning, the truth-claims, the purpose and the social identities of the yoga discourse are *fundamentally* changing as historical epochs shift. This is explored with *genealogical analysis*, which shows how each generation, through necessity, re-interprets, re-formulates and alters yoga's practice and ideas in light of its present circumstances – thereby creating a changed yoga discourse with new social identities and roles. Instead of searching for the ‘the essence of yoga’ - a ‘timeless and constant’ yoga sign - genealogy is instead constructing the yoga sign as fluid and evolving. Change is not an exception in such a yoga history, but the norm.

My overall sociological approach will be to understand the yoga discourse at any given moment in history by investigating how specific forces in society condition and form it. Such an analysis will investigate how yoga *culture* (shared practices and ideas creating meaning and identity) and the surrounding society interact with and re-form each other as a permanent process. This cultural sociological approach replaces a narrative of *harmony and continuity* throughout history by one of *discontinuity and conflict*.<sup>10</sup> This may sound very abstract, but as the book progresses the practical consequences will start to unfold as a very different history of the yoga discourse is recounted.

Yoga is visualised as a discourse within a wider cultural field, which constructs fluid social groups fighting for power, recognition, resources, identity and survival in their contemporary society. It is a *history of conflict* where the continuing interaction of humans,

social institutions and anonymous processes are reflected in the yoga texts, the signs and the practices.

The underlying and guiding cultural sociological model is in other words one of *conflict sociology*, to which most cultural sociologist subscribe - especially the highly influential French sociologist Bourdieu, who is a rich source of inspiration.<sup>11</sup> I have chosen to label my version of conflict sociology *Darwinian conflict sociology*. By this I want to highlight the Darwinian aspect, because I want to emphasise that discourses do *not* primarily evolve out of older and former discourses. Instead discourses primarily evolve out of conflicts and change in the culture and society in which they are situated. Here discourses – like biological species – adapt to and are formed by their present conflict and environmental change. Discourses are visualised as DNA – codes of information – contributing to the social identity of certain social groups, as they struggle to survive and become socially recognised. As people adapt their social life to conflicts and changes in circumstances, we will follow how new yoga discourses evolve as a part of this. So this is an *evolutionary model*, where new yoga ideas are not so much evolving out of *previous* ideas but mainly out of *contemporary* social life and its conflicts. It is an *active* process where interactors *dynamically* adapt to what is.

### **De-constructing the yoga ideology**

If we listen to the rhetoric of yoga we will often hear yoga constructed as ‘eternal’ and as having ‘an essence’ to it, an essence that is resistant to conceptualisation. The yoga specialist – ‘the guru’, ‘the sage’, ‘the mystic’ – is in this context signified as *disinterested* (not motivated by worldly concerns) and ‘embodying ancient meditative truth’. The ‘yoga sage’ is said to reach ‘ineffable mystical experiences’ significantly transforming his existential being. Such rhetoric is typical of social groups trying to solidify or expand their power and status, and I will show that this also applies to the cultural field where the yoga discourse is situated. Hence, I call this the rhetoric of ‘ideology and myths’. This book is about de-constructing such ideological claims.

The decisive guiding idea of my approach is, for instance, to de-construct the image of a ‘yoga guru’ as an otherworldly holy man. I argue that the ‘guru’ sign is an ideological vehicle. Instead, by enquiring, for instance, how holy men (some of them practising yoga) survived economically, socially and politically, I re-construct them as ‘professional specialists’. I treat the profession of holy men as a social species living in a specific historical environment – a cultural field, to use a term coined by Bourdieu<sup>12</sup>. In this cultural field the yoga specialists subscribe to very worldly concerns as they compete to survive, for economic resources, and for recognition and status.

### **The many yoga cultures**

My exposition is structured around several historical forms of yoga - including contemporary forms - many of which have very little to do with each other and all of them treated as legitimate yoga cultures.

Each main chapter is dedicated to the analysis of these historically distinct yoga cultures. In order to capture their historical specificity I have classified each yoga culture in relation to its historical situation. Hence we will see yoga discourses labelled as proto-yoga, early-yoga, theistic yoga, Tantric yoga and modernist colonial yoga. Although these are not general accepted categories, they are mine.

### The different yoga strata

From what has been said in this introduction it should be clear that I operate with two separate groups of *cultural professionals* who have made a living in modern society from their yoga knowledge. Firstly, there are the *professional yoga popularisers*, who (in our society) sell their know-how and skills to a burgeoning market of yoga sympathisers (non-professionals). Secondly, there are the *yoga intellectuals*, who (in our society) are employed by state institutions and religious funded organisations. These two strata represent what is call the *cultural field of yoga* – they make a living out of their yoga knowledge.

Yoga professionals seem to be central to most of yoga's history. My historical investigation of yoga in India showed that each historical era had its specific cultural field of yoga. It dawned on me that the *cultural field of yoga* – the yoga professionals - should be made a central part of any investigation of yoga, as this field in general has the power to define, to a greater degree, what yoga is about.

However I could also see that under *specific historical conditions* a third group played a role in shaping the yoga sign. It was the practitioners: the *amateur yoga sympathisers* to which I actually belong myself. Under certain circumstances we amateurs ('*amateur*' – French, "*lover of*") would send the yoga sign in new and surprising directions – sometimes to the dismay of the professional elite. Actually, I was drawn increasingly to the conclusion that only in two historical periods was yoga culture driven to a greater extent by amateurs: as the sign surfaced and again in our post-modern society. However, in most other eras, yoga culture seems to be dominated by yoga professionals.

Thus a cultural study of yoga, as it is sketched here, attempts to answer some and raise yet more new questions, which should have wide implications, even for practitioners of yoga. This is not only about theoretical exercises. After reading this book I hope, firstly, that a modern yoga practitioner will feel inspired to start to contemplate – critically re-evaluate and re-design – existing *practice* and *meaning* ascribed to yoga. Secondly, I hope that the various specialists within the *cultural field of yoga* will start to re-consider the yoga ideology and myths, which as this book argues they often unwittingly re-enforce.

## 4. Who is the book written for?

Any reader will after only a few pages into this book realise that this cultural history of yoga is - due to its stringently applied *contextual perspective* - addressing much more than just yoga. So any reader concerned about more general topics like culture, history, social conflicts and change and how they interact with specific cultural practices like yoga will find much of interest. So the book is for readers curious about the complex interplay between religion, culture, politics and society. Even for the more methodological and philosophical involved, there are many theoretical discussions of how to explain culture (like yoga) and change in relation to the overall society.

Particularly for readers fascinated by or studying Hinduism, Tantra and Buddhism and who would like to see these explained as an integral part of Indian history, there is also much of interest. These religio-philosophical systems are also briefly discussed because they are woven into the history of yoga. For readers more specifically drawn by the philosophical aspect of *liberation and meditation* – central to mysticism, spirituality, Buddhism and Tantra to mention a few – there is also much of interest as yoga was often a part of a wider cultural field of liberation and meditation.

For readers more keen on contemporary themes like New Age spirituality, fitness culture, commercialisation, globalisation, colonialism, female body culture and cultural narcissism there is much to find as modern yoga is discussed in these terms.

We can then turn to the readers particularly interested in yoga. The question naturally emerges, which of the three strata I have discussed so far am I addressing: the non-professional sympathiser, the yoga populariser or the yoga intellectual?

### The educated reader

First the millions and millions of people who enjoy the practice of yoga one to three times a week - the yoga sympathisers. If the reader belongs to this group of non-professional enthusiasts and anticipates a quick and easy introduction to yoga techniques and their history, she has probably already realised that this is not my aim. First of all, I do not have the pedagogic skills of such popular writing. Secondly, this book does not attempt to provide a new explanation of the *technical meaning* of yoga. It is primarily a critical review of yoga's *role in history*. In other words it is a study of a yoga culture as, for instance, we would have conducted a cultural study of 'dance' – the role of dance in society. Similar cultural studies could also have been about sports culture; or food culture and so on. Hence, if the reader wishes to understand yoga not just as technique, but also as *culture* (something which provides us with meaning, values and identities) and has found that existing literature provides few answers, this book will provide some answers. This kind of reader then represents what publishers call the *educated reader*, who is willing to put time and effort into non-fictional writing, *provided*

*it is written in an accessible language and style.*

### **People involved in yoga as a profession**

The second group consists of the yoga popularisers, who make a living from selling their expertise and know-how to a general market. Today, most consumers expect that a vendor in a market – be it of products, knowledge or services – has ensured that quality assurance and leading edge solutions are a central part of the process. This especially applies to the knowledge industries to which yoga belongs. Today any knowledge industry is under perpetual transformation. The accepted state-of-the-art knowledge never stands still. For those yoga professionals who aim to meet modern expectations, it is critical that they participate in thorough, critical and perpetual re-training. As part of this, the assumptions and taken-for-granted-beliefs underpinning a populariser's yoga knowledge – sometimes called *doxa* – should also come under scrutiny. For a yoga professional committed to such changes and standards a book like this will be of immense value. It takes a *critical look at the changes, signification and implication of the yoga concepts* that modern popularisers teach their students.

### **The intellectual expert**

The final group consists of the intellectual yoga experts. Using a historio-cultural perspective, this book in many respects *re-categorises* the yoga field in which these specialists operate and prevail. This will probably generate some controversy and contention. Nevertheless debate and disagreement sharpens the knowledge of any cultural field. Further discord could also be caused by the fact that I have deliberately ignored many of the formal conventions within academic studies (like the style of quoting or referencing; jargon and tone etc.). This misdemeanour of mine might upset some formalists. Furthermore, academics who orientate yoga signs by religious or spiritual discourses may not approve my critical and debating stance.

Since the times they are a-changing and information technology allows us to write in new and different ways, it is now possible to reach all of the above disparate audiences with a single book. Below I show how there are *many ways to read this book*. New technology has delivered *hyper-links and e-books*, which enable different interest groups (different target audiences) to study and enjoy the very same book because each group can read the book in its own way.

## 5. How to read this book

### A book for browsing and modular reading

This book is not necessarily intended to be read *hierarchically* from the beginning to the end. Instead it is built up in small modules and is supplied with a plethora of hyperlinks (in the e-book version), links to Wikipedia (in the e-book version) and cross-references (in the paper version). This allows the reader to study the book in an *associative* way as one would read for instance *Wikipedia*: the reader may start at a place of particular interest and from here follow the links they fancy. So here ‘reading’ should be interpreted as ‘browsing’: scanning, skipping and selecting.

Hence each chapter is broken up into distinctive modules (typically a half to one page long) covering a delineated theme or two, which may be read individually. The modular structure enables short bursts of reading and the reader may go into as much depth as required by reading the modules before and after a given module. Or the reader can, from the list of contents, pick a *sub-chapter* of special interest (typically five to ten pages long). Sub-chapters are wherever practical composed as stand-alone-units. The modular construction however has necessitated some repetitions for which I apologise.

If, for instance, a reader’s main interest is – regardless of being a lay-person or expert – the yoga of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, you will find specific modules discussing this style of yoga. If the reader is then captivated, the reading of the text may be expanded to include the enveloping sub-chapter analysing the *Mahabharata* and its society and culture. If curiosity leads the reader on, you can expand further and read about the *Era of the Axial Age civilisation* and eventually dive deeper into some of the other styles of theistic yoga from the Axial Age. There are a multitude of ways to navigate within a chapter or expand beyond it by following hyperlinks and cross-references.

What about technical and academic terms and expressions? All Western academic scholarly concepts deemed necessary to explain a subject matter are introduced and briefly reinterpreted in layman’s terms, so academic knowledge and phraseology is not a prerequisite. At any point, academic and technical terms are accessible through cross-references and hyperlinks, so no accumulation of conceptual understanding is necessary. The same, of course, applies to yoga and Sanskrit terms. In the e-book version it is simple to search from any point through general search functions, which opens a whole new world of possibilities.

The reader will find many small sections written in *italics*. These smaller modules clarify the *process of the book*. They are there to guide the reader and should preferably not be ignored. They are there to keep the reader up to date on the investigation and conclusions so far and where they lead to next. Sometimes they indicate that the reader may, if you wish, skip the following section. Many divisions of the book are for the special interest reader and can be skipped by the more casual reader with no consequences for an overall understanding.

Thus, in conclusion, this is *not* a book, which needs to be read hierarchically from A to Z.

Furthermore, I have used diagrams, boxes, arrows and bullet points to visualise some of the more complex and crucial philosophies and concepts. This clear modularisation of arguments, analysis and visualisation should also help the reader to browse through the book to find relevant topics. Scholarly concerns – theoretical and methodological considerations, documentation of sources, criticism of the academic yoga discourse – have either been placed in footnotes (as you see in this introduction) or in separate ‘consideration chapters’ and appendices. In those places the reader interested in theory will find detailed discussions, while it suffices for the educated or casual reader to read only the main chapters dealing with yoga culture. Finally, I have listed the literature supporting my findings (e.g.: (McCutcheon 2003. The bibliography can be found at the end of the book.

### **Moving backward in history – the stable *signifier* and the unstable *signified***

If the reader wishes to get an overview of the modern yoga sign, I suggest they start with the chapter on *Western Popular Yoga*. Why start at the end of the historical narrative? Because the history and the creation of modern yoga is mainly conditioned by modernity. In other words, the meaning of *modern* yoga (a specific historical sign) has very little to do with *pre-modern* yoga signs. The chapter concerning *Western Popular Yoga* demonstrates that today’s yoga surfaced in close interaction with new yoga signs, which emerged in British Colonial India. Thus by supplementing the reading of *Western Popular Yoga* chapter with the chapter on *Modernist Colonial Yoga*, the reader will find a good understanding of our contemporary yoga sign - the yoga of modernity.

As soon as we leave modernity behind and reach back into the history of pre-modern India, we encounter a very different “yoga-species”, which we will struggle to recognise. Many informed readers probably embrace the notion that present-day yoga is a direct descendant of *hatha-yoga* – a bodily orientated yoga from India’s Medieval Age. This is where a genealogy of contemporary yoga should start, they would advocate.

I recommend these readers to read the chapter on *hatha-yoga* and the following chapter on *Yoga under Foreign Rule*. These chapters show however that *hatha-yoga* has very little to do with our modern yoga sign. To understand the background of the *hatha-yoga* culture, the reader should instead read the chapter on *Tantra and Medieval India*. For the modern reader, it is only in the light of Medieval Tantric India that the *hatha-yoga* sign will give meaning to the modern reader – the medieval and Tantric *hatha-yoga* sign bears little comparison to our modern yoga sign.

If the reader – now having realised that both the *signified* of yoga (i.e. the meaning) and the referent (i.e. yoga practice) fundamentally change throughout history - still has the appetite to dig backwards in time to trace the genealogy of the yoga *signifier* (the sound, the word) to the very beginning, to this reader I recommend that you now turn to the chapters on *Proto-yoga* and *Early-yoga*. Soon the reader will discover that these archaic yoga cultures have very little to do even with the Medieval *hatha-yoga*. From this point the reader – now having dropped all expectations of finding a stable *signified* (meaning) and *referent* (practice) - can follow how the yoga *signifier* (the sound, the word) over and over changed *signification* throughout

Indian history.

### The structure and sequence of chapters

Thus the chapters of the book do not follow a strict chronological order. First the reader will find two chapters about the yoga sign as we understand it today – the yoga of modernity. Then follows the early origins (the genealogy) of ancient yoga cultures – a social history of the yoga cultures of pre-modern India. Here we start from the very beginning and then move up in history: yoga in late Archaic Kingdoms, Axial Age civilisations, the Medieval Age and finally leading to India under foreign rule. For those who want to dig even deeper into the material – especially scholars and students – there is extra material inserted. In these so-called *Considerations* and *Appendices*, methodological and philosophical issues related to the yoga discourse are often discussed.

If the reader does not care for my choice of sequencing the chapters they can be read in chronological order or in any order you may prefer. Each one of the historical yoga cultures can be read and understood on its own - questioning the oft-heard proposition that there is a long and continuous yoga tradition.

Finally, this book breaks new ground by considering the culture of yoga and the yoga sign strictly from a sociological and historical point of view. As such, it is a first uncertain step in new direction and I hope that these initial methodological attempts will inspire others to pick up where I have failed or stopped due to lack of knowledge and insight.

As a Dane, English is not my first language. My readability and grammar editor Miriam Harris has been a great help in weeding out many errors and mistakes but it was never her task – which would have been an overwhelming enterprise - to transform my English into the fluent writings of a skilled native.

# 1<sup>st</sup> Contemplation - What are we actually talking about?

## Key Concepts

[Genealogy](#) [Proto-type definitions](#)

*This section attempts to grasp what cannot be grasped: namely, to define what we are actually talking about. Firstly, it investigates why the meaning of ‘the yoga sign’ – its core principles – is not definable and hence why the essence of yoga cannot be captured. An alternative methodology labelled genealogy is then thus proposed. Here we are interested only in the actual use of the word yoga – the signifier. This approach however also entails its problems. As the use of the word ‘yoga’ is very old, we need to establish a working definition capturing the moment of transition when the word (‘the signifier’) started to have the meaning (‘the signified’), which made it into the first historical ‘the yoga sign’. Such a working definition is of course highly contestable.*

*This section is for the reader who is convinced there is something, which makes yoga special – some core principles which distinguish yoga from other practices. For the reader who is not interested in such basic issues of definition, this section may be skipped.*

## 1. Defining ‘yoga’: the elusive signified (meaning)

**Why practise yoga? – Yesterday and today.**

At the beginning of the 20th century, most Western people who had heard the word *yoga*

belonged either to a cultural elite or to esoteric circles. In the main, they thought the word referred to *meditation*. However, by the beginning of the 21st century yoga had become a well-known word believed to refer to *acrobatic poses*. In other words, during the last 100 years or so, yoga has moved from esoteric meditation exercises for the few to the mass culture of body fitness. So even in our Western societies, during the short period we have been aware of it, yoga practice and its meaning has changed dramatically. It follows then – just by observing the evolving nature of the yoga sign in the West - we can really begin to marvel at yoga's changing cultural use and significance during its 2,500 years history in India!

However, as we shall see on reading the following couple of pages, many modern yoga popularisers have arrived at a general and timeless answer describing what yoga is about. I would label this way of thinking an *ahistorical approach* as it ignores historical change and the society-effect. We will follow some of these ahistorical efforts to define yoga's core principles.

### What did the word *yoga* mean originally?

Strenuous body poses of contortion demanding the highest flexibility, held for prolonged periods, is typically what most of us understand by yoga today. These kinds of poses are called *asana(s)*.

It is widely believed that *asana* practice predominantly originated in one of the older branches of yoga – *hatha-yoga*. As most Western yoga today is focussed on *asana* it is assumed by most that our *modernist postural yoga* (as it is often named<sup>13</sup>) is a direct descendant of *hatha-yoga*.

However, through most of history only very few yoga practitioners practised demanding *asanas*. Many would, at best, perform a mild form of stretching, others more energetic movements combined with intensive breathing, and yet others, simply quiet meditation. Some only studied religio-philosophical texts while others chanted sounds. Finally, throughout India's history will be found millions of people called *jogis* (yogis) who were performing neither postures nor meditation but rather were beggars, magicians, thugs, merchant soldiers, and fortune-tellers. Many yogis in fact never practised any yoga (defined as either *asana* or meditation).

There are, in fact, several branches of yoga, but you will not find official schools with any clear definitions of their specialty. Possibly hundreds of styles of yoga developed and mutated in India over an extensive time span. Scrolling through old Indian scriptures we find names like *raja-yoga*, *jnana-yoga*, *karma-yoga*, *Kundalini-yoga*, *laya-yoga*, *bhakti-yoga* and *kriya* to mention a few well-known examples. Many of the branches overlap and thus there is no consensus among the present schools as to how they define themselves. Each practice gives a different answer to what they believe is the nature of yoga.

Many readers may wonder if the word 'yoga' in itself reveals its full meaning. What did the sign 'yoga' really mean, as it originated? Hence, many yoga popularisers believe they can find the nature of yoga by investigating its etymology.

'Yoga' is an old Sanskrit word ([Wikipedia link](#)). Sanskrit is the equivalent of the Latin

language of Europe: an old language used by the elite to communicate knowledge amongst themselves. However, most Sanskrit words have many meanings – often changing according to their literary context - and often, over time, their meaning changes further.

This also applies to ‘yoga’: “*union, join, harness, yoke, practice*” are just some of the synonyms dictionaries offer.<sup>14</sup> So the word could be used in the old Sanskrit scriptures to mean anything from: *to merge, to contact, to discipline, to control, to meditate, to practise, an approach, a way, a method* etc.. Each of these translations may, as we will see, have several meanings, when we begin to think about it. Take, for instance, the popular translation of yoga as “*to discipline*”: When we think about it, there are many ways to discipline something – and anyway what is it we are disciplining? For instance soldiers are very disciplined, but they are not seen to practise yoga. So would we really know what yoga was about if we agreed that its exact translation is “*to discipline*”? In other words, studying the direct translation of the word will not help us in understanding the whys and whats of yoga.<sup>15</sup>

### Does contemporary Indian yoga practice reveal the nature of “yoga”?



Can yoga be defined by what contemporary Indian yogis are doing? Some yoga popularisers believe so because they think modern yoga practices are an exact copy of ancient practices. However, by simply observing Indian yogis practising yoga we will realise that there is a rich diversity.<sup>16</sup> As we can see from the photographs and pictures of Indian holy men who mostly practise some kind of yoga, one will have to stretch one’s imagination to define yoga from how yogis behave and what they look like. Some dress and are painted in all the colours of the rainbow, others are naked or smeared in ashes or cow dung. Some are living as and dressed like members of the upper class. Some will stand on one leg or bury their heads in sand. Some will live in solitude while others live in sects<sup>17</sup> and ashrams. Some live in extreme austerity, yet others drink alcohol, have sex and smoke cannabis. Some are well-read in ancient scriptures but most are illiterate. Most of them do not call themselves yogis but *Sadhus* – holy men ([Wikipedia link](#)).<sup>18</sup> - or *Samnyasins* – renouncers And many of those who call themselves *jogis* have no idea of what yoga is and means.



Sociologists group these people as ‘Hindu ascetics’. It is estimated that today there are between 2 and 5 million of them living a life dedicated to pursuing their rituals and practices – sometimes called *yoga* or *sadhana*. Most of them are men but you will also find women. Sociologists say that today Hindu ascetics are – and this certainly reaches back to colonial and Mughal times - mainly recruited among orphans or were donated to the gods by (poor) parents. Some were recruited as adults – but then they almost always wanted to escape the difficulties they had encountered in a traditional life. They are, in the words of sociology, an ‘institutionalised socially marginal group’ or ‘surplus population’. But among laypeople they are often defined and maintained as ‘holy men’: a ‘religious *Lumpen-proletariat*’ in the terminology of Marx and Engels (an itinerant underclass of “rogues” and “rags” – social outcasts, “riff raff” ([Wikipedia link](#))).<sup>19</sup>

So from our initial phenomenological evidence it appears that yoga in India is not a part time hobby; it is, rather, a *lifestyle*. For these people yoga seems *not* to be something you do on a yoga mat from 6 to 7 o’clock every morning but is a way of living, which totally takes over your life.

But then there are millions and millions of contemporary Indians – and people in the rest of the world - to whom yoga is not a lifestyle but some kind of practice they pursue when they find time for it. They live a normal life, having a regular job living in a traditional family. So is yoga practice a lifestyle or various techniques performed in your leisure time? Modern Indian or Western yoga practice reveals little about the nature of yoga.

So how do modern yoga popularisers define the ‘timeless nature of yoga’? In most popular yoga books there are two common methods. One is to define yoga by the translated meaning of the word (as seen on the previous page) and the other is to employ a *definition* used derived from old yoga philosophy scriptures. Both ways are problematic, as we will see in the following pages.

## Defining the essence of the word *yoga*

The most popular definition of the Sanskrit term *yoga* is “union”, i.e. “bringing together”. Here, for instance, is the authoritative definition of J. Grimes (1996): *A Concise Dictionary of Indian Philosophy* who defines *yoga* this way: ‘union; yoke; a process or path or discipline leading to oneness with the Divine or with one’s Self (from the verb root *yuj*: “to unite, join, connect”)’.

However, the term ‘union’ creates problems. The word *yoga* (‘the signifier’) was first rather late in the history encoded with the meaning ‘union’ (‘the signified’). The *yoga* signifier may well have been used for 500 -1000 years before certain religious cults – e.g. Pasupata’s worshipping Siva - talked about *yoga* as “the soul’s *union* with Siva” (White 2009). Before that the *yoga* sign was not explicitly encoded with the meaning ‘union’. Thus this definition does not capture most early usages of the word ‘*yoga*’.

Furthermore, to define *yoga* as ‘union’ is too wide. Many forms of union have little to do with *yoga*. A union of a family or merging two companies will not be seen as *yoga*. So *yoga* in this view must be a special kind of ‘union’ and we wonder which?

As a response to this some may then reason that we unite with a ‘supernatural principle’ or ‘an abstract idea’. Others – as we see it in the definition above - would say it is a union with god (can atheists then not practise *yoga*?) or even a union happening “inside yourself”. From these interpretations we can conclude that understanding the sign *yoga* as signifying ‘union’ is not enough – *what we unite with* also becomes critical for the definition. But there is no agreement as to what that might be!

Scholars agree that this definition is too vague and broad<sup>20</sup>. They point out that many of the world’s religions and sects aspire to and promise a union with their god. The definition of *yoga* as ‘union’ seems to make too many things into *yoga*.<sup>21</sup> The same objection applies to people who define *yoga* as ‘spiritual practice’: suddenly most religious people, who have never heard about *yoga*, are practicing *yoga*.

Others, in their effort to define *yoga*, study the yogis’ own historical scriptures, typically Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra* (about 1800 years old).<sup>22</sup> The *Yoga Sutra* is the earliest known treatise that explicitly aims to define and describe the term *yoga*. In general, it describes *yoga* as an austere and *ascetic lifestyle* – comprising eight (or three) elements. Reading the *Yoga Sutra* it is clear that of the eight elements, it is the last element of *meditation*, which is crucial. The *Yoga Sutra* specifically defines *yoga* as the “cessation of thoughts” – empty mind. This happens in deep meditation. The meditator moves through different layers of consciousness called *samadhi*. Finally, at the bottom layer, the meditator achieves liberation – *dharma mega samadhi*. The problem is that *yoga* is here defined both an *effort* (meditation) and a *goal* (liberation). Further, overall it becomes synonymous with ‘meditation and austere lifestyle’.

The major problem with using the *Yoga Sutra* to define *yoga* is that many self-declared *yoga* branches do not subscribe to austere lifestyles, nor do they regard *samadhi* meditation as their main practice or agree with the *sutras*’ understanding of liberation. The scholar D. G. White (2009) has further suggested that the sign *yoga* had a range of radically different

meanings not related to meditation at all – especially through its early years from the Vedics to the Middle Ages. The *Yoga Sutra* definition(s!) are in other words too narrow. The problem with using the *Yoga Sutra* is that it defines a historical branch of yoga at a given time in history, an ascetic branch focussing on meditation.

Both the narrow and the broad definitions are *abstract non-historical approaches*. They are trying to grasp, unsuccessfully, the timeless essence or core principles of yoga.<sup>23</sup> Modern cultural studies and above all discourse analysis and genealogy reject the even *possibility* of this approach.<sup>24</sup> Instead such post-structuralist approaches suggest that we should look for the sociological processes conditioning the on-going changes of the yoga discourse. Genealogy, for instance, understands human categories – like the *yoga* sign – as Darwin understood the biological species: they are *constantly evolving* (as they are formed by an ever changing environment) and the further we look back in history, the more they dissolve and become something else. Hence, this book will alternatively treat yoga as a *genealogical category* – i.e. as ‘a series of dissimilar individual occurrences, which are continuously evolving’ due to historical power conditions (Sarasin 2009).

## 2. The alternative: a genealogy of the signifier (the word)

### Historiography and the problem of definitions

The meaning of the *yoga* sign cannot be defined as it changed along with changing historical conditions. There are no core principles and there is no definition that can capture the diversity of the *yoga* sign. But does it matter? Yes, if you want to write about *yoga* history, it does. If we take a look at some of the few general historiographies of *yoga* – Eliade (1990, 1958), Feuerstein (1998) and Connolly (2007) - we will find that they all belong to the *essentialist tradition* ([Wikipedia link](#)). Some of them attempt to define *yoga*, others do not and instead just work with an implicit understanding, which is never subjected to critical reflection. Often the implicit or explicit *yoga* definition turns out to be ‘meditation’ or ‘spiritual practice’. Hence, it is clear that if an author’s understanding of *yoga* is ‘meditation’ or ‘spiritual practice’, then his account will have to include, for instance, Buddhism – even if most Buddhists did not call their style of meditation *yoga* - but *dhyana*. However, the reader will sooner or later wonder why Buddhism, Jainism and Vedanta Brahmanism etc. are included in a book of *yoga* history if these groups did not identify their practices as *yoga*? Soon the reader will further start to wonder, if the subject in reality is ‘meditation’ or ‘spiritual practice’, why do those books not include a range of other Indian and non-Indian meditation traditions and ‘spiritual practices’ that we know about? The historiography is either covering too much or too little.<sup>25</sup> In other words the historical reality will not and cannot fit into the

writers' classification, whatever this is. Accordingly, such historiographies of yoga, based on implicit or wide definitions of the meaning of yoga, become unstructured accounts flickering between this and that religio-philosophical school. The reader is in the end left wondering: "what are we actually talking about?"

### **Researching yoga without a definition: follow the word**

Hence I devote a chapter to reflections on what we are talking about. Giving up essentialist definitions of course raises the question: "how do I know what to study then?" I must necessarily have had some pre-conception or *prototype-definitions* of yoga in order to select sources and phenomena to investigate, the reader might think. Surely, I have some pre-conceptions/ prototype-classifications of yoga – no point in denying that<sup>26</sup>. Without doubt my pre-conceptions of yoga were strongly influenced by contemporary modernist discourse, which informed and taught me about yoga. Modernist yoga discourse is - typically for yoga - a highly hybrid form: a complex mixture of various Western and Indian discourses. In this hybrid modernist yoga discourse evolving the last two hundred years certain aspects of yoga became highlighted while others were de-emphasised. Meditation and rationality were for instance often put on a pedestal while magic, immortality, rituals, exorcism, superhuman powers, and other sorts of "superstition" were ignored or just shortly mentioned. Some of the modernist association and connotations – the numerous silent and unconscious layers of meaning – which we today attach to yoga slowly crystallised before my eyes as I progressed.

However, in choosing an approach inspired by critical discourse analysis these pre-conceptions should not sabotage my project as they do for the essentialists. My idea – inspired by the French philosopher Michel Foucault – was simply to follow the usage of the sign *yoga* as a 'specific technical sign' through history.

The problem was however that yoga first came to signify something at a certain time in history, which is related to the way it is used today and most of history. Before that yoga was mostly used in the form of a 'yoke' (a wooden beam between oxen) or 'yoking' – "bringing together" - like harnessing horses so they can pull together. But at a certain point of history, yoga signified "something else" (!!!), which we today recognise as 'yoga'. This "something else" is exactly where our pre-conceptions and implicit categorisations set in. I will discuss this in detail soon. Now it suffices to say that, based on investigating my modernist pre-conception, I made a vague *working definition* of *yoga as it appeared*. Not a definition of yoga as such – only as the yoga sign emerged as 'a specific technical sign'. After this starting point things were easy, as I just then followed – in the word of semiotics – 'the signifier' (the physical sound of the word, the four letters) as 'the signified' (the meaning) metamorphosed through history.

This method of following the changing signification of a sign is called *genealogy* ([Wikipedia link](#)) and is a central part of discourse analysis. Genealogy is very anti-essentialist and anti-hermeneutical because its explicit purpose is to show that signs - which we often take as unchangeable (i.e. we hold them for trans-historical, natural or god-given) - always on closer inspection display fundamental changes (Masuzawa 2000, Sarasin 2009).<sup>27</sup>

Let me summarise the argument so far with the help of *semiotics* (the study of signs), which is a central part of Cultural Studies today. What I have said until now is that yoga as a ‘*signifier*’ (a physical sound) has been relatively stable for a long period. However – and this is central to present-day semiotics – ‘*the signified*’ (the meaning, the mental thought), we attach to this sound, has changed dramatically through history. ‘The signified’ of yoga has been so *unstable* that there is *no common denominator*.

*In this contemplation I have introduced one of the key concepts of this book – genealogy. In the following contemplation I introduce some further key concepts to this book. Cultural sociological concepts like cultural field, symbolic-value, use-value, discourse and Altered States of Consciousness all play a central role in the analysis. In the following contemplation they are introduced in relation to yoga.*

# 2<sup>nd</sup> Contemplation - Yoga and some key notions of cultural sociology

## Key Concepts

<u>Use- vs. symbolic-value</u>	<u>Subjective transformative aspect</u>
<u>ASC as a referent</u>	<u>Cultural- vs. Religious Studies</u>
<u>Yoga as discourse</u>	<u>Yoga as cultural field</u>
<u>Habitus and yoga</u>	<u>Yoga as Symbolic capital</u>

*This contemplation deals with some key distinctions of this book in relation to an understanding of yoga as culture. These concepts will also be shortly explained as they are used in the analysis within the main chapters. This introduction is for the reader who would like to establish a broader understanding of these key concepts.*

### The subjective transformative aspect of yoga

A common trait to all cars is that they have wheels. Wheels do not define what a car is and wheels are not unique to cars. However they are a common trait to all cars. Similar if we think of the yoga sign perhaps we can identify a similar common *trait* for almost all historical forms the sign has taken. So we are not trying to define the ‘signified’ of yoga. We are just trying to find some commonality in the actual use of ‘the signifier’ (the word used).

It would have to be a very abstract feature in order to capture the diversity. Clearly it also has to be a relatively vague and neutral notion in order to allow the multitudes of the use of the yoga sign.

The trait I have in mind is the following. Most techniques labelling themselves yoga have the effect of generating *Altered States of Consciousness* (ASC) ([Wikipedia link](#)). By that I mean specific observable mind-states, which are *dissimilar* to our daily ‘normal states of mind’. For short we could call ASC *trance*. Within psychology and medicine ASC are observable and measurable physio-psychological states. They are - because they are tangible facts – the chosen foundation for our further discussion. ASC does clearly not *define* yoga,

because many *other* techniques and substances can also generate ASC. Yoga just represents a general group of “ASC generating techniques”, which *conventionally* has been labelled ‘yoga’. Yogic generated ASC can be the *direct goal* of practice or it can be a *side effect* – this is not crucial. Most self proclaimed yoga practitioners through history would agree on this abstract level that their yoga practice is leading to a state of mind *different* to their normal state of mind. (At the end of [Appendix 1](#) there is a detailed discussion of ASC.)

This brings us to the crux of the matter. Through history this ‘yogic trance’ has then been signified different by various yoga *discourses*. Some yoga virtuosi say they had achieved ‘peace of mind’; others that ‘Kundalini was rising’; some would say they had become ‘immortal’ and others just that they had become “very flexible”. We witness different descriptions of priorities and meanings given to yogic trance. This intellectual act – categorising, describing and giving signification to yogic ASC - is a crucial function of most yoga *discourses*. Technically speaking we could say that central to yoga discourse is to give signification to a referent (a measurable physical reality) called ASC.

When the yoga discourse tries to establish *the content of the yogic trance* (the phenomenology of yoga) and tries to explain its *specific benefits* for the individual, then I will call this the ‘*use-value*’ of yoga. Sometimes I will also call this the ‘technical aspect’ of yoga. The use-value is then directly related to the individual and his or her transformation.

By using the word ‘individual’ I want to highlight that the use-value is about establishing the ‘purpose’ of yoga is in relation to the *individual*; about the perceived utility that drives the individual to practise yoga. Accordingly the word ‘individual’ acknowledges the enthusiasm, emotional energy and interests behind many yogis’ practice: we are here identifying what, in their own terms, motivates a wide range of people and what gives yoga an intellectual dynamic of its own<sup>28</sup>.

The word ‘transformation’ is there to indicate that the purpose of yoga is for the individual to ‘change’. This raises the question: change *what*? Personality, mind, body, lifestyle, ethics? There is perhaps no answer to this – various styles will signify ‘change’ different. What I can see throughout history is that mostly – but not always - this ‘transformation’ is about a *significant* re-configuration of the self - an ultimate, existential and fundamental re- arrangement of being. However many modern yoga practitioners would not agree – they just want to lose weight, cure the back pain or feel good.

## Cultural Studies versus Religious Studies

In many cases within *Religious Studies* ([Wikipedia link](#)) ‘ultimate yogic trance’ is often signified as ‘a mystical experience’ or just as ‘the sacred’. Today many of us are so accustomed to this religious signification of yoga trance that we have forgotten that ‘yogic mystical experiences’ are not *facts* but religious *opinions* about facts: ‘A mystical experience’ is not a fact, but a religious sign applied to a fact – to an ASC.

However, ultimately yoga trance does not have to be expressed or signified in this religious way. We could also frame yogic trance within psychological, cognitive or neurological discourses. We would then alternatively say that they signified: pre-cognitive

experiences; Freudian subconscious projections; subliminal perception; psychological trance; states of no-self awareness; mental imbalances; or Jungian archetypes etc.<sup>29</sup>

My suggestion is, as said, that we signify ‘yogic trance’ as ASC; i.e. as some measurable physio-psychological states. Intentionally, this does not give us much information – just that yogic trance is a state of mind more or less different from our ‘normal state of mind’. Cultural Studies in other words make a *distinction* between an ASC and its further signification, while Religious Studies tend to *identify* the ASC with a preferred religious sign.

A *Cultural Study* ([Wikipedia link](#)) of yoga is then (1) to identify how various yoga cultures – or discourses – signify yogic ASC and then (2) relate this to the conflicts and conditions of society.

In summary, in my view yoga discourses ascribe meaning and purpose to some *actual* transformation of the body-mind system – ASC - generated by certain practices called yoga. In this way we have, firstly, found a non-religious and non-mystical way of talking about the transformational effect that *most* yoga practices generate. Secondly, we have opened up the possibility of a *cultural* study of yoga trance: here we are more interested in what *meaning* a given society ascribes to yoga trance, than we are in describing the details of that trance (the ASC) (the technical effect – sometimes called ‘the phenomenology of the yoga experience’).

### Use-value and symbolic-value

Based on this I would now like to introduce a distinction central to this book. Whenever anthropologists, economists, cultural sociologists, historians, business and marketing experts, are studying human beings’ relation to objects and goods, they agree that physical objects have two values or benefits to us. The first is obvious. It is the *use-value*. Use-value is easy to understand: the use-value of an apple is that it provides the body with nutrition. Use-value is about perceived utility.

The second value is not so obvious but quickly becomes apparent when we study alien traditional societies or our modern consumer society. It is the *symbolic-value* of an object. Take a carrier bag. Its use-value is to carry things – for instance our private belongings - from A to B. We could do that with a cheap plastic bag or a cotton bag. But still we see that many people use extremely expensive designer bags. Why? Let us take another product - a watch - to clarify this. The use-value of a watch again is simple: to show us the time. Again, some watches cost a hundred times more than cheap ones. Some brands of these expensive watches are displayed in shops only accompanied with photos of top rated Hollywood stars (see the introduction to this book). These watches are in other words being linked to high status and success. So wearing this watch has the symbolic-value of success and high status. The watch is a communicator – a signal transmitter. It communicates *difference* (Lury 2011). The watch is not primarily bought for its use-value but for its symbolic-value – *its ability to generate social difference and identity*.

This is true for a huge range of objects in our consumer society. Think about cars and clothes. They signal social identities. They are communicators of social membership – status, class, lifestyle, success, and values. So objects are also used to communicate to others who we

are – they have symbolic-value to us. Symbolic-value is created by successfully associating something (for instance a new product) with something generally recognised and valued in the overall culture (for instance a celebrated brand). Anthropologists studying traditional societies call the symbolic aspect of objects *totemism* ([Wikipedia link](#))– the symbolic association of people and groups with powerful animals, plants and nature (Douglas & Isherwood 1979).

We can now return to the yoga discourse with this distinction between use- and symbolic-value in mind. We can first of all see that the subjective transformative effects of yoga (the ASCs) are signified by the yoga discourse as having some utility – some use-value for the individual. Central to the yoga discourse, we would expect, is to describe and explain this *use-value* for the individual. It should tell us what we as individuals – as body-mind systems - get out of practice. When we study yoga discourse we observe that sometimes the subjective benefits are signified with physical, medical, ethical, psychological and sometimes metaphysical signs: focussed mind, strong health, time travel, improved flexibility, psychological self-insight, compassion, self-discipline, stable moods, immortality, calmness, god experience, access to divine energies, mind reading, and ability to fly.

As we then further study the use-value claimed by yoga discourses, it becomes more and more clear that they often turn the use-value into something powerful and desirable. For example the yogic trance is often explained to be ‘a union with a god’. Now, ‘gods’ are strong and powerful cultural symbols. According to our definition: when we associate something (like yoga trance) with something cultural valuable and powerful, we are generating symbolic-value, like associating the watch with a celebrity. So in this example we are actually witnessing yogic trance being turned into symbolic-value.

This is a typical trait of most yoga discourse. The use-value becomes signified and entangled with symbolic-value. In fact it seems that most yoga discourses blur the distinction more or less deliberately. It transforms the yoga practitioner in our example above into a desirable and significant different identity – a person ‘who is one with god’.

The yoga discourse in this way becomes a conveyor of high status, self-identity and difference.

The French philosopher *Jean Baudrillard* (1981,1983) ([Wikipedia link](#)) in his very influential writings claims that under capitalism consumer commodities are increasingly acquiring mainly symbolic-value. Their initial use-value is almost disappearing under layers of commodity signs – of a wide range of imagistic and symbolic associations. We end up living in a society overloaded with images, signs and simulations, which mutually define each other and where we lose our sense of the concrete reality – for instance of the use-value. This also seems to be a relevant point in relation to yoga discourse – the use-value is over layered by symbolic-value. Inspired by Baudrillard, I will as a central theme of this book investigate the dialectic of yoga’s use- and symbolic-value throughout history – the tension between the technical and the symbolic meaning of yoga.

What is central to yoga discourse – exactly like modern advertising and marketing - is to convey symbolic value. Let me further explore this idea of talking about the yoga discourse as primarily a generator of symbols and symbolic value.

## **Yoga as a cultural field**

Symbols and culture are inseparable – they flow into each other. By focussing on the symbolic aspect of yoga we move from the *individual plane* to the *socio-cultural plane*. We then approach yoga as a cultural sub-system – ‘a cultural field’ in the sociology of P. Bourdieu<sup>30</sup> ([Wikipedia link](#)) – that interacts with and is defined in relation to the rest of society. A ‘cultural field’ is a social sphere from which cultural specialists can exchange their cultural knowledge (on law, linguistics, sport, history, art) with the rest of society, who perceive them as experts. This notion of a ‘cultural field’ is central and crucial to this cultural sociological theory about yoga. The following sentence is complex but decisive for this book:

The shape and transformations of both yoga practice (the referent) and the meaning (use-value) of this practice is defined by (1) the dynamic competition between groups and individuals *within* the yoga cultural field *and* (2) this cultural field’s interaction with the rest of *society*.

This is where symbolic value enters and become significant. As a magnetic field is defined by *magnetism*, and as an electrical field is constituted by *electricity*, in similar ways the cultural field of yoga is configured by *symbolic-value*. A field shapes and configure its objects. The objects in a yoga field are for instance yoga notions and yoga practices. As magnetism configures pieces of metal, so will symbolic-value configure the *theoria* and *praxis* of yoga.

The symbolic-value generation within the yoga field is accordingly about associating the “yoga objects” (i.e. new signs) - created and categorised within the field - with “cultural things” (i.e. established signs) in the surrounding society, so that these “yoga objects” become distinct, different, valuable and powerful. This is by definition the creation of symbolic-value. It is not an automatic process but is highly contentious and erupts in unending conflicts. The struggle is basically about the right to define shared perceptions and values.

In short what we are saying is that in order to understand yoga’s use-value we need to understand its symbolic-value. In order to understand symbolic-value we need to understand the struggles and positioning within yoga’s cultural field and we further need to understand this field’s interaction with the surrounding society.

## **Yoga as a discourse**

We are analysing yoga as a *discourse* ([Wikipedia link](#)) *within* a cultural field, which it has given name to. Discourses have a great impact on how and what we perceive as reality. Discourses construct *social realities* (like ‘meditation’ or ‘sect’) and *identities* (like ‘ascetic’ or ‘liberated’). In relation to yoga this means that the yoga discourse constructs the yogi as a social identity at the same time as it gives the yogi symbolic meaning to others, enabling him to influence them.

So the technologies embedded in the yoga discourse – like ‘meditation’ - generate experiences and outcomes for the individual (like Altered States of Consciousness and improved health), which the discourse claim has use-value: the meditative trance is for

instance signified as ‘living liberation’. However, on closer inspection we realise that this use-value – the sign ‘living liberation’ – is actually a powerful symbol. A ‘living liberated’ is something special and different. So at the same time as it creates use-value, the discourse transmits symbolic meaning to society, making people project onto this social identity (like our admiration of the yogis’ liberating achievements as we start to signify him as a ‘mystic sage’).

There is in short a *dialectic* ([Wikipedia link](#)) tension between these two values as the yoga discourse continuously transforms use-value into symbolic-value and vice versa. We shall see how this tension became an engine for the metamorphosis of yoga through the ages. We will also see as society changed throughout history that yoga as discourse and as a cultural field had to change and adapt accordingly or become extinct. The field had to re-position itself in relation to society. We will also see how new social groups continuously tried to infiltrate and dominate this cultural field and in this way re-defined the “objects” in the field.

Accordingly the focus of *cultural sociology* ([Wikipedia link](#)) is now not just the yoga text, but a cultural field and its interaction with society. The aim is no longer to technically describe yoga ideas and practices in detail but rather to clarify their symbolic power. Therefore this project is not about introducing new historical primary sources (like a translation of a yoga text never seen before). Existing ones will suffice, as the aim is to explore the yoga discourse’s relation to its social conditions: the search for meaning and purpose has moved from the text to the text’s conditions and its interaction with those conditions. You could say the aim is to analyse and talk about yoga in a new and different way. To talk about yoga as *culture* – that is a system, which generates meaning, categories, perception, power, distinctions, values and priorities.

### ***Habitus giving meaning to yoga***

The yoga field and the yoga discourse are shaped by peoples’ existing culture and socialisation. In the sociology of Bourdieu this is termed the *habitus* ([Wikipedia link](#)): the dispositions and beliefs people bring to the table as they engage with the yoga sign.

“Simply put, *habitus* focuses on our ways of acting, feeling, thinking and being. It captures how we carry within us our history, how we bring this history into our present circumstances, and how we then make choices to act in certain ways and not others.” (Maton (2012) p. 52)

To understand what is going on in the yoga field – and within that the yoga sign - we will have to identify its *habitus*, which is a central theme of this book. The *habitus* delivers (often unconscious) codes, attitudes and mental habits, which we use to give meaning to the yoga sign. It is from the *habitus* that the yoga sign is charged with power (Moore 2012). By linking and associating the various signs of the yoga discourse with the *habitus*, they become messengers of meaning and difference.

In this way *symbolic capital* ([Wikipedia link](#)), another central notion of this study crystallises. *Capital* is an economical notion meaning ‘resources and assets, which can be exchanged’. Symbolic capital then means that a person is elevated above others in a way that gives social advantage - high social status or rank. In relation to yoga this means that the yoga specialist within the cultural field of yoga becomes charged with symbolic capital (or symbolic-value), which enable the virtuoso to transact with society.

*The reader who is interested in diving further into the theoretical and methodological issues connected with studying yoga as a cultural phenomenon can proceed to [Appendix 1](#) at the back of the book “The methodology of studying ever changing cultural ideas”. This Appendix is for the philosophically minded reader and should be of interest to any person occupied by academic studies of yoga and human discourses as such.*

# Chapter 1

# The yoga of modernity - Western popular yoga

## Key Concepts

<u>Modernist yoga hybrid</u>	<u>Modernist yoga discourse</u>
<u>Popularisers vs. scholars</u>	<u>Female interactors</u>
<u>Spiritual identity</u>	<u>Holistic romanticism</u>
<u>Commercialisation of yoga</u>	<u>Cultural field of yoga</u>
<u>Women's body culture</u>	<u>Consumer culture</u>
<u>Diffusion model</u>	<u>New Age spirituality</u>
<u>Celebrities</u>	<u>Cultural intermediary</u>
<u>Yoga as folk religion</u>	<u>Culture of narcissism</u>
<u>Fitness culture</u>	<u>Self-identity</u>

*In this chapter we investigate the hybrid yoga culture of modernity from the aspect of how it evolved in the West. Of course being a hybrid culture the Western part is only half of the story. The other half is to be found in the chapter of Colonial Modernist Yoga – which is about an Indian yoga culture, also a hybrid. As in the West the Indian colonial modernist yoga discourse was also “trans-local”: it was also a mixed culture of overlapping local and global cultures. Thus in my view the genealogy of the yoga of modernity is at an abstract level a function of the twin pair of globalisation and hybridity.*

*This chapter follows the Indian yoga discourse’s import to the West and how it was adapted to and further evolved in this radically different environment. As we move through this chapter stretching over 250 years, we will in this period see that the conflicts driving and framing the yoga discourse gradually changed its social base (i.e. its interactors) and its institutional location. As the yoga discourse initially surfaced among the cultural bourgeois elites of the West, it was mainly a part of religio-cultural conflicts originating within an embryonic university system and Protestantism. But slowly the yoga discourse became sucked into the all-penetrating maelstrom of rapidly expanding Western processes and institutions like markets, commoditisation, the welfare state, large corporations, bureaucracies etc. Yoga culture finally found its new institutional home in gyms, evening classes and body oriented studios and its new interactors were mainly middle-class women. This would dramatically change the content, meaning and identities of modernist yoga.*

*Initially the Western yoga discourse in its first 150 years or so was a part of the*

*Orientalist project, which re-vitalised and re-constructed a mainly meditative-style yoga discourse and framed it by Christian religio-philosophies. It was a Western cultural elite preoccupied by romanticism, esotericism and spirituality. After WW2 - with the advent of the welfare state, the middle classes and women's increasingly independence - a rather different yoga discourse was re-developed. This was the gymnastically-oriented postural yoga discourse. As in India, yoga in the West also entered mainstream culture - but for very different reasons from those in colonial India.*

*The power discourse of yoga* – its underlying symbolic meaning – of course had to change accordingly in the West, where yoga's various claims of semi-divinity found at best limited understanding in esoteric circles. However it was mainly among middle class women that the symbolic meaning of yoga became radically re-constructed as a part of cultural narcissistic processes and a new female body culture.

This chapter looks into why corporate high-flyers and middle-aged women are “stressing down” with yoga. Why are the Gyms of the biggest metropolises booming with sweating young power yogis? Why are herbal pills, slimming products and yoga products advertised in the same magazines? Why are many services and products bought when labelled ‘spiritual’? Why are hospitals and old people’s homes offering yoga? Why are young women going on yoga retreats in natural beauty spots? To answer this we need to look into deep social currents of Western culture. It is then left open for the reader to contemplate which (combination) of these processes might influence he or her unconsciously. Why should we look into these processes? The Freudian answer is political and psychological: by revealing them they might lose their power over us.<sup>31</sup>

As a key thread in my account I have chosen to focus on how power and knowledge infiltrate each other and the individual self through yoga. We will see how yoga – as a knowledge-practice system – in our Western culture can paradoxically turn into a system of societal control. The individual self - penetrated by yoga - easily becomes a part of modernist society’s social control systems. In summary yoga often became an answer to a demand in Western mass culture: a tool for self-discipline of body and mind in our Darwinian struggle to cope and succeed.

## 1. The yoga discourse coming to the West

### Globalisation and hybridity

Today the centre of gravity of yoga has moved to the West with millions of practitioners. Some would say that the main yoga developments are now taking place in the West, not in the

Indian subcontinent where it originated. Let me over the next couple of pages give a short introduction to yoga's entry into the West.

First let me introduce some central concepts used to explain yoga in modern society. *Modernity* ([Wikipedia link](#)) – our present social formation of industrialisation, capitalism, science, enlightenment, globalisation, and the nation state – had and still has an unprecedented impact on cultural practices – also on yoga. One of the general effects is that cultures today have become global hybrids. This also happened to the yoga discourse. In sociological terms modernist yoga is a ‘hybrid cultural practice’. What do I mean by that? *Hybridity* first of all means that things have become so mixed that we cannot separate the components anymore – they have become an overlapping continuum.

Further the cultural hybridity of modernity is a function of *globalisation* ([Wikipedia link](#)). How? Globalisation simultaneously merges and fragments various “local cultures” into a global dynamic melting pot. Hence various cultural practices globally and seamlessly flow into each other so that in any given local culture it is impossible to tell what is local and what is global. They have become hybrids. In other words any local culture – including yoga culture – is today a patchwork of overlapping local and global cultures. Global and local have become relative terms: modern cultural practices have become dynamic ‘trans-local processes’ – that is hybrid cultures (Barker 2012): modernist yoga as a trans-local culture.

### **Modernist yoga in the West - *before* World War II**

The period from 1750 to 1800 marks the birth of serious and systematic European intellectual discourse on Indian religio-philosophy and the study of Sanskrit language, often termed *Orientalism* ([Wikipedia link](#)). Alternatively we could speak about the emergence of a *modernist yoga discourse*. (The reader will find this discourse described in more detail in my chapter on [\*modernist yoga discourse of intellectuals\*](#)). First a few words about the category ‘modernist yoga’.

The modernist yoga discourse was just one among several modernist hybrids fusing *Eastern religions* ([Wikipedia link](#)) with European categories. Here Eastern religions became reconfigured to match modern sensibilities (McMahan 2008). For the emergent yoga hybrid this implied that initially a specific [\*Brahmin yoga\*](#) discourse – which was one among many yoga mutations – was adapted to the assumptions, premises and practices of modernity. Later on other varieties of yoga were imported and re-configured. For the 19 Century Europe this meant that a Brahmin yoga sign was reconfigured and associated with the implicit orientations, norms and institutions of the entirely different cultural ecosystem of modernity. This process of amalgamation would frequently consist of the de-emphasising or reinterpreting of those myths, “superstition” and rituals of yoga, which did not fit well into European preconceptions<sup>32</sup>. Further – typical of modernity – the authority normally ascribed to ‘tradition’ in *pre-modern societies* ([Wikipedia link](#)) would be undermined and replaced by notions of ‘individual freedom’.

In other words pre-modern practices, rituals, tales, legends and beliefs would be rationally evaluated. The implication of this was that they constantly were under threat of being

dismissed, reconstructed or recombined according to the idiosyncrasies of the modern European mind – i.e. the habitus of Western cultural elites. The yoga sign would in this way be explained more in relation to ‘inner psychology’ signs than ‘outer rituals and worship’. Thus the yoga sign metamorphosed into a ‘science of our inner psychological and divine space’ – a category conceived by the German romanticists. It is in this process that the Brahmin yoga branch was turned into a ‘meditative philosophical based system’ enabling the individual to achieve ‘inner psychological and transcendental’ benefits. Let us follow some of the major steps in this history of hybridisation.

### The first hundred years

In 1784 *William Jones* ([Wikipedia link](#)) founded the influential Asian Society in Calcutta and published his revolutionary theories about the common language roots of India and Europe. This generated a huge upheaval in the West and a boom in European interest in Indian culture. As the Europeans slowly learned to translate Sanskrit texts, new doors of insight opened. Hence it was in this period that the first textual contacts with yoga probably occurred. The *Upanishads* – sporadic mentioning yoga - were translated into French (from Persian!) by A.H. Anquetil Duperron in 1801-02. Similarly, several translations of the *Bhagavad Gita* with its comprehensive theistic yoga discourse appeared around 1800 into English, French, German and Latin and created a great intellectual stir (Clarke 1997, Herling 2006).<sup>33</sup> These translations gave rise to widespread discussions of the meaning and the correct translation of the central and crucial yoga term in the theistic *Bhagavad-Gita*. Some – not surprisingly - translated it as ‘devotion’. The readers and translators realised immediately that yoga had many meanings in this admired oeuvre and thought this was due to translation issues.

However there soon appeared some Orientalist writings trying to clarify the confusion around the yoga sign. In the early 1820s *Thomas Colebrooke* ([Wikipedia link](#)) published a series of essays explaining what he thought constituted Indian religio-philosophy – *On the Philosophy of the Hindus*. Here, following Brahmin Vedantic ideology, Colebrooke identified *Samkhya* and yoga as two of the six Hindu *Darsanas* (philosophies). Colebrooke’s perception and presentation of yoga was based on *Patanjali’s Yoga Sutra* and its commentaries – the latter ones leading to a clear Brahmin Vedantic bias in his orientation of yoga. Thus Colebrook concluded that yoga was a theistic sign – a system of ‘devotional exercise and mental abstraction’.

Colebrooke’s essays contributed strongly to a new and systematic insight into the philosophical implications of the yoga sign. Based on that, European intellectuals like the influential German Indologist *W. von Humboldt* ([Wikipedia link](#)) in 1827 settled on yoga as a kind of ‘absorption’ (*Vertiefung*) – ‘a self-reflective, disciplined turning inward, leading to a communion with the divine’ (Herling 2006). Thus already at this early point of the yoga sign’s entrance into the West, we see a European monotheistic intellectual milieu agreeing on Brahmin and theistic versions of the yoga sign compatible with their prevailing Christian and philosophical sensibilities.

In Germany the Orientalists’ writings and translations were widely studied and debated

by the *romanticists* (late 18th and early 19th century) ([Wikipedia link](#)) and were used in their opposition to Enlightenment philosophy. In their discourse India was perceived as a holistic, intuitive and spiritually driven culture in opposition to a Western rational world. Orientalism inspired German philosophers like Herder, the Schlegel brothers, Goethe, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche (Halbfass 1988, Clarke 1997, Herling 2006, McMahan 2008, Watson 2010). Even the conservative Hegel gave systematic consideration to '*Hindoo*' thinking and yoga. Thus the yoga sign made its first tentative entry into European philosophy, esotericism and romanticism.

Then the yoga discourse travelled across the Atlantic. In the USA Orientalist writings and romanticism influenced writers like H.D. Thoreau, R.W. Emerson, Madame Blavatsky and Annie Besant (UK) (Albanese 2007, Syman 2010). These writers became central to the 19th century American esoteric movements like Transcendentalism (1830), Theosophy (1875) and Christian Science (1879). Here Asian religions received a strong positive reception and were mixed with a hodgepodge of European transcendental metaphysics, individual spirituality, [perennial philosophy](#), Neo-Platonism, and romanticism. This esoteric cultural milieu became a global influential religio-political powerhouse. Its agenda was to re-enchant a disenchanted materialist West and bring it some regeneration by means of 'the spiritual East and its wisdom traditions' (McMahan 2008). It was a cultural milieu, which was on one hand hostile to many of the institutions and discourses of modernity. On the other hand, paradoxically, the milieu was simultaneously orientated by and expressed the tacit assumptions of the very same modernity. Here - in this subsystem of modernity - developed ideas about how some of the Asian cultural practices could help the individual to 'cultivate spiritual experiences' enabling a realisation of an ontological 'identity' with 'the whole'. It seems that it is within this American esoteric milieu that the main public interest in yoga remained among the cultural elite as romanticism diffused in popular literature, film, and music.

In the late 19th century after about a hundred years of Orientalist translations and writings, the yoga sign was still not particularly well known in wider public circles in the West outside Orientalist circles and their now mainly American esoteric elitist audience. The implication was that the defining categories and signs of Western yoga intellectual discourse were moulded and cast in newly created university chairs populated by Orientalist Sanskrit philologists. During the 19th Century this institutional environment had come to dominate and almost monopolise the content and direction of the intellectual modernist yoga discourse. It is within this discourse that the construction of 'classical yoga' emerged about 1850 as discussed in the chapter on [Yoga Sutra and modernism](#).

However the wider public was instead becoming acquainted with the 'jogi' or the 'fakir' character, who belonged to a very different discourse. The jogi was known through travellers' stories and the anecdotes of British soldiers, administrators and traders living in India. He was imagined as a kind of dark magician, who could perform marvels like disappearing on a rope in the air, being buried alive for days, sleeping on a bed of nails, telling fortunes, swallowing swords and doing contortions - a kind of marketplace entertainer with sinister and mystic undertones.

Orientalist scholars like E.W. Hopkins, W.J. Wilkins, Max Müller and M. Monier-Williams tended to dismiss this jogi figure as an 'impostor, a juggler – a near-idiot' (Singleton

2010). He was in their eyes just a typical example of the general degeneration of Indian culture and had nothing to do with the “real yoga” surfacing in the Sanskrit scriptures translated by these Orientalists.

### **Yoga popularisers and sympathisers around and after 1900**

As I have said, a large part of the Orientalists’ audience around 1900 was formed by esoteric, occult and spiritual circles in the West. The social background of many of the readers - often dominated by women - was that of wealthy bourgeois society leaders and cultural elites like artists, musicians, actors, dancers and authors. They were also the first for whom yoga was not just an intellectual activity, a professional business or a scholarly interest but a practical concern. They had all the passions of the amateur. They started to practise yoga and were keen to receive instruction. In my terminology they became the first Western yoga sympathisers. Among the practitioners were people who turned the knowledge and skills they acquired through their enthusiasm into a profession: the yoga popularisers.

What united these early yoga popularisers and sympathisers were their anti-establishment stance - their critical attitude to institutional Christianity, Enlightenment philosophy and life under modernity. They propagated the romanticists’ notion, that modernity had brought us too far away from our physical and human nature. Their esoteric views criticised Christianity’s orthodoxy and modernity’s materialist reductionism. Buddhism, Hinduism and yoga were fitted into their esoteric agenda, which as we have seen now had its stronghold in the USA.

So in the late 19th Century yoga was studied with profound interest in American esoteric circles. Especially within theosophical circles – which were extremely influential – the hybrid forms of modernist meditative yoga and modernist Buddhism were of keen interest. These discourses were perceived as ‘exotic and spiritual’ and offered practical guidance and methods. The sympathisers’ primary sources for inspirational information were the continuous arrivals of Orientalist translations of Indian religio-philosophy. In 1889 William Judge – a leading theosophist – reflected on the *Yoga Sutra*, which the *Theosophical Society* ([Wikipedia link](#)) had just translated into English by one of its Indian members (Albanese 2007). The meditative yoga Judge envisioned, based on this translation, was labelled ‘*raja-yoga*’. It was however kept very distinct from *hatha-yoga*, which was conflated with the detested contortionist – the *jogi* of the market place. Thus the theosophical milieu promoted yoga meditation, while the bodily practices of *hatha-yoga* was avoided if not warned against. One of the founding fathers of Theosophy – H.S. Olcott – accordingly wrote from India about *hatha-yoga*: “many have failed and died in the attempt. It is therefore strongly denounced by all the philosophers” (Albanese 2007).

So the early lay followers of modernist yoga and Buddhism were especially drawn to the meditative aspects of those discourses. Meditation now received a new meaning in relation to Romanticist religious ideas. One of these ideas was Friederich W.J. Schelling’s claim that the subject – the self - through ‘intellectual intuition’ could realise his/her ontological identity with the world: the object. Similarly another German Romanticist Friederich Schleirmacher advocated that through ‘pre-reflective awareness’ we can have an inner consciousness of our

‘universal existence’: the infinite – the ‘whole’ or god (McMahan 2008). The Theosophists quickly concluded that meditation – yogic or Buddhist – was an obvious practical tool to deliver such internal states.

They finally found a teacher and instructor in yoga and meditation with the arrival of *Vivekananda* ([Wikipedia link](#)) in USA in 1893 – one of the first star yoga popularisers. He acquired immense popularity among the yoga sympathisers and early Western yoga popularisers. The word spread rapidly. This resulted in a swift growth of the movement. So it was with the visit to the USA of prominent yogis like Vivekananda (1893), Sri Yogendra (1919) and Yogananda (1920s) that this modernist yoga hybrid started to take off.<sup>34</sup> In particular, women of the urban cultural elites flocked around these Indian gurus (Syman 2010).

*Vivekananda* toured and set up Vedanta Centers in major towns in USA. The *raja-yoga* he instructed claimed to be based on the recently translated and re-discovered Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra*. Vivekananda combined the meditation of the *Yoga Sutra* with some few body postures – *asanas*. This mix was finally spiced with some Tantric Kundalini philosophy. In order to give the meditative practices and techniques meaning, Vivekananda mainly employed a revised version of the old Brahmin religio-philosophical system of Vedanta. This [Neo-Vedanta](#) was in itself a reflection of the Romanticist-Transcendentalism of his audience (Albanese 2007).



Some twenty-five years later the guru *Yogananda* ([Wikipedia link](#)) added on to Vivekananda’s initial missionary work. He also understood the importance of building up an organisational network. In the USA Yogananda set up his Self-Realisation Fellowship, which promoted a system named *kriya-yoga*. This system was also an attempt to implement the meditative system of Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra*. However Yogananda defined yoga as a science rather than as meditation (Albanese 2007). Yoga here became an instrument for a universal- or perennial religion. Yogananda also taught some physical yoga exercises for improving the health, although these were not *asanas* but instead mainly Western based calisthenics, auto-suggestion- and will-power-techniques. Yogananda’s self-biography became a bestseller.

Other Indian exporters of yoga – like Sri Yogendra, Yogi Gherwal, Yogi Wassan, Yogi Hari Rama - also travelled to USA promoting *hatha-yoga* and yoga.

Still, it was Vivekananda’s and Yogananda’s constructions of meditative yoga science – a yoga relatively successfully promoted and maintained by small organisational centres - which

became most widespread (Syman 2010). These centres promoted a discourse, which corresponded to that of the leading Western Orientalists and American esoterics. Hence they were often legitimised and supported by Western cultural elites like the author Aldous Huxley.

So yoga at the beginning of the 20th century - with its focus on the re-discovered *Yoga Sutra* of Patanjali, - often peppered with Tantric Kundalini signs - became mostly known in the West as a sign related to meditation and science. This style of meditative yoga was mostly practised in narrow religio-cultural circles, and small manuals and introductions were quickly offered to the interested elites <sup>35</sup> The yoga specialists among the sympathisers were perceived more as missionaries, gurus and sages than as just yoga professionals.

### **Modernist yoga as a part of a global high culture circuit**

Vivekananda and his like represented a missionary *Neo-Vedanta religio-philosophy* ([Wikipedia link](#)), which stated that all religions were identical: that all the different gods of the world were just different representations of the highest principle of all: *brahman* . The American esoterics endorsed this message because the ‘mystical Hindoo sage’ – for instance embodied by Vivekananda - basically fed back to them their own previous export of modernist Western esotericism and Protestantism to colonial India. What was significantly new in this context was that the Indian guru was able to offer *practical* scientific tools – yoga – for attaining the divine.

So yoga meditation in the West in the first part of the 20th century became enveloped in American Protestant spiritual and esoteric movements – and not particularly in fitness discourses. Yoga’s purpose was accordingly now to find the inner god. This is for instance expressed in a 1953 translation of the *Yoga Sutra*, coming out of the Los Angeles Vedantic Centre, which was titled: “*How to Know God*” (Syman 2010). It was thought that yoga delivered the scientific and practical tools for a ‘spiritual-psychological self-discovery’. This hybrid modernist yoga was as we have seen initially framed or given meaning by Western discourses of psychology, science, romanticism, esotericism and Protestantism.

In conclusion, we can say that the first colonial Indian exporters of meditative yoga – which already as it became exported was a strongly Western modernised form of yoga - were the Indian colonial elite. They were the professional yoga popularisers. The importers – the amateur yoga sympathisers - of this religio-psychological product were Western cultural elites and esoteric groups – primarily women.<sup>36</sup> In fact what we are witnessing was a high-culture to high-culture mutual exchange on a global communication circuit, which also was a market of exchange: yoga capital (knowhow) was exchanged with Western money and admiration. Let me now shortly introduce how the body oriented yoga discourse – often called *hatha-yoga* – entered the West around 1900.

### ***Hatha-yoga in the USA before World War II***

Even if the notion of *hatha-yoga* was originally conflated with the dark jogi it managed over time to achieve some positive reputation in USA before WW2. The problem was that the

kind of *hatha-yoga* which the esoterics encountered had very little to do with the *hatha-yoga* depicted in the 15th Century *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*.

One of the first to write about *hatha-yoga* was the American writer W.W. Atkinson. He was a strong promoter of the New Thought discourse writing books like: *Thought Force and Everyday Life* (1903); *Mind-Power: The Secret of Mental Magic* (1912). However under the pseudonym Yogi Ramacharaka, Atkinson published several titles about yoga. One of them was *Hatha-yoga; or The Yoga Philosophy of Well-being* (1904). It was mainly about finding a powerful ‘real self’ and the yoga exercises illustrated were more about callisthenic exercises than *hatha-yoga asana* (Albanese 2007). In other words Atkinson was heavily influenced by the modernist yoga discourse of the Theosophists but he tried to break up the alignment of *hatha-yoga* with the rascal *jogi*: “In India there exists a horde of ignorant mendicants of the lower fakir class, who pose as hatha yogis, but who have not the slightest conception of the underlying principles of this branch of yoga” (From Albanese 2007).

Another American couple to promote the notion of *hatha-yoga* were *Pierre A. Bernard* ([Wikipedia link](#)) and Blanche de Vries. Pierre Bernard had an intensive and impressive knowledge about Tantric and Sanskrit writings. He was a charismatic person who in his early youth was trained in Tantric ideas by the Indian emigrant Sylvais Hamati. In 1905 Bernard initially had a studio in San Francisco showing and initiating the amazed public in the powerful and mystical techniques and teachings of Tantra. Later he moved to New York where he successfully mingled with and targeted the affluent cultural upper-class milieu of celebrities, dancers, artists and extreme wealthy families. It was here he was joined by the dancer Blanche de Vries who took over the practical yoga exercises, while Bernard focused on lectures, organisation building and public relations (Love 2010). The couple managed to become a celebrity pair themselves. They left very little in writing but it appears that the *hatha-yoga* they taught consisted of bodily exercise heavily influenced by modern dance, contortionism, and calisthenics (Syman 2010, Love 2010). The exercises were wrapped in hybrid discourses of bodily and mental health, spiritual living and Tantric philosophy.

As in earlier times, yoga in whatever disguises it might take seduced and intrigued the upper classes of society. Apparently in such glamorous milieus of leisure and wealth yoga was a novel and enticing fashion generating amusement and diversion. It could not only distract and occupy their fleeing interest but was often also able to address eventual existential concerns in a life where economic survival was no longer of any concern.

In 1919 [Sri Yogendra](#) arrived in the US, one of the great missionaries of an Indian physical body culture. As mentioned in the chapter on Colonial Indian yoga, his re-construction of *hatha-yoga* was informed by a Western discourse of science, esotericism and *physical culture* (today called ‘fitness culture’). Sri Yogendra was inspired by the [Hatha Yoga Pradipika](#) and its focus on the purification of the body. However this interest was orientated by his modernist and scientific discourse of ‘hygiene, therapy and the improvement of the autonomic nervous system’. He stayed only briefly in the US and mainly interacted with the medical scientific milieu here. Hence his ideas left few traces.

So there was little knowledge of *hatha-yoga* in the US. Pierre Bernard was more occupied by Tantra than by *hatha-yoga*. It was first about twenty years later with the arrival of

Bernard's nephew Theos Bernard that America encountered a *hatha-yoga* discourse directly inspired by the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*. *Theos Bernard* ([Wikipedia link](#)) was strongly influenced by the concept of Tantra outlined by the Orientalist John Woodrooffe (aka Arthur Avalon) and his uncle Pierre Bernard. [Theos Bernard's](#) book *Hatha Yoga: The Report of a Personal Experience* (1943) is discussed in the chapter on colonial yoga. Bernard claimed that *hatha-yoga* was able to lead to *samadhi*, but this was apparently not his main interest. Basically he posited *hatha-yoga* as an instrument – or almost a fulltime lifestyle – leading to unimaginable health and well-being.

This was primarily a health and fitness discourse wrapped in mystical signs. All in all for some very few American urban middle class circles *hatha-yoga* became “regimes of calisthenics, deep breathing, dietics, nature cure and positive auto-suggestion” according to Singleton (2010) and Syman (2010). However most of these modernist *hatha-yoga* discourses and techniques were clearly not Eastern but originated in the West.

The fact was that since the middle of 19th century there had among the middle classes of the West been the surfacing and conflation of a wide range of discourses. It was a mixture of religious esotericism, new protestant innovations, health, holism, gymnastics, dietary regimen, motivational psychology, modern medicine, dance and theatre training. All these discourses merged in ideas about a holistic *bricolage* consisting of a healthy body, mind and soul. It was promoted by institutions like the YMCA, movements like Muscular Christianity and discourses like physical culture and harmonial religion ([this is discussed in the chapter](#) on Colonial Modernist Yoga) (Albanese 2007, Singleton 2010). The target audiences were mainly sophisticated and well-educated better-off women from the emerging urban centres in the US.

The Indian or American yoga gurus introducing meditative *raja-yoga* and *hatha-yoga* did not bring much new to this discourse. They just managed to give it an interesting mystical-oriental slant, hugely popular among the yoga sympathisers.

Even if *hatha-yoga* was slowly aligned with Western physical culture, health, spirituality and science, it never managed to build up a necessary organisational network like the one supporting the meditative yoga milieu. Pre WW2 *hatha-yoga* was still a fringe activity. Time – the sociological matrix - was not yet ripe.

### **Modernist yoga discourses in the West - *after* World War II**

After the Second World War yoga's elite-based communication network was overshadowed by new popular yoga forms. First the yoga discourse transformed and migrated into emerging female body cultures and discourses. Then in the 1960s yoga moved into counter- and pop-culture.

These new yoga sympathisers – interactors - framed by post-war conditions accordingly imbued the yoga sign with new meaning. A momentous new force in this process was Western urban women, who primarily encountered yoga through the new mass media. Women, who in India mostly had been excluded from yoga, took up yoga in great numbers and began to transform it. For the women of new affluent Western middle class – many of them housewives – yoga found strong resonance. Soon at evening classes in Western metropolises, yoga was

taught by women for women. But as we soon shall see this was a rather different bodily oriented style of yoga.

The next development happened as Westerners commenced on a large scale to travel to India and there came into direct contact with all its different sects and religio-cultures. It might all have started as emerging mass-tourism but during the 1960s the visit to India became educational and experimental for many travellers. A fast growing post-war middle class of well-educated but often alienated young people filled up airlines and ships heading for India to find new meaning in life. They brought back with them the forms of colonial yoga they encountered in India. They – like the women – re-configured yoga, merged it with pop-culture, hippie life style, and protest. A new hybrid culture was surfacing among new strata of yoga sympathisers.

As we have seen, new circuits of communication and exchange emerged after WW2. The post-war yoga communication circuit was no longer a high-culture elite-to-elite transfer but rather a global fusion of mass cultures. The economical exchange of yoga capital (knowledge) now increasingly took place in an anonymous market. In this period the yoga discourse grew significantly and transformed totally in form and meaning.

### **The split into yoga scholars and yoga popularisers**

In other words, during this post-war period we witness a break up of the Western modernist yoga culture into two distinct and separate cultural fields – a scholarly field found within academic institutions and a popular field found in the market and formed by the nascent consumer culture. The intellectual scholarly field was hitherto a central part of Western elite culture. Until then the Orientalists had been widely read and had interacted intensely with urban cultural elites and middle classes. However the *Indologist scholars* ([Wikipedia link](#)) emerging after WW2 became isolated in the notorious “intellectual ivory towers”. The academic yoga discourse mainly retreated to departments of religious studies. It was from now on conducted by people primarily trained in Sanskrit and hermeneutics (textual interpretation), by scholars heavily influenced by phenomenological and essentialist philosophy and methodology (see [Contemplation on this intellectual yoga discourse](#) ).

Like many other academic [cultural fields](#) it became a closed circle for initiated knowledge specialists.<sup>37</sup> To be acknowledged as a producer of valid yoga knowledge – that is cultural capital - in this discourse, you would need to have read certain works, follow specific methodologies, master certain skills, subscribe to tacit assumptions, and use a certain jargon. In other words, a knowledge discourse splitting the world into experts and audience. Here students were still mainly trained in Sanskrit and hermeneutics. Hence many yoga scholars were ill-equipped to analyse and comprehend the significant changes which hybrid modernist yoga underwent in the last half of the twentieth century.

As this intellectual yoga discourse tended to focus on translating and giving meaning to ancient scriptures, it typically dismissed current forms of popular yoga culture as being degenerate and regrettable mutations of the real thing. For many yoga intellectuals it was only in history and in old scriptures (and some few enclaves of rural India) that the essence of yoga

– the core principles - could be revealed. It was clear to most modernist Indologists that modernist yoga forms had very little or nothing to do with the core principles of yoga, as defined by them. About what was happening right now to yoga in the real world, they had little to say. Modernist popular yoga culture could only be perceived as a hollow fashionable vehicle and was not a proper part of ‘the yoga tradition’. Commercialised contemporary yoga was not worth studying and, anyway, the yoga Indologists would struggle to do this – they were primarily linguistic scriptural experts, not cultural sociologists reviewing changing fashions. For many the main history of real yoga tended to end around 1400 as Turkic Muslims entered India and new Sanskrit writings on yoga dried up. It was a nostalgic view, where the truth was situated in the past and it was thought the present had so much to learn from that past.

Recently we have seen changes to this categorisation of the knowledge field. Contemporary yoga culture is increasingly becoming the topic for scholarly yoga research. A few historians, sociologists and anthropologists have published interesting research on contemporary postural yoga culture. And within departments of religious studies for some time students have been graduating who themselves have a background in practising modernist postural yoga. They have made their amateur passion into an academic study and are now trying to make sense out of the postural yoga, with which they initially have been raised. It is also among these newcomers that we see the first sign of a bridge being established between academic and popular yoga communication circuits as these people bravely try to reconcile their yoga background with their newly gained academic insights.

The modernist postural yoga culture unfolding in and on TV, DVDs, newspapers, women’s magazines, blogs, gyms, studios, evening classes, movies, self help manuals, and instructional books have been driven by a whole new breed which we first met in late colonial India. I have named them the *yoga sympathisers and popularisers* – the last category being people practising yoga and now wanting to spread the message and make a living from it. Entry to the ranks of a professional populariser is easy. You practise for some time and then you just need to speak with self-confidence about yoga to become recognised. There are no exams to pass - but it is seen as a major benefit, if an Indian guru has initiated you. Many Western instructors however only have a “humble background” in dance, fitness, body therapy and sports. If you are an Indian born *swami* you are perceived to be a heavyweight contributor.

The popular yoga culture represents a separate cultural field with an entirely new discourse and economical dynamic, conditioned by consumer culture, market forces and deep structural social changes. This means it is a field where recognised and successful yoga knowledge is formed by the demand of the yoga sympathisers via the market - yoga capital (knowhow) as a dialectical outcome of the interaction between producers (popularisers) and consumers (sympathisers). It is a cultural field with its own communication circuits, which has almost no direct awareness of or input from the pre-war Orientalist- or post-war Indologist yoga knowledge. This yoga culture is rather fed by the popular late colonial Indian yoga culture, romanticism, Western fitness and body cultures, spiritualism etc. It is this hybrid culture of the yoga popularisers and sympathisers that will have our attention for the rest of this chapter.

Here is a quote from a yoga populariser who summarises the feel of the new field:

"Your doctor recommends yoga. Your insurance company pays for it. The Fortune 500 company you work for offers it over lunch hour. Your psychotherapist recommends it to reduce stress. Yoga and meditation are being taught in AIDS hospices, corporate boardrooms, battered women's shelters, inner city churches. Yoga images permeate everything from your favorite sitcom to your least favorite junkmail catalog. And in the process, Western society is leaving its mark on yoga as well. "Yoga is American now," says Judith Lasater, a yoga teacher for almost 30 years and the author of *Living Your Yoga: Finding the Spiritual in Everyday Life*. "Back when I first started teaching, it was very tied to Hinduism—to wearing white cotton yoga pants, taking a Hindu name, burning incense, and having a guru. Now it's taken on an American patina rather than a Hindu patina." "Anne Cushman: The New Yoga in Yoga Journal, see [Yogajournal.com/lifestyle/281](http://Yogajournal.com/lifestyle/281)

*Today most observers agree that 80-90 per cent of Western yoga students are women. There are millions and millions of them doing yoga and the trend is that yoga is rapidly going global. Modernist postural yoga culture has in a serious way met the mainstream mass culture of the West. Why was it adopted on such a massive scale? How did the yoga culture become a part of mainstream Western culture? How did this successful adaptation transform the yoga culture? How did the yoga popularisers – the trend setting interactors – manage all this?*

*This is what the beginning of this chapter sets out to explain. So it will leave behind the mainly elitist meditative styles of modernist yoga of pre-WW2 and instead focus on the postural yoga culture of the masses as it spread like wildfire among women across the West after WW2. Here we will first focus on how women transformed the yoga sign into a female body culture and then we will see how the counterculture linked this body culture with identity and spirituality. In the end we will see how these masses transformed the yogi into an entrepreneur thriving within a specific cultural field.*

## 2. The yoga culture of middleclass women

### The post World War II middle class female

Our focus group consists of women – or more specifically the women belonging to the new emerging middle classes of the post-WW2 years. Within the new layers of *corporate capitalism* ([Wikipedia link](#)) and state bureaucracies, there surfaced women who not only adopted yoga, but also changed it. These women – the new yoga interactors - shared many characteristics with the social strata who 50 years earlier developed a female fitness culture. The typical profile of the first female yoga sympathisers around 1900 was that of a stratum of wealthy metropolitan bourgeoisie, society leaders and cultural elites like artists, musicians, actors, dancers and authors – often well educated wives and daughters of wealthy families. Often they were involved and engaged in cultural and religious/spiritual activities. They would often perceive themselves as the avant-garde enlightenment of modern times leading the way

into the twentieth century.

Now after WW2 and the economic boom the cultural dynamic – and with that yoga - left these upper class strata and moved down into female circles in the emerging middle classes. Yoga was entering strata of economic independent and strong women living in metropolitan areas seeking new identities and interests. It was such female amateurs who now mainly opted for the postural yoga styles, a body exercise style, which as described in the chapter on Colonial modernist yoga was configured in India between [1920 and 1940](#). It was not the modernist meditative yoga of Vivekananda that attracted them. Instead it was the so-called *hatha-yoga*. As described in the Colonial Modernist Yoga chapter this hybrid postural yoga culture was highly influenced by Western gymnastics, calisthenics and body building practices. Many of the stretches and movements were probably downright copies. It all came out of a turn-of-century modernist Western discourse of ‘physical culture’. Today we call it the ‘fitness culture’.

Thus, seen in this perspective we can see what the middle class women demanded was actually not yoga (in the meaning of meditation) but fitness. But not just any fitness. They were requiring a *specific* fitness regime congruent with their female bodies and mind-set: a female *habitus* ([Wikipedia link](#)). They did not like men strive after muscular- or high-performing bodies. Their demands were different.

If we look at the period before WW2, we find that many of those demands had found their early expression in a range of female body cultural practices. However before WW2 those discourses were confined to narrow cultural elites of the upper bourgeoisie, entertainment- and cultural milieus. They were not relevant for or within reach of most women. So the social conditions were not established for these cultural practices to spread out in society. Before the physical culture would have any relevance to Western women, they would have to have achieved a certain level of emancipation - emancipation from the household, the large numbers of children, the denial of education. In short they needed economic independence and leisure time. These conditions emerged after WW2 for many women – not only the elite - in the West, as the middle class exploded in size. However the discourses of fitness post-WW2 women adopted were already developed before the war.

*So let us first look of the discourses of female fitness before the war. Having looked at that it is easier to comprehend what happened after the WW2. Mark Singleton in his recent book *Yoga Body* (2010) has mapped the emergence of this female fitness culture and the following module draws on this.*

### **Male and female fitness culture**

With the emergence in Europe during the 19 century of a powerful middle class and bourgeoisie, there surfaced around them popular gymnastic movements. On the surface it looked as though gymnastics was a way to overcome the “disease of affluence”, a way for well-off people with too little physical activity to become fit. However the gymnastic movement – initially using tools like static rings and bars and later moving into callisthenic

exercises like push-ups and jumping jacks - was enveloped within the context of rising European nationalism and militarism. The aim with the new body drill was not just the strengthening of the body but also the build up of national and strong character. The underlying theory was that body disciplining was a way to discipline the self: the idea that military-style drills would create a strong will-full body and mind, an integral and moral self strongly identifying with the nation.



*Delsarte exercises*

These gymnastic discourses then merged with new Protestant and esoteric ideas that not only the mind but also the soul could be strengthened through such disciplined physical regiments. This discourse even envisaged god within the body and hence saw the perfection of the soul as a way to ‘harmonise with god’. Hence there emerged in the West the widespread holistic ideal of a strong and healthy body, mind and soul, says Singleton.

Late in the 19 Century the modernist medical discourse took the form of developing regiments of health, diets and hygiene. These discourses also found their way into the existing holistic body discourses outlined above. All this finally coalesced into the discourse of *physical culture*, which I discuss in the chapter on Colonial yoga. (We see there how bodybuilding for instance emerged and entered the Indian middle classes.)

However most of these discourses were male macho cultures creating steel-like sculptures of will and power. These male ideals were mainly for men being trained in the military or in private gymnasiums, but not really designed for women. Initially this was not much of a problem because for most women physical exercise was out of their reach. Their situation did not allow them such luxuries. Further what should women, who were “intended for motherhood”, do with such a masculine body and resolute character anyway?

The impetus for a female body culture emerged in other milieus. From the middle of the 19 century new techniques and principles related to dramatic expression within modernist

theatre, dance and singing developed. These new techniques were of course influenced by the prevailing male discourses of body culture and fitness. But being rooted in art, drama and entertainment, they took most of the male aggressive components out of the physical culture drills and developed instead exercises and programmes aiming for pose, grace, flexibility and health, according to Singleton. The French teacher of acting and singing F. Delsarte (1811-71) developed his *Delsarte System*, which spread rapidly across the West. These new ideals seemed to fit much better into the mind-set of women and the cultural elites of the bourgeoisie and middle classes.

The late 19 century was very busy. Many of the discourses of modernity we today take for granted emerged and cross-fertilised here, for example psychology and psychoanalysis. They merged with - and sometimes surfaced out of - esoteric discourses and all this then entered the body discourses discussed above. Discourses and programmes of body relaxation, deep breathing, positive thinking, and body-visualisation developed and became integrated in many of the physical body cultures, according to Singleton.

Thus many of the physical body discourses lost some of their militant character and became much more gentle and introspective. Words like 'harmony' and 'relaxation' now came to the foreground. And still the discourses all shared the aims of body beauty and aesthetics. The new gentler discourses embodied however beauty ideals which proved more compliant with existing female body ideals. So in this way some of the physical exercises slowly became more attractive to a female audience.



1926: Stack demonstrating

Hence the Delsarte system aimed at actors, dancers, chorus girls, and singers were in the USA developed by a woman in 1892 into a callisthenic system integrated with deep respiration, relaxation, visualisation and harmonial esoteric. The title of G. Stebbin's book says it all: *Dynamic Breathing and Harmonic Gymnastics. A Complete System of Physical Aesthetic and Physical Culture*. A year later another American female writer A.P. Call published a similar system consisting of gentle gymnastics, relaxation techniques and 'mystical breath-work'. Soon after there emerged similar techniques some of which are still renowned today like Mensendieck gymnastic (1908) and Pilates (around 1920). Both worked on posture, relaxation and breath and both found significant therapeutic use.

So the time was ripe with a huge range of body-oriented discourses interacting constructively as circles of middleclass women increasingly gained independence and emancipation. In Britain – as a final example of the development - M. Bagot Stack around 1920 developed her Harmonic Gymnastic. Photos of her demonstrating some of her poses would make most contemporary people claim she was instructing *asana* yoga. But as Singleton says, she actually had been on a visit to India, so this is no surprise. What is significant is that her exercises were about ‘aesthetics, health and spiritual growth’, which also came across in the title of her book *Building the Body Beautiful, The Bagot Stack Stretch-and-Swing System* (1931). But please note that she does not call it yoga, and note further how ‘aesthetics’ and ‘spirituality’ have become happy neighbours.

So we see that at the turn of century the male and female body culture of modernity shared many values and programmes. But we also recognise the differences in the ideals of male and female beauty aesthetics. Male ideals were strongly influenced by militarism while female ideals became enveloped in spirituality and psychology. This difference in values will obviously imply gender-specific exercise programmes.

We have now seen how holistic body/mind/soul discourses of health and beauty developed among the cultural elites of the bourgeoisie and middle classes. They would - when able to infiltrate the state - spread to the public through school systems and educational programmes. The growing mainly male working class movement took on and promoted many of the male programmes and discourses. However the women were mostly still caught in the roles of household motherhood. Hence we need to see a change of those circumstances before we can expect a popular uptake of the body discourses of modernity whose origin we have just seen outlined above.

### **Corporate capitalism and the new welfare state**

So let us now investigate the first wave of yoga after WW2 – postural/*asana* yoga among middle class women and the counterculture. I believe this first wave can be related primarily to two significant changes in the sociological matrix of the post-war years. After WW2, as the welfare state and large companies (corporate capitalism) expanded dramatically in the West, there emerged a new strong middle class – sometimes called the middle-layer as it was defined by its position in huge bureaucracies.<sup>38</sup> In this period many women were propelled out of the family household into professional services. This meant a significant empowering of women who became educated and economically independent. This improvement of the situation of women was also related to the boom and affluence characterising the 1950s and 1960s. There was an over-demand for workers encouraging women to enter the labour market. Families could finally afford to provide young women with substantial education instead of marrying them off as early as possible.

The economic boom, expansion of the middle classes, the explosion in education not only opened new doors for women but also led to a new counterculture emerging among the well-educated children of the new dominant middle classes. The yoga culture became a part of these social changes and found resonance among many people in these groups. First let us take a

look at the situation of the women, as they would come to dominate modernist yoga culture. Then I will return to the counterculture.

### **Women at home and at work in the new middle class society**

Women not only came to dominate the first wave of post-war *asana* yoga but actually have dominated modernist yoga since then. So the task is really to explain why did *asana* yoga become so popular among women in Western post-war societies? Why did men not take it up to the same degree? This is a very complex phenomenon to explain and contemporary social theory struggles to find answers. What adds complexity to the situation is that the yoga product – postural yoga – during this process also became formed by the attitudes, desires and requirements of women – their *habitus*. As we start to look into how the market forces formed yoga this should become clearer. So for the first time in the history of “*Why Yoga?*”: why female interactors?

The emerging huge new affluent middle class meant for the women entering it as either professionals or wives significant new possibilities and empowerment: education, independence, work and/or substantial leisure time, freedom from the fetters of family/household/motherhood, the contraceptive pill. Many women entered the production process but many also stayed at home dedicated to the family.

For those *women staying at home* in a middle class household supported by new devices, automation and “outsourcing” of many of their previous activities, there emerged a whole new life style. Time became abundant in a home deprived of most of its earlier functions. There was now time to become educated at the evening classes of adult educational institutions, where women began to flock. Further there was time to become occupied with oneself and the kind of interests often pursued by women. Women traditionally had strong interest in their looks, health, and body maintenance (Newcombe 2007). We have seen how the pre-war female body discourses had contributed to this. Now here after the war a range of adult educational offerings met these female interests. One of the offerings was postural yoga, which “surprisingly enough” exactly offered improved look, health and fitness. Let us look into that.

In today’s terms what the new middle class of women actually among other things demanded was fitness. But evidently it had to be a fitness regime congruent with their body ideals and pre-conceptions – i.e. being a reflection of their female *habitus*. It had to meet the requirements of what they had been socialised to understand as the ideals of a female body. For instance, in addition to fitness it also had to deliver health and beauty as many women, due to their new social situation, had become increasingly occupied with such regimes. The basis for this demand had been prepared by the bourgeoisie elites’ female body discourses *before* WW2. As we have seen, turn-of-the-century female holistic body discourses had constructed the perfect woman as ‘healthy, relaxed, flexible, posed, graceful, body-aware, aesthetic and spiritual’. <sup>39</sup> And it is my conjecture that the new expanding female middle class was now slowly adapting to this elite holistic body discourse.

Many of the colonial modernist yoga styles constructed during the 1920s yoga-renaissance were under the heavy influence of many of the same Western holistic body

discourses. Take for instance Sivananda's [healthy Hindu lifestyle yoga](#). Thinking about it, this yoga actually met most of the criteria demanded by post-war women concerning spirituality and health. The further good news was that Sivananda had already built up an organisation and ideology ready and geared for world export – a perfect match of demand and supply. Hence this style of yoga now spread rapidly among interested Western female yoga sympathisers.

Early female adopters of such styles of yoga could easily form and modify its postural *asana* exercises to conform to female Western expectation and habitus. Soon these female pioneer yoga sympathisers would teach their sisters – often at evening classes - a slightly modified posture practice that met the new female demands in the market. *Asana* practice – instructed by female professionals - now became informed and guided by “feminine” signs of gentleness, grace, adroitness and aesthetics. The female yoga instructor – a former amateur - either labelled it *hatha-yoga* or just *yoga* and then enveloped it in romantic stories - told by her Indian guru - about fascinating “ancient mystical yoga traditions”.

In summary, the first wave of *asana*-driven yoga was conditioned by a growing group of affluent and well-educated middle class women. What was also new to them was that they were not restrained and locked in by the duties of the household. They had abundant spare time. However it was still yoga interactors who were confined by their traditional role in society: women as the managers of the household and its members, the supporters of children, the sick and the old.

Let us now turn to the professional middle class woman, whose problem was definitely not too much leisure time. Here the traditional identity of a woman as a mother and housewife was in the process of metamorphosis, as she turned into a worker *and* a mother. Those women finding work *outside the home* started to become integrated in and influenced by the processes of *corporate capitalism* ([Wikipedia link](#)) - processes having a social-psychological impact on the men already working there. That implied that women succumbed to social-psychological processes generated by a life within institutions and organisations affecting of course both men and women – one of them being cultural narcissism which we will to investigate later.

Whole new patterns of interaction and lifestyles emerged slowly among the professional female middle class. Gradually young women delayed having children to a later phase in life. The most pressing dream was no longer to rock the cradle and look after the husband. Instead of the family they increasingly found their engagement, values, interests and involvement outside the family. In their leisure time they wanted to go to the movies, theatres and concerts. At night and at weekends they wanted to have fun and go dancing and partying – to be out with friends. In their holidays they wanted to travel and experience the world. They wanted a career and were not just satisfied with being the boss's secretary, but actually hoped to become the boss's boss. They started to become project managers, editors, analysts, designers, consultants, heads of department and so on in the new dominant industries and state sectors of corporate capitalism.

Later on in this chapter we shall see how these conditions around the 1990s had reached a critical mass, which allowed yoga culture to take off. These huge numbers of independent metropolitan young women created the conditions for yoga culture to leave the edges of society and move into the mainstream. Later in this chapter we will return to this crucial situation of

yoga culture gaining critical mass.

To summarise, sociologists agree that overall there were after WW2 extraordinary significant changes to the majority of Western women's situation and habitus: the affluent housewives of the middle classes; employed women gaining economic independence and new social experiences; women becoming independent and defining new life styles and identities appropriate for them. Many of those women became attracted to modernist postural yoga as one of many new female fitness regiments. An initial sociological explanation for the interest in modernist postural yoga is that what this yoga product offered resonated with what society traditionally had held up as female body preoccupations, namely *health and beauty* (Woodhead 2007). We shall return in more detail to this later.

### **What follows in the rest of the chapter**

*So far in tracing the surfacing of a Western postural yoga discourse we have reached the period just before the youth rebellions of the late 1960s. Before looking at that I would like to discuss two discourses which many scholars relate particularly to women and their gender specific social situation. These two discourses are spirituality and romanticism and both discourses seem to have resonated well with the asana yoga and hence became a part of its Western construction as a health and fitness tool.*

*Then I will return to the historical chronology of yoga culture and discuss another aspect of the middle class revolution – the youth and counterculture of the late 60s and 70s. This naturally leads me into a discussion of the commercialisation of yoga culture, which accelerated dramatically in this period and the following period, where yoga became adopted into the New Age discourse of the 70s and 80s.*

*It will be shown how yoga culture in its first phase after WW2 – from the early fifties to the early eighties – was engaged in holistic romanticist and spiritual discourses. Having done that we will follow yoga's move into mainstream fitness culture of the 90s, which muted the spiritual part of yoga culture. Fitness and health had been a central part of the Western yoga discourse since long but now in the 90s as new female beauty and general fitness culture moved to the forefront of society and it did similar in the yoga discourse. Yoga culture stepped into its second post-war phase, where it got critical mass and spread out in popular culture.*

*First the relationship of modernist postural yoga with spirituality and holistic romanticism, which characterised its first post war phase. We are in the words of the cultural sociologist P. Bourdieu going to look at the habitus of popular yoga culture.*

## **3. Yoga wrapped in spiritual and romanticist habitus**

“Our aspirations and expectations, our sense of what is reasonable or unreasonable, likely or unlikely, our beliefs about what are obvious actions to take and the natural ways of doing them are all to Bourdieu neither essential nor natural but rather conditioned by our habituses...” (Maton 2012, p.57)

The term *habitus* as defined by *Bourdieu* ([Wikipedia link](#)) is about how we bring our cultural history and social background into the present circumstances. It is about how our past socialisation guides us in our current action and in our interpretation of the situation that we are facing. In relation to yoga culture habitus is about our attitudes and dispositions forming the emerging popular yoga field. It is about how existing “cultural programs” (existing mental habits) become part of the new yoga discourses and the newly crystallising cultural fields, how the new is formed by the past. More specifically we are investigating how spiritualism and romanticist holism – both belonging to the Western female middle class’s habitus – interacted with the formation of popular modernist yoga.

### Holistic Romanticism, women and yoga

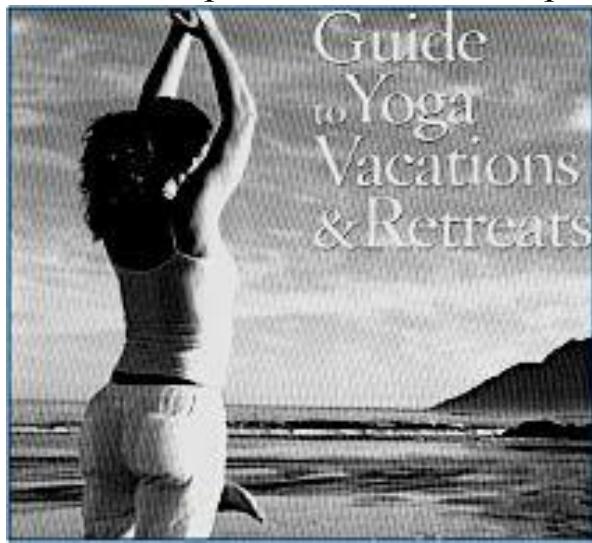
Inside our habitus – our cultural dispositions - we will find our values and self-identity. They guide and orientate us in the world we face. In order to understand female self-identity and values better sociologically, one could take as a starting point the material and social conditions typically framing the lives of women - investigating the traditional roles of women in Western male-dominated societies. I am thinking of the woman as a *mother*, <sup>40</sup> that is *women* in a reproductive *social role* of the raising of children and caring for the sick and weak. As history abundantly shows us, women have traditionally been responsible for looking after children, the sick and the old. Women previously had and still have a strong social role of caring and maintaining the social reproduction within the household. Many women still seem to identify with this role.

This role probably often gave – and still gives - them a sharp and practical eye for the physical body, its care and needs and the overall social functioning and coherence of the family. Maybe due to their role women became interested and skilful in social and communicative matters – matters that under modernity became subject of public discourses and science. In other words as the modernity of the 19 Century developed discourses in pedagogy, psychology, feelings, romanticism, and social systems these subjects might have found a captive audience among “educated mothers” to whom – as a social role - such discourses had strong relevance and resonance. This establishes a link between women and romanticism. Let us explore this.

It was during the 19 Century that social and holistic ideas historically found expression in *romanticist* ([Wikipedia link](#)) views or discourses. What do I mean by ‘holistic ideas’? ‘*Holism*’ ([Wikipedia link](#)) as a worldview maintains that everything – the parts of a system – is somehow connected to *the whole*. The whole – the system – is more than the sum of the individual parts. The whole brings the parts together in a coherent common resonance. The whole is “the working together of the parts”.

According to romanticist holism the parts and the system mutually permeate each other. Humans are a part of nature, social organisations and god – and this is also true the other way

round: nature, social organisation and god are a part of humans. Humans – being elements - can only thrive if they are living in harmony with the whole – nature, society etc. Romanticist ideologies were accordingly criticising modernity and the industrial society for breaking up our fundamental social organisations and for removing us from nature. And when the romanticists said ‘nature’ they both meant our ‘inner human nature’ and the ‘surrounding physical nature’<sup>41</sup>. In other words, according to this discourse, the process of modernisation is breaking down ‘the whole’ and this is individualising us – making us “inhuman”. Turning humans into fragmented parts lacking their wholesomeness. The romanticists held India up as a counter example of a holistic and spiritual wisdom culture.



*Yoga framed with romantic nature*

Romanticism today penetrates our discourses in a tacit but comprehensive way. It has become a part of our Western habitus. It is maintained and thriving in movies, novels, psychology and therapy to mention but a few. Most of its themes and notions play a significant part in our lives and popular culture: our commitment to a deep interior true self; our scepticism about materialism and social convention; our feeling of alienation to society and ourselves; our sense that intuition and interior experience should supersede the rational; nature as a living force which invigorates us and bring us to ourselves; our wish for a re-enchantment of a industrialised and materialistic life; and the natural world as an embodiment of a universal spirit.

With this background or habitus we could suggest that there is a connection between women’s traditional interests, sensibilities and roles (the mother) and romanticist discourse: the importance of gentle connections and not obvious relations, the elevation of the interior and its feelings. We have already seen how female body discourses as they surfaced around 1900 were penetrated by holistic and romanticist discourses. Hence it is of little surprise when we find that the yoga sign, as it became a part of female identity building (female values, interests, ethics), became overlapped and orientated by signs from romanticism. A few hours of browsing today’s yoga websites and blogs on the net will confirm this in abundance.

This hybridisation of yogic and romanticist signs and cultures is confirmed by the American teacher of women’s studies K. Lau. In *New Age Capitalism* (2000). She also finds that the romanticist discourse resonates very well with the social experiences and interests of women. Nature for instance has become a strong romanticist symbol. Hence you will find

countless yoga magazines, books and videos imagining yoga as linked to nature, says Lau. It has become a worn cliché in yoga literature and publicity to see images of people practising yoga with a breath-taking natural background. Further in classes, books and magazines yoga is presented as a tool for connecting yogis to social welfare, ancient cultures, nature, the planet and even the whole universe.

In this way the yoga sign – through the habitus of romanticism - becomes charged with symbolic value: it is linked to and associated with established high value cultural signs. Thus the student is often urged to ‘feel’ the holistic connection (‘nature’, ‘ancient’, ‘whole-ness’) during the practice and to ‘take these feelings with them out in the world’. Yoga is signified as a ‘holistic restoring practice’ – ‘re-connecting the parts with the whole’. The yogi is being empowered by being ‘re-rooted in the ancient, the origin of things, the nature, the divine or her own inner nature’. By re-establishing a ‘connection to the whole’, one returns to an integrated ‘wholesome being’ – ‘the natural condition’ of humanity devoid of alienation, loneliness and lack of identity - the romanticist nostalgic aspiration of ‘returning’. Practising yoga means that the yogi is linking into powerful imaginations and fantasies.

When yoga in this way is charged with symbolic value, it also has psychological transforming effects. It becomes a self-fulfilling social-psychological process where the individual feels because they are told during practice to do so. You get what you expect.

As Lau demonstrates, contemporary yoga practice – and as yoga entered Western elite discourse – has been deeply re-configured by romanticist discourse, a romanticist discourse that tacitly informs many women’s (and some men’s) self-identities, worldviews and longings. Hence in the yoga market romanticist holism has become a powerful selling tool because yoga has become a desirable totem charged with symbolic value: “Go to ... (x,y,z) retreat and connect with ... (a,b,c) ancient culture, its beautiful nature and your own inner nature. This allows you to return home with a rejuvenated body and mind....” – so the template of the advertisement goes.

Yoga practice - signified as a romanticist holistic practice – has benefits, in themselves implicitly containing a critique of modernist society. So when a student buys the yoga product, she also automatically buys into a romanticist protest against the technological and stressful world. The yoga sympathiser can in other words consume the yoga product with good conscience, as she knows that this consumption in itself is a symbol of protest – ironically against consumption!

Let me now turn to another element of the female habitus – spiritualism - which orientated and formed the emerging post-war yoga sign.

### **Spiritualism as a habitus forming the yoga sign**

In my terminology ‘spirituality’ is a modernist variety of ‘religion’. We could say *spirituality* ([Wikipedia link](#)) is the outcome of the privatisation of religious (state) organisations. Earlier, religion was a *collective* and institutionalised practice. Here religion, culture, state and society so to speak melted together into one. Religion was a significant part of the collective culture into which a person was socialised. However with the surfacing of

modernity and Protestantism religion became a separate and individual matter. Modernist spiritualism emerged and with this discourse institutions like church and collective rituals loosened their grip on the population.

In modernist spiritual discourse religion has instead been privatised to an *interior experience of the divine* (Heelas & Woodhead 2001). Most sociologists see this internalisation as a defining aspect of modernity. It is further believed by many that this internal reality ('the spiritual') can be accessed, especially by using 'Oriental spiritual practices' (yoga, Tantra, Buddhism).

We have already discussed the American Transcendentalism and Theosophy movements, which had a strong dominating religio-cultural position around 1900. We saw already that within this discourse – often termed *Western Esotericism*<sup>42</sup> ([Wikipedia link](#)) - modernist yoga underwent a significant re-configuration – a hybridisation - where a selection of its notions and practices became defined in relation to signs from psychology, Protestantism, Romanticism, Neo-Platonism, Transcendentalism, and rational scientism. This happened not only to yoga. Over the last 150 years discourses like Buddhism, Neo-Vedanta, Taoism and Tantra have been incorporated and re-constituted in spiritual discourses in the West (Urban 2003, Michelis 2004, Singleton 2005 & 2007). So the yoga sign was already early in its entry into the West absorbed into modernist spiritual discourses.

The advent of *New Age spiritualism* ([Wikipedia link](#)) in the 1970s did not add much new substance to the Western hybrid spiritual discourse. New Age-ism mainly brought to the table the optimistic evolutionary belief that the world has reached a stage where the spiritual will come forth. Within the New Age movement yoga however was given a prominent role. For yoga Western spiritualism became a significant habitus (we recall the term '[habitus](#)' is about how we bring our history into present circumstances).

Spiritual discourse maintains as its core doctrine that there is a spiritual dimension to life – the transcendent - found within the individual as a 'super-conscious mind state'. In relation to yoga it is postulated that yoga techniques can get the virtuoso in touch with this (spiritual) inner dimensions of life, which is out of reach (transcendental) of modernist science. So within the spiritualist habitus yoga is not constructed as something in opposition to science but rather as a *refined form of science* with roots in ancient wisdom systems<sup>43</sup>.

### The creation of the spiritual yogi

The framing of yoga practice as a (spiritual) *science* – as opposed to being perceived as a fitness and health sport - has strong implications. It imbues the yoga practice and spirituality with authority and difference. The physical exercises (labelled yoga) in this way have distanced itself to other 'mindless body sport'. In this spiritual context the physical practice of yoga has a different significance – it is not just another physical exercise. Instead yoga is a tool for the 'inner personal spiritual development'.

So the inclusion of the yoga sign in the habitus of spirituality has strong symbolic significance: it makes the yogic adept different, it gives individuality, it makes her/him 'spiritual'. It creates distinction and hierarchy. A spiritual identity based on and created by

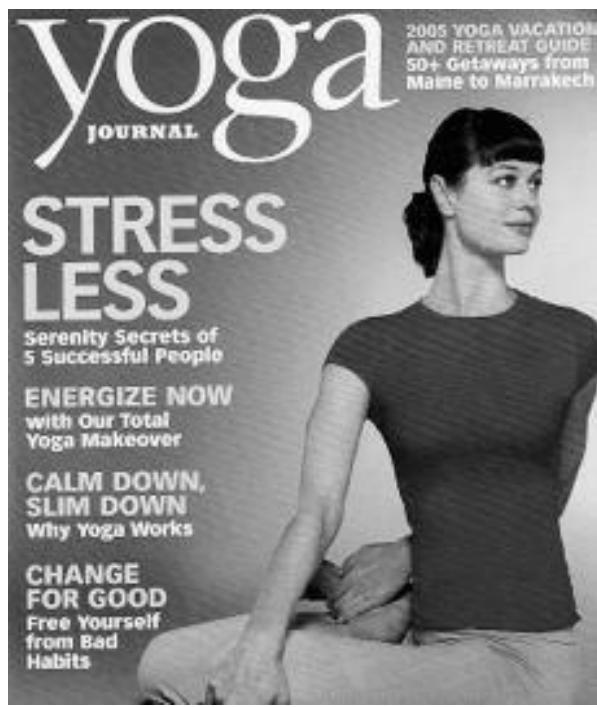
science. Yoga, according to this spiritual framing, is a unique practical tool, which generates inner individual experiences otherwise not accessible. Yoga for the spiritualist becomes a reliable tool (or scientific source) for generating ‘individual spiritual truth’. Further – according to this discourse - such inner individual experience of the ultimate truth is ‘authentic’ and is *superior* to institutionalised religions, which rely on ‘dogma and empty ritual’.

The yoga sign within the spiritual habitus is therefore a central part of a power discourse. The outcome is identity building and high status ranking. This discourse establishes the ‘spiritual yogi’ as “*one up*” and the ‘religious believers’ and ‘ordinary fitness adepts’ as “*one down*”. They become ‘*the other*’ relying on religion or physical materialism. However this preoccupation with the self and its spiritual evolution makes - according to the Dutch professor W.J. Hanegraaff, who specialises in Western esotericism - the spiritual yogi segregated from each other and unable to form institutions and organisations (as religions often do). This individualised community struggles to become a political force and provides instead an endless market opportunity to the spiritual suppliers of the New Age market place. The spiritual identity – constantly reconfiguring and re-creating her inner individual world - has become an ideal *spiritual consumer*, says Hanegraaff (2008).

### Spiritual fitness yoga

The incoming yoga sign was not only framed by the habitus of spiritualism but also by the upcoming fitness discourse, which to an increasing degree engulfed Western societies. Some colonial modernist yoga styles (investigated in a separate chapter) fitted better than others into this mixture of New Age spiritualism and Western fitness culture. For instance [Sivananda’s](#) yoga-as-a-part-of-a-healthy-Hindu-lifestyle and [Krishnamacharya’s](#) spiritual fitness yoga seem to have fared best. They are both strongly body posture oriented discourses (as the fitness culture requires) and they both claim that yoga postures can deliver ‘individual spiritual bliss’.

It is then up to the local spiritual yoga popularisers to explain to the surprised newcomer to the yoga class, how the slow and conscious stretching of the body accompanied with calm breathing patterns can produce such transcendental ‘spiritual truth’. Hence I have labelled this hybridisation [\*spiritual fitness yoga\*](#). This discourse of fitness-cum-spiritualism often leads to curious student enquiries, like: “are the most flexible persons in the class those who are closest to spiritual truth or *samadhi*; is spiritual development congruent to bendable elasticity; are acrobats and circus artists enlightened people without knowing it?”



How will a yoga sympathiser know if she is participating in such a discourse of modernist postural yoga enveloped in spirituality? I will suggest that students starts to listen for rhetoric like: "... discover the divine within you; give up yourself and drop your Ego; ... become the love you always were; honour your Guru and pray to .... ; .... feel the mystical union with...; ... find peace with your deepest Self; feel your Aura reaching out... ; ... sense we are all One; ... gives Spiritual insight; drop your thoughts and surrender to ... ; feel yourself penetrated by cosmic energies". Such language is good evidence that one is taking part in modernist spiritual-fitness-yoga discourse.

In summary there is a great deal of cultural politics in the subtext of spiritualism. The incorporation of Oriental wisdom practices gives spiritual discourse an ideological justification of being a deep-historical-rooted worldview – something challengingly different to that of modernity. The yoga sign is so to speak used to beef up spiritualism in its ideological critique of modernity.

However there is a dark side to spiritualism and its incorporation of the yoga sign. From this perspective, the modernist spiritual fitness yoga discourse is implicitly about adapting and fine-tuning the individual to the life conditions of contemporary society, says Hanegraaff (2008) among others. The individual is being equipped with spiritual tools and belief systems which will enable her not only to survive but also to prosper in modernist society, confirm Carette & King (2004).

*In the insert below we investigate this dark side of spiritualism. The insert may be skipped.*

### **Insert: Spiritualism and consumer society**

In a historio-sociological analysis of spiritualism J. Carette & R. King *Selling*

*Spirituality* (2004) argue that “spiritualism” – despite its claims about the opposite - is actually the religion of our present society: a highly individualised religious practice.<sup>44</sup> A common denominator of modernity is that it fragments society and individualises us as individuals. This also holds true for religion. It has been individualised.

As we individually choose commodities, partners, jobs, political parties so today we choose our own private religion. We are not even any longer restricted to a choice between religions. Today we can assemble our own religion. This is new, this is New Age spiritualism. So here each individual is left free – as in a supermarket - to pick different belief systems concerning values, meaning, connectedness, hope and transcendence and to combine them into her/his own private compiled religion. A “*pick and mix*” approach to religious traditions – especially Far Eastern – say Carette and King.

The individualised religion – spiritualism – fits perfectly into the consumer society<sup>45</sup>. Traditionally Christian spirituality had an important role of defining limits to human business and worldliness – but not modernist spiritual discourse. Firstly New Age spiritualism has become good business in itself. It has been commoditised! ‘Spiritual techniques’ like Reiki, *asana*, *chakra* treatments, meditation, Kundalini, *pranayama*, Tantra and Qi-gong are central offerings in a booming Wellness business.<sup>46</sup> Further commercial products are often branded as ‘spiritual’ in order to improve sales: Zen soaps and clocks, “holistic” food, yoga tea etc. All kind of products are now sold to soothe, calm, integrate, enhance, relax the consumer’s ‘spirituality’. Oils, soaps, cars, creams, holidays, retreats, courses, DVDs, books and so on all promise to do something good to that ‘spirit’.<sup>47</sup>

Last but not least spiritual discourse is often used to optimise and increase the individual’s effectiveness and productivity, both in private life and in corporate business.<sup>48</sup> Through spiritual-psychology books, self-help publications and courses in personal development people are taught how to use spirituality to get the most out of life in their corporate and institutionalised habitat. In this way spiritual discourse promotes the values of a commoditised society – the true privatised religion of contemporary society. Modernist Western yoga culture has become a central part of this.

*We are in these pages investigating the female habitus, which after WW2 formed the incoming yoga sign. We have looked into romanticism and spirituality. Both seem to form a stronger part of female than male consciousness and disposition. If we look into spiritual groups of contemporary society in general we will find that there is a significant majority of females – maybe up to 80 per cent are women (Woodhead 2007). These are numbers very similar to those of the yoga movement according to mine and many others' observation. Is that a coincidence? In the insert below we investigate why this might be so. The insert may be skipped.*

## Spiritual identity, women and yoga

If you ask women why they are attracted to yoga many will list ‘spirituality’<sup>49</sup>. Now there can be many reasons why women responding to a sociological questionnaire find it more convenient to answer that they are motivated by ‘spirituality’ rather than for instance ‘vanity’. But it seems without doubt that *some* women are attracted to yoga because of its framing as a ‘spiritual practice’.

There are no firm answers as to why women dominate spirituality. <sup>50</sup> According to the sociologist L. Woodhead (2007) there has been a broad consensus among sociologists that in Western societies since WW2 there has been a trend to find a meaning in life within private and domestic spheres. Some sociologists express this by saying that late industrial societies are characterised by the ‘sacralisation of the inner life’. They say this is caused by the life conditions of contemporary Western societies, which deprive people of a strong sense of identity.<sup>51</sup> To compensate for this lack of identity – an identity previously generated by religion, local communities, and nation - many people today seek to regain their identity by turning to ‘inner spirituality’. We are, according to this train of thought, talking about a general cultural transformation, which however came to strongly influence women in particular. For some reason women seemed more exposed to this ‘sacralisation of inner life’. Why this female dominance in spirituality?

According to Woodhead (2007) one reason could be that men are tightly integrated in the production process, whereby they gain identity as producers (i.e. identifying themselves through their occupation - as an accountant or a lawyer for instance). However this does not apply to women. Many women do not have a job but are still isolated at home in a family. Other women - while working (often only part-time) - are still mainly occupied with domestic issues and children and hence do not identify strongly with their jobs. Hence they lack this process of identity generation seen among men. So this sociological theory argues that due to women’s situation - either being staying-at-home-women with abundance of time or being professional women caught in double jobs of careers and home – they are turning to other sources in order to find social identity. They then turn inwards to find their identity and in this way they compensate for their lack of occupational identity.

This sociological theory then concludes that yoga – advertised by the yoga industry as a *spiritual practice* - therefore became an interesting offer to specific groups of women. The yoga spiritual practice could deliver. This discourse met women’s requirements for identity (Woodhead 2007, Newcombe 2005).

This sociological theory has many interesting points, but I do not feel convinced about its ability to explain why women rather than men are attracted to spirituality. Does this sociology imply that as women become increasingly integrated in production (as we have seen in the Scandinavian countries), then their spirituality will fade away (which has not happened in Scandinavia)? And how does it explain that many – if not most - people still strongly gain identity through religion and nationhood, which this theory claims they no longer do?<sup>52</sup>

Anyway there seems to be no lack of identity in contemporary society, as this theory

assumes. In modern times we constantly construct and re-construct lifestyles and identities, which often change with the speed of fashion. Some describe this as an essential part of the *post-modern condition*.<sup>53</sup> Often our identity is strongly linked to our consumption – “you are what you consume”! So I find the sociological theory mentioned above needs some modification and adjustment.

There is however little doubt that modernist yoga in conjunction with spirituality does contribute to many women’s self-identity building. For many yoga culture provides a reservoir for ethics and social values which forms a central part of any self-identity. For instance the *Bhagavad-Gita* and the *Yoga Sutra* is often referred to as a source of inspiration. The values and ethics extracted from such texts are then orientated by or linked to signs from vegetarianism, ecology, non-violence and human rights – and spirituality. So signs from spirituality are without doubt often a part of such systems of signs referring to and informing each other.

*As this sociological theory somehow fails to explain why women tend more to spirituality than men, let us in addition investigate another issue strongly connected with women, yoga, self-identity building, values and ethics: romanticist holism.*

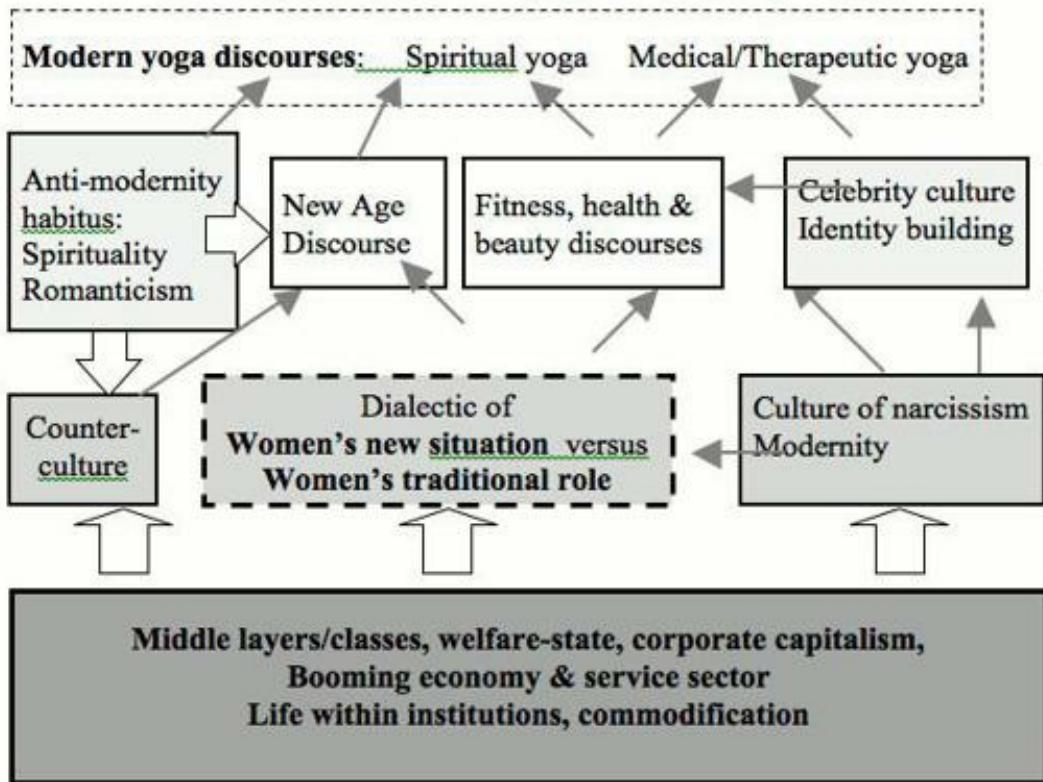
### ***Post-war social processes and habitus affecting women***

*With these reflections - combined with the earlier analysis of women’s social situation - let us now summarise the investigation of why it is primarily women – often guided by the habitus of spiritualism and romanticism - who have become the modernist yoga interactors.*

*On one side we have the new social dynamic of affluent well-educated middle class women – stay-at-home or professional – encountering new social interaction and experiences. On the other side we realise that these modernised women are still under the influence of their traditional situation as mothers and of romanticist holistic and spiritual habitus. This social interactional matrix conditioned their adoption and re-configuration of the yoga sign. In the emerging hybrid discourse of yoga, romanticism and spirituality habitus became a central part of women’s modernist quest for building new self-identities and finding a new meaning in a changing world.*

*I have tried to visualise the overall matrix conditioning the emergence of hybrid modernist Western yoga discourse after the Second World War. Even if this yoga sign was heavily overlapped by romanticism and spirituality it turned out primarily to be anchored in and glued together by female physical exercises. This body regiment originated, as we have seen, in pre-war holistic female fitness cultures. We will return to this all-significant underlying female body culture, as the body sign became more and more central to late modern self-identity building. Hence in the diagram the reader will find that some of the boxes in the figure are not explored in detail. The drawing provides a supporting map for the complex relations discussed in this chapter.*

### *The conditional matrix of modernist postural yoga*



Thus in summary it was not a coincidence that the modernist postural yoga discourse that emerged in the post-war period in the West among female yoga sympathisers was constructed as beautifying, healthy, well-being, spiritual, romanticist holistic etc. This rhetoric represented basic female fitness discourses – not yoga discourses – which already evolved at the beginning of the century. Hence it is of little surprise that the yoga sign, when sucked into this maelstrom found less interest among men as their social conditions, habitus and body discourses were different.

We are now ready to move back to the chronology of yoga. We enter at the moment of the youth revolt of the late 60s when yoga also became a part of the counter-culture. This process implied a major shift into the commercialisation of yoga as we shall soon see.

## 4. The commodification of yoga

## **Countercultures and social-identity**

Having discussed the social and cultural situation of post-war women, let us investigate the children of the affluent middle classes. Among the often highly educated youngsters of the middle class there emerged in the 1960s an influential counterculture inspired by romantic criticism of modernity. Who has not heard about hippies, flower power, LSD, Woodstock and alternative lifestyles? Yoga was adopted in many of those groups, but it did not gain widespread recognition.

The yoga sign became a part of the emerging middle-class hippie culture loaded with drugs and hedonism. On a par with LSD yoga now was seen to be able to ‘expand consciousness’ and ‘help to find your real self’. The hippie culture was a part of a wider counterculture very critical of Western society. The counterculture ideology which swept through Western institutions of higher education was often very political and romanticist (in the sense of Rousseau and German Romanticism). This counterculture re-used romanticism’s critique of reigning materialist and scientific worldviews. And the yoga sign easily found its place here.

Popular wisdom had it that the “revolutionary core” of the counterculture later split into two: those seeking the revolution of society ended up in universities and those seeking personal revolution ended up in the ashrams.<sup>54</sup> Among those proclaiming ‘inner-revolution’ the whole palette of Indian practices and cultures became a part of their construction of a romanticist counterculture and self-identity. They found something different – the ‘mystical, romantic and spiritual Orient’ – to hold up against a materialistic consumer society accused of being frustrating and debilitating. Yoga, Buddhism, Tantra – all promising the ‘inner revolution’ and the fundamental transformation of the self - now became a part of an alternative lifestyle. Once more the yoga sign – the yoga DNA - had become involved in the construction of modernist self-identities: the emancipated hedonist of the counter-culture.

Every society undergoing dramatic social changes like those in the West after WW2 will experience social groups struggling to adapt to the changes. The counterculture of the 60s and 70s was not just romanticist opposition but also a milieu for middle class dropouts. Many young people for instance failed in long and almost endless processes of education. The counterculture fighting for new ways of living was in fact a mixed culture of romanticist-opposition and failure-to-adapt. In the early 1970s the counterculture faded out and many became absorbed by the 1970s elevation of New Age Spiritualism. The romantic hippie had become spiritual.

This mixture of opposition and drop-out repeated itself within sub-cultures of the spiritual movement of the 1970s: the New Age. So like the counterculture, some New Age groups in my experience became a refuge for marginalised youngsters in the later part of 20 century. Many young people struggling to adapt to society (still the same reasons, long education, competitive pressures, the weakening of the stability of the family) joined the New Age oppositional culture dressed up as spirituality.<sup>55</sup>

It is my observation that in these post-war sub-cultures there was a psychological need to

be different. So these groups' understanding of yoga - strongly coloured by romanticism and esotericism - was used to construct a sense of being the different other.<sup>56</sup> Practising yoga *asana* was like vegetarianism, long hair, smoking dope, strange rituals, rock music, the ring in the ear, yin-yang food, ecology, animal rights, non-violence and so, all signs of you being 'not one of them': symbols to gather around – symbols communicating your protest to the world, symbols of who you were and what values you represented.

Now the New Age spirituality should not be reduced to a sub-culture. <sup>57</sup> On the contrary, as we have seen, New Age culture reaches much more widely. It forms a part of modernist religiosity. It is nonetheless interesting that many of the yoga instructors and popularisers of the 1970s and 1980s came from sub-cultures like the counterculture and New Age groups<sup>58</sup>. Why is this so?

### The emergence of popular yoga as a cultural field

A crucial part of being marginalised is that you cannot or will not take a normal 9 to 5 job. It is interesting that many in the counter-cultures and sub-culture milieu today have turned their 'oriental practice' into a way of living.<sup>59</sup> They turned their acquired amateur skills in meditation, Tai-chi, chakra massage, Tantric healing and yoga into a profession. Most often these yoga instructors became self-employed or free-lancers offering classes, retreats and courses. They made a profession out of their difference by writing books and offering *asana*, meditation and relaxing breathing classes to the public. Seen from a sociological point of view this entrepreneurial inventiveness has significant implications. The yoga sign was now signified as accepted knowledge and this knowledge-skill had become a product. Yoga had entered the market and this catapulted the yoga sign into a dynamic process of changes. It had to meet the demands of the consumers of the market – the yoga sympathisers.

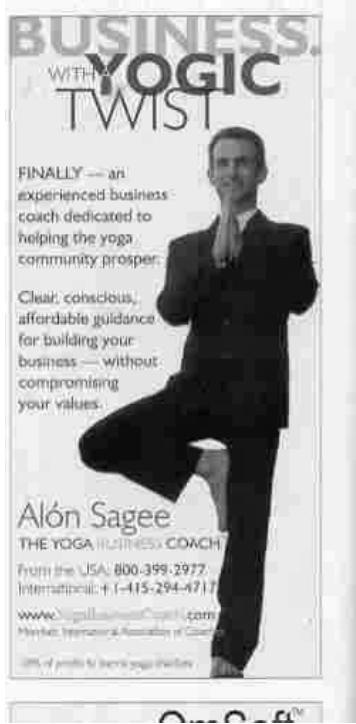
Furthermore it established a *cultural field of popular yoga*. Cultural fields are cultural arenas dominated by know-how specialists. Well-known examples of cultural fields are medicine, law, literature and sport. Within a field recognised experts define, categorise, accumulate and transact knowledge and skills, which are specific to and owned by them; in our case, Yoga knowledge as *symbolic capital*. In pre-modern India yoga culture was often a sub-system of the [cultural field of liberation](#). However within the powerful forces of modernity, the yoga sign would become totally re-configured and charged with the symbolic values of modernity. We have already seen how the habitus of spiritualism and romanticism formed the yoga sign and its symbolic-value.

As popular yoga became a cultural field let us have a look into the economical forces which, "hidden behind their back" (as Marx would have said) formed the emerging Western yoga discourse of the yoga popularisers and their knowledge. The next 5 modules will look into this. As yoga culture became a mass phenomenon after WW2 it also created its own mass market. Yoga know-how in other words became a commodity – a service demanded to an increasing extent. Yoga know-how became a product/service in the *consumer culture*, which had come to dominate (Sassatelli 2007, Lury 2011). A class of suppliers was emerging to meet this demand of the yoga amateurs: the yoga instructors, the yoga entrepreneurs or the yoga

popularisers.

### The commercialisation of yoga

In Medieval India the student–guru relationship unfolded within the guru's relationship to the local community of providing services. Sometimes students would become a part of the guru's household and would have to work hard physically. Another possibility was to join monasteries and cults where the student might also encounter hard physical work. So the guru–student relationship was also a personal economical relationship similar to the apprentice institution of European medieval societies.



Modernity on the other hand meant a big change in the economical relations surrounding the transfer of yoga knowledge. In late colonial India yoga teaching became a commercial product – a service a student *bought* from a teacher or guru. This happened as yoga moved into popular culture in the 1920s. The intimate relationship between the guru, his student and the local community was replaced with the market place. Let us investigate some examples.

The new yoga ashrams of late colonial India can for instance be seen as corporations providing privatised education camps, similar to the colleges and universities of the USA. The guru was the capitalist CEO of the ashram offering “religio-educational” services to the public. The teacher and assistants were low paid workers. The commodification of yoga teaching was especially prominent within the Mysore tradition. In commercial terms Krishnamacharya – one of the great pioneers of *asana* yoga - was employed by the Mysore Raja to undertake product research and development; to train the court and its soldiers and to reform the public. Later in life he lived as a self-employed instructor offering therapeutic yoga to Indian elites. His student Iyengar was the one of the first to offer yoga classes, enabling him to break out of the economical restrictions of one-to-one teaching. This de-personalisation in commercial terms gave him new opportunities to increase turnover and to reach less well-off

people. Other modernist yoga pioneers like Sri Yogendra chose to sell the yoga product ([medical/therapeutic scientific yoga](#)) in a new and different way: he wrote yoga self-help manuals for the educated metropolitan citizen, creating a new market.

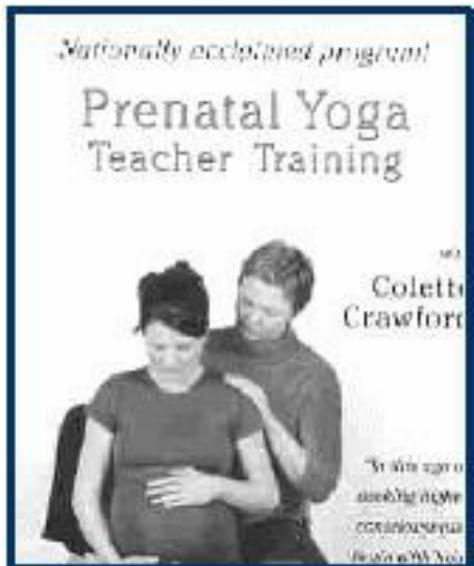
Some people might say – “yoga as a commodity, and so what?” The issue is, that as soon as an aspect of our lives (like caring, health, security, food, sport, holidays, love, yoga, friendship, education, transport) is turned into a commodity, it will start to change *dramatically*. *Commodification* ([Wikipedia link](#)) is like a strong magnetic field: as soon any piece of iron enters such a field it is controlled by the magnetic powers of the field. This was what *Karl Marx* investigated. He tried to identify the power and logical rules of a society where one of the most crucial aspects of our lives - labour - has turned into a commodity. He called such a society ‘capitalist’. He argued that commodification meant release of unimaginable dynamic forces. Changes would happen with increased speed. Products would have to transform, specialise, refine and improve with increasing speed. There would be tendencies towards cartels, monopoly and increased exploitation around the product and so on.<sup>60</sup>

Let us investigate how this applies to yoga: the effects of the commercialisation on yoga itself. Market dynamics had replaced the intimate student-guru relationship.

### The market dynamics of yoga

As modernist postural yoga in the West hit the mass market in the 1990s an enormous new market opened up. The logic of commodification became even more transparent. Commodification means among other things that each supplier will try to make his/her product slightly different in order to attract clients – product diversification. The 1990s witnessed the addition to yoga of dance, hip-hop music, martial arts, Pilates, bum-and-tummy-exercises, high room temperatures - new yoga forms never seen before!

It is the job of marketing executives to create new markets by packaging their products with other attractions. In similar ways yoga has been packaged with fitness holidays combined with retreats to tropical beauty spots or Mediterranean beaches. Into this package are often added other products like massage, Tai-chi, Ayurveda, adventure trips, Reiki healing, and vegetarian food (Lau 2000).



Another closely related packaging strategy is to envelop yoga in an overall romanticised experience. The student is then not just buying yoga but an *experience* of ‘soothing spirituality; de-stressing, rejuvenation and detoxification; one-ness with nature or the sense of authenticity of an ancient culture’. Other new market opportunities have been to promote yoga through self-help-books, TV classes, DVDs & videos, web based streaming and magazines. This again opens up possibilities for further specialisations like yoga for pregnant women, stiff backs, old people, golfers, kids, stress, happiness, performance improvements, eyes. Other recent markets have been to sell yoga exercise programs to gyms and corporations. Clearly yoga commodification means dynamic change and product fragmentation! The yoga sign is put into various contexts, which increasingly envelop it with various new meanings.

The re-contextualisation, commodification and competitive pressure also imply that the yoga product and know-how has been constantly improved and refined. This means that yoga teachers themselves are continually attending courses in further education to deepen their understanding and to obtain new ideas. Intensive studies in Western medicine and anatomy are obligatory. For the product itself this means that for instance the *asanas* are refined and modified. There has been a strong tendency to aestheticise *asanas* so that you move in and out of poses with the grace of a ballet dancer or a circus acrobat. Precision, flexibility, elegance and strength are pushed in the name of perfection. In other words *asana* has been transformed into a modernist sign charged with meaning from signs in Western discourses and aesthetics.

So we see the yoga industry breaking up into a plethora of market niches each giving yoga (‘the signifier’, the sound) various signification (‘the signified’, the mental meaning). But we have also seen that it is not just the signified that has changed: also the *referent of yoga* – the content, the physical reality, the actual practices and their priority, the know-how – are in a perpetual process of change. In semiotics this is called ‘the referent’.

Some market niches genuinely offer new products; others just package known products with other services and meanings. So the commodification does not just have an impact on the formation of new markets but also on the referent - the product itself and the know-how. The yoga popularisers however ignore this power of commodification. They do not realise how the demand and re-contextualisation – which is a reflection of underlying social and cultural

processes – forms the referent! The effect of the market happens through a process of selection of the best fitted. The producers of the cultural field – the yoga populariser - who manage to develop and deliver the new product required demanded by the market of yoga sympathisers will prosper. Those who do not will struggle to make a living.

*Soon we will investigate how Western modernist postural yoga emerged out of such a dialectical process. First let us look further at the formation of the yoga market and industry.*

### **Yoga branding, fashion and delusions**

In a big anonymous market you need to be seen. You need to stand out or you risk being squeezed out by stiff competition. As any marketing executive knows: branding is important. Branding is about associating a product with symbols, fantasies, meanings, values and emotions. A brand name creates in this way a profile in the market – an identity. It makes you visible and different, which is a competitive advantage. The yoga sign was also sent through the process of branding, often connected to new efforts of re-contextualising the product.

So within yoga there has been an explosion of yoga styles and names – sometimes indicating real differences (in practising and in signification) sometimes not. Some examples: Ananda-, Bikram-, Vinyasa/Flow-, Ansuara-, Integral-, Jivamukti-, Svaroopa-, Vini-, , Ishta-, Kripalu-, Power-, Synergy-, Pilates-, Dynamic- and Gentle-yoga to mention some. If one looks from a distance at the services actually offered there is not much diversity. Basically most of them offer different varieties of *asanas* and dissimilar ways of performing them. Often what distinguishes the brands is the context and the specific signs (meanings) they attach to *asana*. However all the brands will maintain that their style of *asana* yoga is significantly different from the rest, making it deserving of its own name.

Branding - as in the rest of the business world - gives rise to patent rights, infringements and court cases. The poor judge now needs to consider if one can patent a given *asana* combination or who has the right in a sectarian split to carry on the name of the style. There are already several such reported cases. For instance Iyengar and Bikram - following the logic of branding - have set up strict rules of corporate identity for their yoga brand. Only certified teachers can run their strictly defined programmes. Wherever in the world you enter such a class you are guaranteed a certain product - McYoga! Any teacher's breach leads to expulsion (loss of franchise) or court cases.

On reflection we can see that the yoga market behaves like any other market - competition, product diversification, product refinements, and branding. Further like any market the yoga market is constantly awash with new trends and fashions. New fashions create new products to sell, all eagerly reported in all the media – especially women's magazines and yoga magazines (looking just like women's magazines but slightly more specialised). They clearly see great interest among their female audience in reporting what's up and new.

It was mainly groups in the West critical of capitalism or modernity that ironically turned yoga into a commodity: the post WW2 counter- and marginalised culture, the romanticists and

spiritualists. By making yoga into a commodity they firstly added another commodity to capitalism – “increased” capitalism - by making yet another aspect of our lives commoditised.

Secondly they started a process over which they had no control. They now had to follow the rules of the market or close down their one-man enterprises. In Marx's terms they had made themselves into a *petty-bourgeoisie*, very vulnerable to the forces of commodification. There seems to be little awareness of this. Yoga popularisers tend to scorn and distance themselves from the capitalism they themselves reproduce by offering yoga knowhow in the capitalist market. Let us now investigate the producers of Western modernist yoga know-how.

### The yoga market hierarchy

Another logic of commodification is the creation of a hierarchy among producers – culminating in cartels and polarisation. It is well known that early market entrance improves the chances of market dominance. Accordingly the first yoga corporations dominating the West were early Indian entrances. [Sivananda](#) and [Iyengar](#) – two leading Indian yoga CEOs - established themselves in the 70s as two dominant yoga brand names.<sup>61</sup> Otherwise most suppliers in the market are self-employed running small businesses. Percentage wise there seem to be more males here than we find among their customers – the yoga sympathisers. The more entrepreneurial among these specialists are already moving into small corporations promoting their own styles and brands. There is money in selling further services and related products over the Internet (Lau 2000). Who can practise yoga without mats, props, specialised fashion clothes, posters, jewellery, and statues?

Within the cultural field of yoga in the West there emerges a three-tiered social hierarchy of yoga entrepreneurs: *the global celebrity stars, the regional entrepreneurs and the local freelance workers*. The top rank is rich in symbolic capital and successfully transacts its knowhow and symbolic capital in the global market. Here we find the globally known celebrity instructors who are featured in magazines, writing their own books, promoting their own videos, running large advertisements and web sites, doing global tours and running courses. Some of them have practised yoga for a lifetime but others are using their celebrity status as film actress, pop singer or TV star to promote their newfound yoga. These top ranks are used in advertisements and to promote conferences, and have often developed their own styles of yoga. Many of them are from California. And they have in the yoga world reached yoga celebrity status. Most have to be constantly active and alert to stay on top - for fashions tend to change.

Some of the celebrity yoga stars enjoy the status of a true guru among a group of devotees. These groups of adherents often commit themselves, their entire life and career to the guru. There develops in the end a typical cult culture, which over and over ends in betrayal, tears and collapse. The cult members end up as economically, psychologically and sexually exploited. The last reported scandal is the breakdown of the cult around John Friend and his Anusara Yoga<sup>62</sup>.

We are still in the early phase of commodification so most yoga entrepreneurs in the three tiers run their businesses individually. On the next tier we find national or regional prominent

teacher-trainer often running his or her own little business site. They are running well-visited classes and weeklong retreats at holiday hotspots. Outside the committed strata of yoga sympathisers, they will not have much of a name. They have their own studios and/or travel their territory to give courses to teachers and special interested groups. Often they will also sell their own book and video. Often as part of their image building, they now and then disappear to India - in all humility – to join their personal guru for a month. Here on this level of small businesses – a *petty-bourgeoisie* of producers in Marx's terms - there is much struggle for economical survival and social recognition.

On the lowest tier of the professional hierarchy we have the local modest-earning yoga teacher, who runs daily between local gyms, yoga sites and private clients to make a living out of it - the freelance worker. This is the yoga *proletarian*. She/he is striving hard to work herself up the hierarchy within the cultural field. She/he often admires – almost regarding as divine - the top professional business ranks, taking their words and deeds very seriously. Parts of his/her little earnings will flow up the hierarchy in the form of fees for retreats and continuing education. Here is often real material suffering. Let us investigate the hierarchy and the suffering – the *dukkha* (which, as we know, is caused by delusions) - a bit further.

### **Yoga corporations and proletarians**

Today the yoga product is mainly offered as classes held in either corporate gyms or small specialised yoga studios. This is where most modern yoga new comers will encounter yoga<sup>63</sup>. Most gyms are run by major corporations. They respond to the huge demand for fitness in larger metropolitan areas. Typically 3-6 times a week they offer yoga classes, mostly outside peak hours. The gym employs freelance yoga instructors. If classes do not attract enough students the teacher is swiftly replaced. The gyms recruit young, inexperienced and often marginalised personnel. They drift from job to job in this low paid market. In some areas there is an oversupply of prospective instructors as a range of yoga schools (i.e. successful studios with renowned owners) have been pumping out trained yoga teachers for some years now. This will over time worsen the situation for the freelance yoga worker.



*Yoga celebrity in ads*

The more experienced and renowned instructor often starts up her own specialised yoga studio by renting premises in central metropolitan areas. As a small business entrepreneur the

yoga instructor now faces all the problems of running a small business: administration, accounting, cash-flow issues, marketing, meeting monthly fixed costs, employment issues, regulations. Of this the studio owners often have no experience or even no interest. They romantically define themselves as yogis – not entrepreneurs. Many studios therefore close down within the first couple of years. The successful yoga entrepreneurs who are able to run a business will now start to expand the number of classes offered and, like a gym, start to employ freelance yoga workers. Classes are offered at all hours of the day – some studios even have several rooms. Typically a class outside peak hours has 10 students while peak hour classes are crammed with 20 or 30 students. As the manager you constantly have to keep an eye on the business and the bottom line – not much time is left for the beloved yoga.

As one would expect there is a trend of small yoga businesses growing into small multi branch corporations. *The Yoga Journal* reports in 2005 that *Yoga Tree* has four centres, *Om Yoga* and *Yoga Yoga* each have three. There is a further trend of commercial enterprises moving into the yoga growth industry by buying up struggling studios. These enterprises have written their business plans and market investigations. They are not run by idealistic yogis but by hard-nosed business people who however also have yoga at heart. They have gathered a group of investors around them who provide the long-term capital to enter the market and stay there.

*Yoga Works* is such a successful example. It runs a dozen studios in southern California and metropolitan New York employing 250 instructors (Shin 2005). *Yoga Works* - as any business corporation - has its eyes fixed on the horizon: they see a huge future market of getting into markets like the workplace, health care facilities, senior centres and schools!

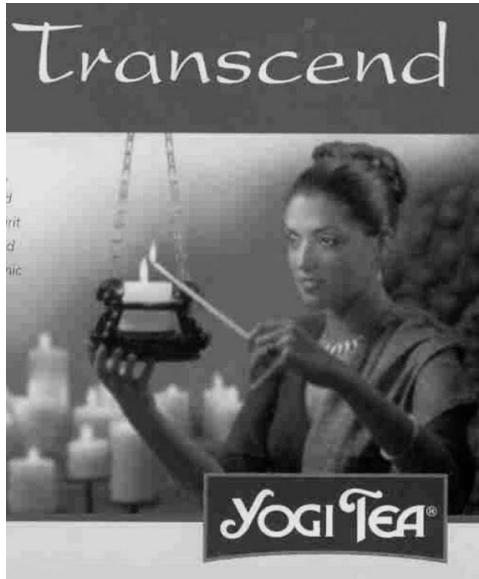
Anyone who is aware that bigger corporate fish eat smaller fish realises where all this will end: at a certain point in time large corporations from other industries (Microsoft, Disney, McDonalds???) will move in and clean up the yoga cultural field.

### **Yoga and consumer culture**

This completes my analysis of the market and the commodification of the yoga discourse. The dynamic of commodification of the cultural field of yoga has hugely conditioned the yoga products being offered – the practising and the signified. The very fact we can talk about a ‘yoga product’ is only made possible through the conditioning of commodification. In a commodity market there is a producer and a consumer side, each supporting the other. Until now we have looked at the producer side – the yoga entrepreneur designing, producing and circulating her yoga product to the market. But there is also the consumer side: the yoga sympathiser who pays for yoga capital (know-how). As a product, yoga after WW2 became a part of a rapidly growing consumer culture. What happened to yoga also happened to a wide spectrum of practices, activities, sports, and experiences as they became enveloped in the post-war consumer culture for the masses.

A consumer culture is a culture where shopping has become a pleasurable leisure-time cultural activity, instead of it being a rational act of acquiring utility (Featherstone 2011). In other words shopping is not so much done because we need the use-value of commodities but

rather their symbolic value. So in a consumer culture commodities primarily become associated with symbols. Their use-value moves to the back of our consciousness. Why has this symbolic value become so important to us consumers – what does it offer? The answer in short is that commodities are desired because they send out signals about who we are - about identities. Products are communicators of symbols and images – named totems among anthropologists (Lury 2011, Sassatelli 2007, Featherstone 2011). This is true for all human societies – objects are conveyors of the owner’s identity. They associate the owner with images and signs. In the eyes of others we become (or rather ‘we become associated with’) what surrounds our bodies.



In a *consumer culture* ([Wikipedia link](#)) the offering of commodities overwhelms us. Hence choice becomes essential and the sum of the consumer’s choices sends a strong signal out about who we are. This choice - our selection, combination, display and use of commodities - tells others who we are, our tastes, and our values. This cluster of chosen commodities – a selection of specific products, services and experiences/activities (like for instance travelling, clubbing, spirituality or cycling) – becomes in our consumer culture a sign of a given lifestyle. Hence in a consumer culture, *lifestyle* ([Wikipedia link](#)) is about your choice of consumption – ‘you are what you consume’. Your lifestyle becomes a signifier of status and identity. Through participation in a lifestyle the individual communicates identity to her/him self and others. (Giddens 1991, Bauman 1998, Barker 2012). Hence on countless yoga websites and blogs we find yoga sympathisers displaying their personal signification of yoga by often surrounding and relating it to a *bricolage* of objects, interests, narratives and symbols (like pets, hobbies, opinions, vacations, music): “*this is me, this is who I am*”. Here yoga discourse is clearly an essential part of self-identity building, often signifying values and ethics.

I will return to this later: yoga as a totem signalling images of social identity and lifestyle; yoga signified as a provider of cultural values and ethics to the yoga amateur. It now suffices to conclude that yoga like so many other activities and experiences became conditioned by the post-war welfare society’s consumer culture. The yoga sign in other words became part of lifestyles signalling identity and status.

*In summary we have seen until now how the yoga product in the West has been formed by the power of commodification and how the Western modernist yoga sign has been absorbed in spiritualists' and romanticists' ideological critique of modernity and Christianity. We have further seen the irony of this as spirituality and romanticism – including yoga – at the same time have become pillars for an individualising and commoditised society. We have also seen how a new middle class of female yoga sympathisers generated a demand for health care, beauty and spirituality as a part of their new self-identity narrative. But it all happened in relatively limited number of social groups.*

*We are leaving the 70s and 80s. What happens next in the chronology of yoga was significant: it moved into the mainstream consumer society, a new phase where yoga gained critical mass. So what is now essential to explain is, why yoga in the 1990s moved out of these relatively narrow groups and came to penetrate popular mass culture? What were the social conditions for the yoga product demanded by new generations of young women in metropolitan gyms? To understand yoga's move into mainstream culture we need to look into other factors woven into commodification, spirituality and middleclass female culture and identity building. To begin answering this I suggest we first look into the general fitness culture and women's specific body culture.*

## **5. Yoga in mainstream female body culture**

"I don't want yoga to change my life. Just my butt"  
Hollywood actress Julia Roberts in Style Magazine

*Sociologists today agree that body culture has become a central part of the lives of the middle (and upper) classes.*

"In recent decades, body management techniques have become a very conspicuous aspect of self-representation and have been served by the expansion of commercial services to deal with diet and health, physical training and cosmetic improvement to appearances. This may be related to the phenomenon which Bourdieu called 'californiansation', a new culture of the body that proved particular attractive to sections of the middle class deficient in legitimate capital." (Bennet et al (2010) p.153

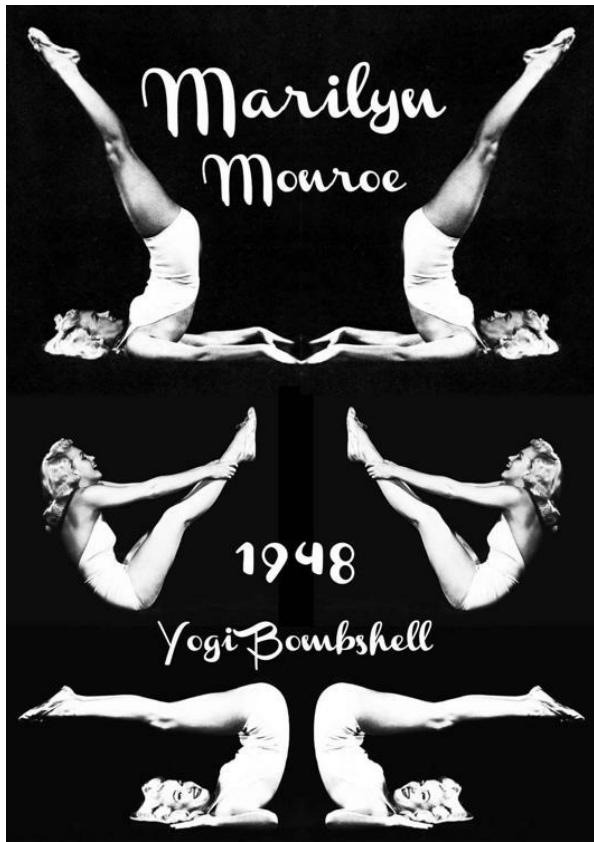
*Fitness has moved to the centre of post-modern living for many. The attributes and appearance of the body has for the middle classes, according to Bourdieu (1984), become cultural capital. The body has become an asset through which individuals and social groups exhibit difference and rank. Hence according to Bourdieu the management of the body asset – through fitness, clothing, eating, health and cosmetics – occupy us increasingly. Unlike*

*the bourgeoisie, who ensured their favourite sports like sailing and riding were protected by economic barriers, today's middle classes (especially women) have instead become anxious about appearance – our body-for-others - and are attracted to 'ascetic' fitness regiments, says Bourdieu.*

*This – the body as cultural capital (I prefer to label it 'symbolic' capital) - is the subject of this sub chapter.*

### **Medical therapeutic yoga**

Since the 1990s new types of yoga sympathisers have picked up yoga for different reasons. I personally belong to these latecomers to yoga. We newcomers often protest or feel manipulated when we find a yoga populariser enveloping our newly discovered yoga exercises with spirituality and "Hindu mysticism".<sup>64</sup> All the spiritual talk fused into practice does not fit into our experience, expectation and worldview. This is not why we are doing yoga! We are a mass market of consumers who through our demand – i.e. commodification – has propelled a peripheral yoga product into the mainstream.<sup>65</sup> We are amateurs, demanding a product, which should give us certain benefits. In the subsequent process of selection one yoga product stood out. It was a very body oriented yoga form cut loose from spirituality, Hindu life style and Neo-Vedanta. In that exchange between supply and demand we have formed a new yoga product: the medical therapeutic yoga. We could also call it *modernist postural yoga* or *asana yoga*. I see notions like *medical therapeutic yoga and spiritual fitness* yoga as subspecies of *modernist postural/asana yoga*<sup>66</sup>. Let us investigate this subspecies of technical therapeutic yoga discourse and see what formed and influenced our demand for this product. Our searchlight now turns towards a different female habitus, which was going under significant change: the female body, health and beauty culture.



Modernist postural yoga in general is a yoga discourse where the word *yoga* has become synonymous with *asana* – posture. The posture-centred yoga we millions of newcomers experienced had during the post-war years become predominantly an exercise of series of long held body stretches assisted by slow breathing patterns. Over time a blueprint had developed for how an *asana* driven yoga class should progress: slow start, warming up, climax, slow down and relaxation.<sup>67</sup>

According to my investigations most of the students are women – mainly young. Very few of them have young children although some women are there for either pre- or post-natal treatment. But you will also find a couple of men in each class – except the most extreme power yoga forms which of course tend to attract more men.

If you look into the general reasons for why people attend this medical-therapeutic-yoga, one just has to look how the benefits (i.e. the purpose) of postural centred yoga as it is presented on posters, flyers, back side of DVDs and books, front covers of magazines (see above): '*less stress, calm down, slim down, energise now, change for good, feel serene, back cure (or other body malfunctions), fitness, well-being*'. You could summarise the reasons as mainly being *medicalisation* (fitness, health, healing and therapy). Hence the term 'medical therapeutic yoga'. The yoga product in other words has a medical-therapeutic use-value. Often this yoga is enveloped in a stint of romanticist-esoteric discourse (de Michelis 2005). In its most commercial forms this yoga tends to drop all connections with spirituality and instead strongly engages with female beauty discourses and branches out into a straight *beauty and fitness yoga*.

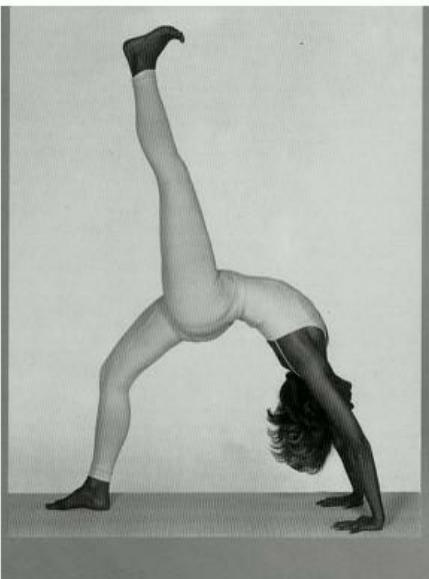
Most of the therapeutic benefits of *asana*-driven yoga can also be achieved through other similar sports and body-mind practices. The medical therapeutic use-value is not unique to this

yoga form. In other words postural yoga is just a minor part of a broad range of therapeutic and fitness products of gentle gymnastics. But why has the yoga product managed to become so much more popular than other products offering similar use-value?

To explain the popularity of this yoga discourse, we both need to look into wider trends running through contemporary society and some more specific factors linking those broader trends to the habitus of women's body-mind culture. During this investigation a different aspect of the yoga product will surface: the *symbolic-value* of yoga; yoga as a totem communicating images and symbols; yoga as a provider of cultural values, meaning and self-identity. Yoga turning the body into capital.

*In order to explain why millions of yoga sympathisers – the majority of them women - buy the physical medical-therapeutic yoga product, I have already suggested women's new role in relation to a new affluent middle class and their romanticist-holistic habitus as possible conditions. I have also discussed how a female fitness discourse surfaced around 1900 and slowly settled as a part of the female habitus of the upper classes. We will soon see how this habitus of body culture, which was itself undergoing strong modifications, came to guide women for the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century as they formed the yoga sign accordingly. So we are now going to map a complex interplay of deep social processes DYNAMICALLY interacting with female habitus - meaning that they themselves underwent transformation as time progressed: women's body culture, fitness culture, celebrity culture and cultural narcissism. Women's body culture first!*

## **Yoga and women's body culture**



Kathy Phillips has practised yoga for 25 years. She is Health and Beauty Director of British *Vogue* and has written for many magazines and newspapers, such as the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Sunday Telegraph* and the *Financial Times*. In 1992 she co-wrote *Yoga for Children* with Mary Stewart, one of the leading teachers of yoga in the West, and is the author of the bestselling *Vogue Book of Blondes* and *Vogue Beauty*.

***Kathy Phillips – 25 years of  
yoga. Health & Beauty Director  
of British Vogue***

It is widely agreed in the beauty industry that for women beauty is power! Beauty is symbolic (cultural) capital. The link between *asana* yoga and beauty was planted in the consciousness of Western women from early on. We recall that symbolic value is created by linking a (new yoga) sign to already established powerful cultural signs (like ‘beauty’). In this way the new sign becomes charged by the value and power of the established cultural sign. This symbolic linking of yoga to beauty became crucial for modernist popular yoga culture.

In the 1950s Hollywood stars, models and celebrities like Gloria Swanson, Greta Garbo and Marilyn Monroe clearly linked their beauty and its maintenance to yoga postures (Syman 2010). According to the sociologist Newcombe (2007), who studied yoga’s role in Britain 1960-1980, yoga’s beautifying powers were expressed in many popular yoga books like N. Phelan & M. Volis: *Yoga for Women* (1963). In this period the yoga TV presenter Richard Hittleman began to use fashion models in his television shows. One of his models, the actress Lyn Marshall renowned for her beauty, wrote a range of books soon afterwards clearly saying that one of the benefits of yoga was its ability to maintain youth and beauty. Soon the press picked up and spread the message. The Beauty Editor (!) of the newspaper The Evening Standard confirmed for instance yoga’s ability to ‘keep appearance’. In 1978 it was clear that yoga had been embraced by the beauty industry as *The Vogue Body and Beauty Book* displayed models performing yoga poses. Newcombe concludes her study:

“I have focused rather on the expanding popularity of yoga during this period as particularly attributed to its perceived ability to promote women’s freedom, health and well-being while simultaneously supporting her traditional obligations to be beautiful and available to husband and children.” (p.59)

This link between *asana* yoga and beauty ran in parallel with changes in women’s beauty

discourse after WW2. Women's magazines are a good place to study those changes and K.J. Lau did so in *New Age Capitalism* (2000), which I will follow here.

Already in the 1950s there was a clear expression of women wanting to control their beauty, sex appeal and body in order to live up to certain norms. In those days the ideal of a female body was defined as a soft and curved body with little muscular toning. But in the 1980s there were changes to this beauty ideal as women to an increasing extent strove after a sporty body expressing strength and power. Gone were curves and softness. Women started rather to look like chiselled men rather in line with male fitness discourse and aesthetics.

This was of course related to the fitness culture washing over Western societies in the 1980s (Sassatelli 2010). With it came a range of new exercises never seen before like jogging, mountain biking, aerobic classes, and spinning - you name it. Every major town or hotel with any self-respect built gyms and fitness studios. However in the 1990s a new trend appeared among women. The hard aerobic workouts or machine exercises were replaced by more gentle exercises. The new ideal of the beauty discourse was no longer the muscular body but the long and lean body. It was a very slim body without bulging muscles or fat. Still, though, it had to be firm and fit, says Lau.

In the 1980s and early 1990s women had filled up aerobic classes following celebrities like Jane Fonda. But fashion - living from novelty - has to change so new celebrities of the 1990s turned up recommending rather different regimes of exercises. So a new body ideal emerged among models at the catwalk, actresses, dancers and pop stars. And how did the star celebrities build such a body, wondered the magazines? With gentle exercises like yoga, Tai chi and Pilates, the magazines marvelled! Yoga could make you slim and tone your thighs.

It was like a return to the ideals of the female fitness cultures of the pre WW2 years. Or to put it the other way around: the turn of the century female-elite body cultures were now breaking out into general society, which had become widely middle class. Society was now an emerging 'information and service society' with the middle classes inhabiting new dominant sectors like the financial services, the state apparatus, the information industry, the marketing sector, and the entertainment industry. Hence middle class discourses were becoming hegemonic and mainstream!

To fit into the mainstream body and beauty *habitus* the *asana* yoga presented in women's magazines toned down yoga's former connection with hippies and spirituality. Yoga was instead constructed or imaged as a 'gentle, low impact and non-sweating exercise'. It was promised to 'sculpture a beautiful body and to de-stress the mind'. Soon specialised yoga-magazines emerged which adapted the style and coverage of women's magazines.<sup>68</sup> Women's beauty and fashion adverts now dominated yoga magazines. Beautiful models, dancers and fitness instructors were used for illustrations in yoga magazines showing desirable young, tall, flexible, slim and yet toned bodies.

In summary the yoga industry of the 1990s grew up in the whirlwind of the fast expanding fitness and well-ness industry responding to and forming consumers' increased demand for cultural desirable signs related to the body and its appearance like 'fitness', 'health' and 'beauty' (Smith Maguire 2007, Bordo 1993). The female body habitus was metamorphosing rapidly. Yoga was surfing on a general body-appearance-wave washing over corporate

capitalist middle class societies. The demand no longer came from narrow groups of middleclass housewives, but was stimulated by large groups of metropolitan young women. So yoga – as a body fitness and beauty culture - spread to the mass of office and service workers through the general fitness culture gaining momentum. It found its big chance as women's beauty ideals changed as described by Lau: yoga was once more in the right place at the right time.

### The fitness culture of late 20<sup>th</sup>Century

So while the men were pumping iron, new social groups of women in the 1990s began to stretch their limbs, relax their bodies and to perform deep breathing. The mass fitness market was in other words - like the fitness market around 1900 - breaking up into male and a female cultures driven by different aesthetic ideals (Glassner 1992). Modernist postural yoga - as the middle class in the West had developed it – was certainly framed by this female body habitus. In this process of adapting *asana* yoga to fitness culture, yoga instructors brought to the table new signs and meanings derived from holistic romanticism, as mentioned earlier. So yoga was more than ‘just simple stretching exercises’, as many newcomers soon discovered. There were other dimensions to yoga than just sport and beauty. They were taught that yoga also was an effective way to ‘re-connect with your deepest self’ and acquire a ‘relaxed mind’, and this was an attractive proposition of holistic fulfilment for many women. They were further promised that yoga would ‘work on your energies’. This ‘energy recharge’ would make you ‘feel good’ and increase your ‘performance and endurance’. *Asana* yoga signified in other words also a promise to deliver an integrated, harmonious, well-balanced and powerful individual – a beautiful and holistic body ready to go out in society and succeed, a desirable and potent self-identity.



This was the holistic romanticist habitus yoga successfully brought to the fitness and beauty discourse. In other words the women of the Western metropolises had found a tool

signifying beauty, holistic fulfilment and survival in a world full of stress. Yoga became a tool for female power increasing their symbolic (cultural) capital! A *female* power sign radiating different messages and symbols than that of the male power sign. It was an important new sign for the busy female executive who already knew that female beauty *is* power, says Lau! This emphasis on power embedded with female messages was rather new in the female fitness discourse, and we shall soon see what conditions had made power so compelling

Thus we see yoga being integrated into a female fitness and body-for-others culture, which was under change and becoming immense popular. Yoga was surfing on a general wave. So in order to explain the popularity of this *beauty and fitness* yoga discourse, we also have to explain the wider phenomenon of fitness culture becoming mainstream. Why have many people – and not just the narrow middle classes - become so obsessed with appearance, being healthy and being fit? Why must men and women undergo daily strenuous efforts to become male muscular or become female lean, flexible and relaxed? Why does the body need to ‘look so good’?

*Contemporary sociologists are working hard to find explanations. Before coming up with an explanation related to yoga I would like to look at the star celebrity culture, which emerged prior to the contemporary mass fitness culture. By linking the fitness culture with the celebrity culture I find there emerges an underlying cultural-sociological explanation – the culture of narcissism.*

*Just to recapture the process. As we enter the 90s we are no longer dealing only with narrow groups of middle class women, counterculture and New Age spiritualism engaged with yoga, but we have moved into the wider conventional discourse of mainstream women. This is a significant difference. Yoga had gained critical mass. For these women asana yoga was constructed as a practice delivering – or signifying - a ‘beautiful body, power, mental tranquillity and a sense of connection to the whole’ (nature, planet, etc.). This rhetoric was created out of an exchange with strong demands in the fitness market and formed by an existing female body habitus under transformation. There was no conspiracy behind this! No one tried on purpose to force this imagination upon yoga sympathisers. Instead it all grew out of underlying dialectical processes, which I would like to investigate further. How did yoga gain critical mass?*

### **The diffusion of yoga from early adaptors to pop culture**

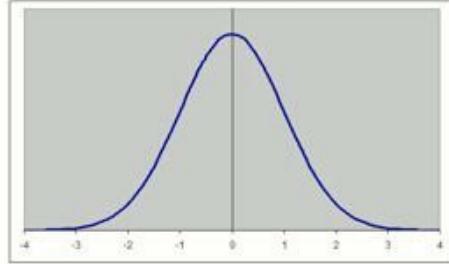
Our task is to explain how yoga in the 90s jumped from rather narrow social groups to a global mass audience. At a certain point yoga seems to have achieved *critical mass* ([Wikipedia link](#)) and made the leap to the masses<sup>69</sup>. From the studies of *complex, dynamic and adaptive systems* ([Wikipedia link](#)) we know that this is normally triggered by the confluence of a range of factors. How do we identify those factors?

A typical way to proceed would be to ask who actually were the main promoters of yoga to women in mainstream culture in the 1990s. One assumes here that *someone* had driven the interaction. It is probably easier to answer who it was *not* – despite them being suspected. It

was *not* the inventors of modernist colonial yoga in India (described in the [Colonial Modernist Yoga chapter](#)). Most people have never heard of them: Sivananda, Krishnamacharya, Iyengar and Jois. Neither was it the first Western yoga entrepreneurs – the popularisers and teachers. They just became fortunate vendors in a market which suddenly exploded. Nor was the market created by mass media like women's magazines, TV, newspapers, videos, books and yoga magazines. They covered yoga because *there already was an interest* in the mass market. Of course by writing about it they created even more interest – but they did not invent it.

So it is hard to find a single agent causing and running the process. Instead we need to introduce some sociological concepts. First let us describe once more the process of yoga's adoption in the West, this time by using the notions of a diffusion model as used by sciences ranging from epidemiology to marketing. This model – combined with the notion of the 'cultural intermediary' - will throw some light on what process drove the change, if we agree that change was not caused by a single interactor.

### ***The diffusion model - virus or yoga***



Diffusion models take the form of a **normal curve**. The spreading starts - at the left slowly (*innovators*) - and then increases until it peaks. The spread then decreases – at the right (*laggards*).

Diffusion models describe how phenomena spread in large populations (Barabasi 2002, Heath & Potter 2005). In the beginning very few are affected (by a virus, a new idea, new fashion) and the diffusion is very slow. These are the days of the 'innovators', 'receptors' and the 'early adopters'. Then there is a slow surge like the early rise of an exponential curve: we move into the phase of 'early majority'. At a certain point the curve peaks – the spread has reached its climax and moves into 'late majority' as it moves downward. Finally the curve flattens out and mirrors how it looked initially. We have now moved into the phase of 'laggards' and 'resistors'.

### **The cultural intermediary as an early adopter**

Before describing the diffusion model in relation to the spread of yoga I need to introduce a social stratum, which after WW2 would become more and more powerful – the *cultural intermediaries*. We will see how they would become the early adaptors of postural yoga and critical to its diffusion. In the late 1960s the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu conducted a large-scale empirical study of consumption and taste in France – *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1984). Earlier it had always been the upper classes – the aristocracy and the elite bourgeoisie – who had created style, fashion, taste and who dictated which products were desirable. Bourdieu concluded that this had changed and a new middle class of people based in media, design, fashion and advertising had become the major factor in forming consumption and taste: the cultural intermediaries. They were *professionals* engaged in the production, marketing and dissemination of *symbolic goods*, said Bourdieu. As we recall symbolic goods are goods we consume not because of their use-value but mainly because they are totems – i.e. associated with images, signs and symbols. It was these cultural intermediaries – often by tapping into and combining existing traditions, sub-cultures and art forms – who now had the capacity to produce new symbolic goods and decide how these should be used.

According to the sociologist M. Featherstone the cultural intermediaries of Hollywood actors, rock stars, fashion models, TV presenters, designers, spin doctors, journalists, advertising agents, commentators, PR managers, news readers, marketing executives, architects, publishers, bloggers, reviewers, and film directors, became ‘consumer heroes’ and creators of consumption-based lifestyles:

“Rather than unreflexively adopting a lifestyle, through tradition or habit, the new heroes of consumer culture make lifestyle a life project and display their individuality and sense of style in the particularity of assemblage of goods, clothes, practices, experiences, appearance and bodily disposition they design together in a lifestyle.” (2011 p. 84)

They could do so because of their newly won central position in the production process. It was a strategic position that had moved to the centre of society – an intersection of consumption and high culture. That is, a position where goods and services became loaded with symbolic-value by cultural intermediaries, which gave them immense power. Bourdieu labelled this power ‘cultural capital’ – the power to simultaneously create ‘differentiation’ (the marking of difference – what is good and bad taste) and ‘stratification’ (i.e. status hierarchy – i.e. who is cool or out). The cultural intermediaries have the power to influence other people’s behaviour, identity, values and status – not through an economical or political position – but through their position as creators and communicators of symbols related to consumption.

Most sociologists today agree that this creation of taste and lifestyle is not just a one-way street, as described by Bourdieu (Sassatelli 2007, Lury 2011). Taste and lifestyle are also created from other positions in society. It is a dialectic process. However Bourdieu points out a critical and determining factor, showing a major parameter forming our tastes and lifestyles.

## Celebs' Favorite Workout Gear ×



HEALTHY LIFESTYLE  
SEPTEMBER 21, 2011 AT 11:45AM  
BY ARIANA FINLAYSON

Like 22 Tweet 15

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Sweat it out in style!

Looking good is a must for any A-lister, and that goes for at the gym too. You'll rarely see a celeb in a ratty T-shirt from high school. Here, Bianca Jade, founder of style and fitness blog MizFit.com, tells Us Weekly about the hottest gym gear in Hollywood so you can work out like a star!

PHOTOS: Us Weekly's Hot Bodies 2011

**Healthy Lifestyle magazine** advising on the taste and style of celebrities – including a link of where to buy

What is central to our investigation of yoga is that the cultural intermediaries came to adopt yoga. They made yoga practice the right thing to do – they turned yoga practice into good taste. And as soon as yoga was a part of the cultural intermediaries’ discourse and their approval, it spread effortlessly out into society. We will follow that process. Some readers might wonder why did this sub-stratum of the middle classes embrace yoga as it did? Why did yoga fit so well into their lifestyle and social interaction? When later on we introduce the notion of cultural narcissism we will see through the example of the celebrity star how prone this milieu was to certain discourses of yoga.

It is among the upper echelons of the cultural intermediaries that we find the *celebrity star* and we shall now see how this celebrity figure – supported by the emergent strata of cultural intermediaries – became a major factor in the diffusion of the yoga discourse. The celebrity who made it cool and tasteful to do yoga; who made yoga into a part of a middleclass woman’s lifestyle - we are going to see the ‘cultural intermediary’ as an obvious ‘early adaptor’. With these sociological concepts in place let us now return to the diffusion of yoga.

### The right timing of the final mass diffusion of yoga

So according to the diffusion model the innovators were the Indian yoga “gurus”, who developed hybrid modernist postural yoga in Colonial India in the 1920s and 1930s in the light of Western body discourses. They passed over the “yoga bug” to Western students who trained with them in India shortly before and after WW2. Other gurus established yoga training centres in the West. Now Western students – often with middle class background - started to pass on what they had been taught. Among their mainly female students we often find female celebrities involved with visual media. Already in the late 1950s superstars like Marilyn Monroe, Gloria Swanson and Greta Garbo – all trained by the influential [Indra Devi](#) - started to appear in photo shots demonstrating their newly acquired yoga skills.

In this initial phase the spread would have been fairly slow and restricted to the urban middle classes – the cultural intermediaries - mainly in the US: fashion models and writers, dancers, TV presenters, actresses and other entertainers. But this did not guarantee any epidemic spread. It is important to realise that other processes and conditions have also to be in place. However the seed of yoga was planted in an important garden – the Hollywood milieu of especially movie celebrities inhabiting the upper echelon of the cultural intermediaries. In a society daily awash with celebrity gossip and images it is of course significant when such media celebrities take up new interests. As they are role models for the masses they can trigger a rapid spread. However as we were still on the early phase of the diffusion curve and as other social factors did not encourage the spread, *asana* yoga still was for the relatively few but most people began to hear about yoga from the celebrity industry. Had it not been for the interplay and conflation of a range of other factors the spread of yoga would most probably have stabilised here.



*Greta Garbo in yoga pose*

In the 60s and 70s yoga in parallel moved into the *counterculture* ([Wikipedia link](#)). Many young people travelled to India and encountered yoga there. They brought it home with them and from them it slowly spread into New Age groups and adult education evening classes. Yoga was slowly finding its feet among housewives and female professionals of the middle class. We have seen how they informed yoga practice with romanticist, holistic and a bit of spiritual discourses. Then significantly *asana* yoga reached television in the USA and the UK where it was demonstrated by Western ‘early adopters’ using beautiful female models (Syman 2010). Yoga moved into the general beauty discourse. The target group turned out still to be mainly middle class housewives. The emergence of yoga on TV is however a significant sign, as it indicates that the “epidemic of yoga” was on its way, moving out of its entrenched position among the early adopters. Even if we can trace increasing momentum in the diffusion process, we are still in the late phase of early adopters bordering on becoming the ‘early majority phase’. This is where many epidemics grind to a halt.

Suddenly things started to happen as we moved into the information and service society of corporate capitalism - the postmodern consumer culture took off. So did the fitness and appearance culture. This meant yoga rapidly diffused among the cultural intermediaries – a social sub-stratum of interactors whose numbers and influence rapidly increased at this point in time. Countless numbers of women - many of them now in new powerful jobs - embodied new lifestyles and social interaction never witnessed before in history. They embraced yoga

discourses of fitness, beauty and celebrity and via their central position in the media industry they started to spread the yoga message to the masses. These amateur yoga sympathisers – not yoga professionals - took yoga from the ‘early adopters’ to the ‘early majority’. Yoga had gained critical mass. In the 1990s a wave of new film stars, pop singers and models – like Jane Fonda, Madonna and certain Spice Girls - would confess to women’s magazines that a large part of their success and beauty was due to yoga. So they just ‘loved yoga’! Many of them started actively to promote yoga on television and videos. Jane Fonda who in the 1980s had promoted aerobics in 1994 released her video *Jane Fonda’s Yoga Workout* (Syman 2010). We see that the yoga sign now was firmly linked to ‘celebrity’ and all the symbolic power and glory associated with that sign in modern mind.

Fashion models, designers and the editors of female magazines would soon be seen everywhere in the media displaying yoga poses. They were keenly watched and followed by a huge new generation of young, single, well-educated, professional middle class women populating Metropolitan centres - independent women who were not going to have babies at the age of twenty, but who instead wanted to live an active social life and have a career.

We notice the strong conflation of processes generating critical mass and a crucial difference at this point on the curve: this was the time of the fitness discourse of the masses! Underlying discourses and social and demographic trends moved in parallel enabling yoga to take off. This was significant. The yoga discourse of well-being, health, celebrity and beauty could now explode in this phase of ‘early majority’ propelling it with irresistible force into the next phase of the ‘late majority’: global take off among the middle classes.

## 6. Cultural narcissism and the symbolic meaning of yoga

### The culture of narcissism

*Three questions are crucial to understand this process of diffusion and build up of critical mass. First we need to know why female celebrities took up yoga in the first instance? Secondly why do people – in this case mainly women - copy their idols? Thirdly how come that the combination of celebrity driven yoga, mass media and fitness culture gave yoga the critical mass required to reach popular culture? To answer this I suggest we investigate the process of cultural narcissism. This was a notion launched by C. Lasch in The Culture of Narcissism in 1979 and further elaborated in 1984 in The Minimal Self. The notion ‘culture of narcissism’ immediately had a huge impact in wide cultural and intellectual circles. The theory of cultural narcissism can explain many aspects of the emergence of discourses like fitness and celebrity, which in their turn explain the spread of*

*the yoga discourse into mass culture.*

*One of the reasons I find Lasch interesting so many years later is that I find that he does not distinguish as people often do between the individual self and social processes. Traditionally we tend to perceive human beings as individual agents or selves separated from social process. Instead of understanding the self as a closed box, a single unit or an independent agent, Lasch's notion of the self follows contemporary social scholars who - like the Buddhists - see the self as an open field, an ecological habitat permeated by its social matrix. When individual and social processes flow into each other it does however not mean they become one.*

*As it was a critical part of meditative yoga styles to inquire into oneself to reveal delusions, I found it essential for a modernist yogi to have a similar look at which social processes work like 'karmic seeds' – to use an old yogic metaphor - in the yogi's subconscious. In other words, the task is to investigate how the yogic self – a self shaped and captivated by yoga sympathy - is conditioned by social processes like cultural narcissism. This task would lead directly to the self-reflective yogic question "what process on a social level defines and conditions my interest in my yoga practice?" Hence I suggest we spend some time understanding Lasch's critical theory as he shows how social processes flow into the individual (the yogi) and her values and interests ("I like asana yoga").*

In the late 70s C. Lasch ([Wikipedia link](#)) identified emerging social processes of *corporate capitalism*, ([Wikipedia link](#)) which he found penetrated and shaped the contemporary self in significant new ways. From a range of psychological studies Lasch identified the emergence of a new personality type. It was no longer the personality connected with developing capitalism – impulse controlled, strong super ego, disciplined by peers – who consulted therapists in the 60s and 70s, he observed. Instead it was a narcissistic personality claiming to suffer from feelings of 'inauthenticity and inner emptiness'. To live with their sense of emptiness, people compensated by building up megalomaniac images of themselves. Lash identified this as a 'narcissistic' symptom because the perceived insecurity which people felt was overcome by seeing their 'grandiose self' reflected in the attention of others. Or they would overcome their insecurity by attaching themselves to those who radiated celebrity, power and charisma. These are typical narcissist strategies: for the narcissist the world is a mirror and in this mirror hedonistic self-fulfilment is sought, says Lasch.

*Narcissism* ([Wikipedia link](#)) is not about being *selfish* as many believe. As the American social-psychologist Baumeister formulates it: "More precisely, Lasch saw the typical modern American as highly insecure, dependent on others for approval, desperately seeking for intense emotional experiences to fill a perceived inner void, full of suppressed rage, and cut off from broader values and contexts that should supply meaning to life, and that could make aging and death more acceptable" (1991, p.105).

Lasch in other words saw narcissism penetrating the psyche of American society. This culture-wide emergent narcissist character was a reflection of change in society: corporate capitalism and its middle classes were becoming dominant. So Lasch identified the main factor conditioning this cultural narcissism as corporate capitalism – huge state and capitalist organisations pervaded by bureaucracy. I will return to this below. But Lasch also points at

other factors contributing to this situation: the emergence of *visual mass media, advertisement industry, celebrity culture, the break down of the authority of the family*. Let us first investigate mass media and celebrity discourse in order to both understand ourselves better and why we practise yoga.

As we do this we also find an explanation of why the new stratum of cultural intermediaries – the producers of symbols – with their primary base in the media and entertainment industries became so enchanted by the yoga discourse of beauty, power and fitness. In many ways they were the “early adopters of cultural narcissism”.

### **Visual mass media, celebrity and the power of fitness**

The advent of television shortly after WW2 had a huge impact on Western culture. Before that the film industry had been thriving, creating stars and celebrities idolised by the public. But television led to an explosion in this celebrity discourse. The West became dominated by a culture of images. Visual mass media proved to be forceful promoters and entertainers. Sports – dynamic, competitive and strongly visual – moved into prominence in the consciousness of the masses and inspired them to engage in sport and become fit. The visual mass media thrived on making the individual performer into a star: the actress, the boxer, the football player, and the dancer. Whoever had a pleasing exterior and the ability to attract attention became the darling of news media, gossip columns and talk shows. The narcissistic character – a person who craved to be the centre of attention and admiration – was sucked into the maelstrom of fame, vanity, glamour and fleeting glory offered by an image producing mass-industry.

Lasch in his *The Culture of Narcissism*:

“The mass media with their cult of celebrity and their attempt to surround it with glamour and excitement, have made Americans a nation of fans, moviegoers. The media give substance to and thus intensify narcissistic dreams of fame and glory, encourage the common man to identify himself with the stars... (p.29). ..... The beautiful people ..... lives out the fantasy of narcissistic success, which consists of nothing more substantial than a wish to be vastly admired, not for one’s accomplishments but simply for oneself, uncritically and without reservation. .... Modern capitalist society not only elevates narcissists to prominence, it elicits and reinforces narcissistic traits in everyone.” (p. 232)

Following the thoughts of Lasch we could say that the emerging visual mass media was in a dialectical exchange with an emerging narcissistic culture (I will come back to this below) and a sport/fitness culture - they all three absorbed and fed each other. Out of this grew the narcissistic and fit celebrity identity, who was just an enlarged version of the disorders penetrating the self of the masses: narcissistic traits had become the property of most.

Let us now apply Lasch’s analysis of a celebrity discourse to *asana* yoga and its way to mass prominence.

### **The power of symbolic images**

Celebrity stars are excellent examples of people governed by the forces of cultural narcissism: either the star fills out the symbolic image or she socially fades away. Cultural narcissism is, briefly, about people living under circumstances where their projected image – what others think about them – is crucial to them and their success in society.

What is the image of a star? In the 1950s and 1960s the star image was being transformed.

Some underlying processes in society were changing. The fifties and sixties witnessed an emerging visual mass media society commencing to divinise youth and beauty. It became an image – a projection or a symbol – with which people loved to identify in their fantasies, fed by feelings of their own insignificance. “Unconsciously fixated on an idealized self-object for which they continue to yearn .... such persons are forever searching for external omnipotent powers from whose support and approval they attempt to derive strength” (p.84), says Lasch.

Today the masses project that fantasy of divinity upon the stars. The stars are *living symbols* to us! This nevertheless puts the celebrity stars in a tight spot: they will only stay at the top as long as they look young, energetic and fit – as long as they can conform to the symbol. Their look is their symbolic capital – but it erodes quickly. This image of eternal youth especially haunts female stars. Their main selling point becomes their beauty. For them their beauty *is* their power – their symbolic (cultural) capital. When the first wrinkles emerge and the body loses its firmness is the moment when contracts no longer roll in. In these female star circles there is competitive pressure second to none. Hence any fitness discourse promising good looks is interesting.

Let us once more return to the beginning of the diffusion process and follow – as they say in semiotics - how the new ‘signified’ of yoga (the mental meaning) was created. In 1947 fresh from India came [Indra Devi](#) – an eastern European woman recently trained in a postural yoga style by Krishnamacharya, the innovator. She went to Los Angeles and started to offer yoga training and was soon followed by more. Devi – like Pierre Bernard twenty to thirty years earlier - targeted her *hatha-yoga* at a milieu of stars, celebrities and the media world. She framed it – signified it - within the Hollywood discourse of health, celebrity and beauty, but she did not, like Bernard, link her regimen to Tantra and mysticism. Like her Indian teacher she kept it – the signified - much more within accepted modernist outlooks and her genius was to link the yoga sign strongly and directly with beauty. Hence Devi collaborated with Elizabeth Arden and her beauty farms and she worked with the diet and health star adviser Paul Bragg (Syman 2010). Devi further befriended, taught and collaborated with the celebrity actress Gloria Swanson. In their books and promotions they signified *hatha-yoga* with youth and beauty (Syman 2010), which of course gave yoga immense symbolic value: yoga increasing the capital value of the body.



*Indra Devi instructing a Hollywood actress*

Devi wrote a book about *hatha-yoga* which stayed on the US best seller list for a year. This was the popular breakthrough of *hatha-yoga* as we conceive it today: a yoga form that was almost impossible to distinguish from many contemporary modernist female body regimes. Here Devi made significant promises in her title: “*Eternal Youth and eternal Health*”. Of course this must have been an interesting proposition especially among the female stars, who were increasingly beginning to feel the demands of extreme and perfect youth. Any female star celebrity who wanted to stay in the limelight had to look at this daring promise.<sup>70</sup> In the intense competitive culture of female stars and model celebrities, yoga among many other fitness regimes increasingly became their tool for youth, beauty and strength – their *competitive edge*. Yoga for them signified the maintenance of their power and social prestige – their symbolic capital - by delivering youth and female beauty. This I believe was the warning of a new symbolic meaning of yoga to come: practice could turn the adept into a powerful symbol of beauty. The technical meaning of yoga – its use-value - had become symbolic. The yoga discourse turned itself into a totem.

Ideals of beauty, youth, happiness and strength – maintained by fitness regiments - are *external images*, widespread norms and ideals of society we all are striving after. It is when external images – social ideals about appearance – populate our internal world – our psyche - and become crucial for our social and mental survival, that Lasch talks about ‘cultural narcissism’. The notion comes from the myth of the Greek god *Narcissus*, who admired his own image mirrored in a lake so much that he fell into the water and drowned. So there is an inbuilt tragedy to narcissism. Female celebrity stars are clear examples of cultural narcissism. Their careers are created and destroyed by an image. They are utterly controlled by the processes of cultural narcissism – external ideals of beauty defined by society govern their psyche and life. They are early warnings of what we have all become. Reading Lasch encourages yoga sympathisers to investigate how far such processes are penetrating our yogic self or psyche and to what degree we are caught in such self-destructive patterns. Thinking of Patanjali’s yoga dissecting the five *kleshas* of the mind, I find such enquiries very yogic!

### The narcissism of corporate capitalism

Celebrity stars become living external symbolic images, simultaneously successful and tyrannised by the very same image, which has taken over their lives. Lasch’s point is that narcissism penetrates all levels of society – not just stars and celebrities. The stars become living symbolic images for the masses. By copying the stars, we become what they symbolise to us: beauty, power and youth. If the stars need to stay fit then so do the rest of us. Why do we need to be that image? Why narcissism?

Because, following Lasch, our lives within *large corporations or bureaucratic hierarchies* have brought us to a similar situation to the celebrities. Like the stars, we are daily exposed to *extreme competitive situations*. In our hierarchical organisations there is an on-going struggle for social power and dominance. Our appearance and body here becomes an asset – symbolic capital. Success within bureaucracies is not due to content but to form: performance is overridden by images of winning, energy, power, momentum and high

visibility.

PY pages

ON THE COVER

## Model of Health

Carré Otis, 36, says meditation and yoga saved her from the destructive world of high-fashion modeling.



### *Yoga as an antidote to a model's detrimental lifestyle*

"The dense interpersonal environment of modern bureaucracy, in which work assumes an abstract quality almost wholly divorced from performance, by its very nature illicit and often rewards a narcissistic response (47)" says Lasch.

One way to succeed is to conform to the image of a star – being *young, energetic and beautiful, semi-divine*. We all need to look energetic, resolute and powerful<sup>71</sup>. (Why do politicians always *run* up the stairs when in the public eye?) The promise of looking good – radiating energy - is what drives society and especially the fitness culture. The rhetoric of the fitness culture – fed by idealised pictures - sends millions of young women to fitness gyms, where they among many offerings of female fitness programmes find yoga classes - while the men did bench presses (Glassner 1992, Bordo 1993, Sassatelli 2010).

For Lasch '*cultural narcissism*' means that we are living in a kind of society that creates narcissistic *conditions*. From birth to death we operate in *strongly competitive organisational environments*: kindergartens, schools, universities, corporations, and finally old peoples' homes – a life almost entirely spent within hierarchical organisations. Lasch's obvious social-psychological argument is that such a life significantly forms us – among other things it conditions a narcissistic body culture turning body and appearance into symbolic (cultural) capital.

This means that we can return to modernist yoga culture now re-constructed as a part of a *narcissistic fitness culture* led by images of celebrities produced by the mass media. Not all modernist yoga styles fit into our narcissistic body culture. We have seen how meditative yoga forms have been subdued in the West. But some styles really do fit into our current mass culture like [Krishnamacharya's](#) spiritual fitness yoga and Swami [Kuvalayananda's](#) medical therapeutic scientific yoga. They both signify an identity of youth, health, well-being and beauty. They do not offer *life-styles* (like [Sivananda's](#) yoga does) – but they can if required also deliver spirituality. These yoga styles offer a transformed body and mind charged with symbolic value: energised and yet balanced; relaxed and yet powerful; flexible and yet tough. They are so to speak offering building blocks (signs), which are easy to incorporate into our post-modern build up of self-identity. This symbolic value is exactly what many of us need in order to survive and prosper in an institutionalised and corporate style of living.

This body and this self-identity promised or signified by modernist yoga styles is exactly

what the *post-modern self* craves.<sup>72</sup> Modernist yoga forms explicitly contribute to such build up of self-identity. Accordingly these two forms of postural yoga have prospered enormously in recent years as our *narcissistic body culture of health and fitness* has gained momentum since the 1980s. According to the sociologist M. Featherstone the body has become a vehicle for representation:

“The body is presented as the central vehicle to the consumer culture good life: the source of pleasurable sensations, which must be ‘looked after’ (maintained, repaired and improved). Yet the body is also understood in terms of its images, as the visible indicator of the self, hence the attention given to ‘the look’ (presentation, grooming, style). Celebrities, the new rich and middle class are presented as enjoying access to a whole array of personal body services.” (2011; p. xxi)

In this *post-modern* ([Wikipedia link](#)) and narcissistic consumer culture these two forms of modernist colonial yoga is becoming more and more specialised: as a psychological therapy, as a weight loss programme, as a repair tool for run down body parts, as anti stress treatment, as performance improvement, as a mental power booster, as a cure for neurological diseases, as a preventive treatment cutting down costs of maintaining old people. This is the *yoga* discourse of medical/therapeutic *fragmentation* – so typical of modernism. Yoga here signifies a *specialised tool* for identity/self build up, power and survival. Post-modern institutionalised existence is a tough competitive life constantly running us down. Here yoga – accumulating body capital - will help us to get to the top and stay there. It will energise us, make us appear energetic.

Because of yoga we can adapt and build-up our required images for success: the symbolic capital of owning *youth, health, recognition and power*. Yoga in other words symbolises a skill, which can generate these modern forms of symbolic capital. By linking the yoga-skills to symbolic capital these skills have themselves received symbolic value. Let me expand on this important point.

### The goal of popular yoga becomes symbolic

In summary the purpose claimed for modernist *asana* yoga as acted out in popular culture is to build up a body and an identity consisting of symbolic values like *power, youth, fame, beauty and health/immortality*. I believe such symbolic images to be the main driver sending millions to yoga classes today<sup>73</sup>. This conclusion applies not only to the mass culture of fitness and therapeutic based yoga: I believe that the majority of “spiritual fitness yogis” – yoga amateurs who claim to do yoga on mainly spiritual grounds – are also driven to a large extent by the same drivers, especially a drive for identity as such, to which I will return.

The craving for power, youth, beauty, recognition and health I believe to be a part of corporate capitalism and consumer culture. These desired resources represent symbolic capital in a post-modern and narcissistic culture fed by endless images of idealised selves: the celebrities. Furthermore we live in a celebrity culture turning the yoga instructor herself into an idealised icon: a gorgeous integration of graceful movements, a slim long limbed body, a gymnastically drilled body sculpture and facial features deserving the very same front page on which she appears. This idealised yogic body vision - calmed and de-stressed, resting in herself - is celebrated on the front of yoga manuals, DVDs, women’s magazines, and product advertisements. This desirable totem is endlessly promoted by a visual media and fashion

industry that continually craves and consumes new young beauties to keep the attention of consumers, who suffer from exactly the same cravings to fill up their sense of emptiness. This is the culture of narcissism, where yoga skills can create symbolic images so strong that they turn yoga skills and yoga experts into powerful symbols.

The craving for power, beauty and health – the body as symbolic capital - is interesting as it links into the tension between what I call the technical and the symbolic meaning of yoga – the dialectic between its use- and symbolic-value. Throughout this book I am investigating for each historical period the relation between the technical utility of yoga/ use-value (often being transformative) and the symbolic meaning/ symbolic-value of yoga (what images society projects onto yoga; yoga as totem or sign).

The French philosopher *Baudrillard* ([Wikipedia link](#)) claims that under capitalism the use-value of commodities becomes secondary to their symbolic-value (1981,1983). According to him the use-value almost disappears from our consumer culture as it becomes overloaded with signs, images and symbols. This chapter shows that in the post-war West, it often seems that the distinction between use- and symbolic-value disappears into a dialectical synthesis. The *use-value* of yoga becomes *identical* with the *symbolic-value* - and that in a circular way. The use-value to many is yoga as a totem – as a communicator of signs. Let me explain.

The underlying use-value of the yoga discourse is still transformation. However what is significant here is that the consumer requires and demands to be *transformed into a symbol*; a narcissistic image, a totem. For many consumers, yoga – as many other commodities - is all about images of power and beauty: “*I want to become beautiful and powerful in order to symbolise beauty and power to others, which will actually make me beautiful and powerful ....*”. It is as Baudrillard says a self-referential world where signs and totems mutually define each other. The concrete reality – in this case the technical use of yoga – disappears in the sense that it has almost no significance to us. It is all about signs and images – symbolic appearance.

So in many respects this chapter confirms Baudrillard’s general theories of late capitalism: in our specific analysis of the yoga commodity we can say that for many consumers the technical-transformative meaning of popular yoga is to become a *symbol*, to become an idealised body and self created by media images – a pure world of signs. The goal of yoga for many is to become a celebrated person who is “admired, not for one’s accomplishments but simply for oneself, uncritically and without reservation” as Lasch says. Thus the triumphant formula for success within corporate bureaucracies: “*performance is overridden by images of winning, momentum and high visibility.*”

### **The use-value of modernist yoga – cultural self-identity**

Throughout the history of India there was often a dialectical tension within yoga between the use-value and the symbolic-value where the yoga discourse in the end turned them into a synthesis. This analysis of the Western hybrid of yoga has shown that once more they have become conflated.<sup>74</sup>

However what is important to realise is that I am not denying that yoga still can have

significant transformative value – i.e. a use-value - for many of its consumers. The use-value of yoga did not disappear as its symbolic-value took over and in itself has become use-value. Yoga can still be used to physically or mentally transform the individual. For instance many who were initially attracted to modernist popular yoga because of its symbolic value, will most probably go through a process of learning and yogic awareness training. During this process they might eventually become significantly changed, their life hereafter taking new enriching directions. This is not a one-way street. People are not just passively taking over commodities and identities, but often use them as input for creating new deepened interests, lifestyles and identities. [75](#)

The following quote from a yoga populariser, who sees yoga as a tool for ‘spiritual awakening’ illustrates this point:

“That's not to say that most Americans come to yoga—or stick with it—out of a yearning for spiritual awakening. For most people, it starts as simply as this: Yoga makes us feel good, and we like to feel good. And if it makes us look good, too, we're all for that. But such relatively superficial motivations aren't unique to yoga—the longing for material-world happiness is often why people initially come to spiritual practice in general. .... But gradually, if we're lucky, we notice that this approach to spiritual practice has limitations. We may become more fit, healthy, and calm, but we discover that mastering Lotus doesn't necessarily save our marriage. We notice that doing yoga doesn't mean that we won't ever get sick and die. We may even find that as our yoga practice makes us more sensitive to our inner experiences, we feel more rather than less emotional pain: We become aware of grief and longing that we didn't even know were there. And so we start looking to our yoga to give us something other than perfect bodies and charmed lives: an ability to meet *whatever* is true in our bodies—and our lives—with grace and awareness and compassion. If you look closely at the serious yoga practitioner—the person who does it on a regular basis for more than a year or so—you'll often find that asana has become not just an end in itself, but the medium through which he or she begins to explore other yogic teachings. For us in the West, the body has become the meditation hall in which we first learn to practice the basic contemplative arts of concentration, insight, and mindfulness. Asanas have become the tools for opening the heart to compassion and devotion; for studying the flows of breath and energy; for gently releasing the classic spiritual obstacles of greed, hatred, delusion, egoism, and attachment. The poses, used appropriately, can be paths that lead us deeper into the true Self—and that, after all, is what yoga has always been about.” Anne Cushman: *The New Yoga* – Yoga Journal , <http://www.yogajournal.com/lifestyle/281>

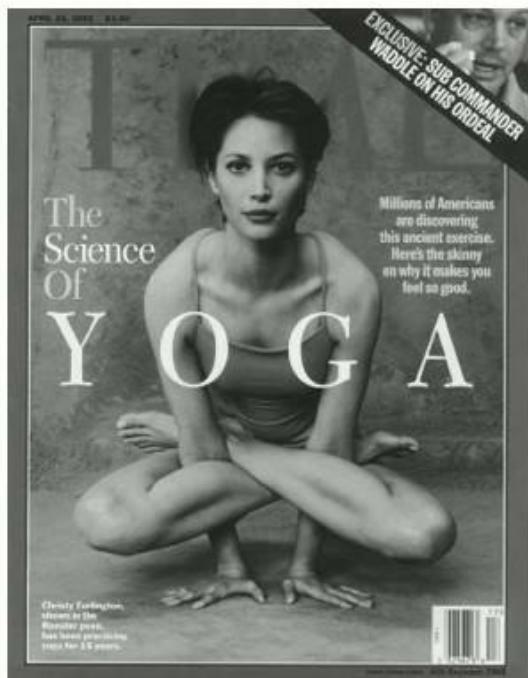
Thus by for browsing the endless numbers of yoga websites and yoga blogs on the internet it becomes clear that yoga for many is a reservoir not only for the building up strength and the capacity to cope. Modernity to many also means a loss of cultural values (Tomlinson 1991) and personal meaninglessness (Giddens 1991). Previously religion, school, tradition, community, and family offered cultural values, meaning and ethics. This for many is no longer the case. Here modernist yoga discourse in combination with romanticism and New Age Spirituality often supplies the individual with such cultural guidance systems. They help yoga sympathisers to find an answer to the critical ethical question “How shall we live?”. In this way the process has been reversed – the symbolic value of yoga equips some individuals with a cultural *self-identity* ([Wikipedia link](#)), which we could say is of significant use-value.

In summary the life under the so-called post-modern condition according to sociologists like Giddens and Bauman means that the individual is in a perpetual process of building up self-identity – continuously constructing, mastering, de-constructing and re-constructing new social identities and selves. This process of ‘life politics’ (Giddens 1992) allows the individual to find meaning and cultural values in life. It is clear - as we witness on yoga websites and blogs - that yoga to many has become an essential part of this process of self-actualisation within post-modernity.

## 7. Modernist popular yoga as a power discourse

### The modernist yoga power discourse

This chapter confirms what seems to be common to all historical forms of yoga discourse: yoga is closely enmeshed in discourses of power and social symbols.



Christy Turlington (model, pictured above): "*The industry of beauty and fashion has provided me with countless chances to exercise what yoga has taught me ..*"

We have in this chapter investigated the symbolic power of yoga as this aspect helps us to understand why yoga has become fashionable and spread out. Most importantly we have seen yoga being used as a tool to compensate for a narcissistic sense of lack of identity under the corporate capitalism of late 20 century ("*I do not want to be my present hollow self but to become my idealised image*"). In other words yoga is fashionable because the discourse empowers us to transform into a grandiose self-image of beauty and power turning our body and appearance into capital. However we have also seen that to some yoga has become a cultural reservoir for building up self-identity, ethics and values not necessarily conforming to

our consumer culture.

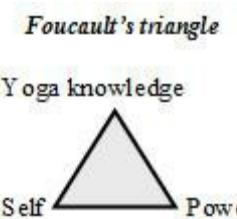
Overall yoga technologies and signs often enable us to become competitive and successful in hierarchical corporations where we spend most of our time. As we become our image of energy radiation, stamina, steadiness, groundedness and beauty, we succeed socially. We strive to full-fulfil a narcissistic image of success breeding even more success.

Because the *asana* yoga technology – dressed in discourses of fitness, health and holism – is said to work effectively on body and mind, for most sympathisers it in reality becomes a *tool of adaptation and survival*. It promises and delivers endurance - the physical and mental strength - needed in an ever-increasing competitive environment.<sup>76</sup> Thus there is a strong and actual use-value embedded in this fitness-and-beauty-yoga. The promotional brochures are not only empty talk. Like so many other body-mind technologies, fitness-and-beauty yoga is able to physically and mentally empower the user. Thus we can say that in the modernist popular yoga discourse, the use-value has been directly and explicitly aligned with power. So it seems fair to conclude that also much of the contemporary yoga discourse is closely connected with power – its use-value as well as its symbolic-value.

The power of fitness-and-beauty-yoga of course has been spotted as a business opportunity in the traditional corporate business sector. Yoga today has for instance become a core product of the modern Wellness business: a week-end at a luxury health spa hotel, re-charging, de-stressing and giving peace and meaning to the exhausted competitive marketing executive or secretary. If you are exhausted, a plethora of brochures and advertisements will promise to restore your strength and beauty.

So we have seen how the contemporary yoga discourse - the know-how of practising and talking about yoga – empowers the sympathiser. This link between knowledge and power is a central theme of the French philosopher *M. Foucault* ([Wikipedia link](#)). Foucault then links knowledge and power to self-identity. This last link also fits well into what we have seen with contemporary yoga. We have seen how the yoga discourse for the practitioner builds up self and identity – for instance social images of young, beautiful, strong and holistic person. However we should not forget that a yoga identity to some can signify a self-identity of ethical living, resistance and self-emancipation.

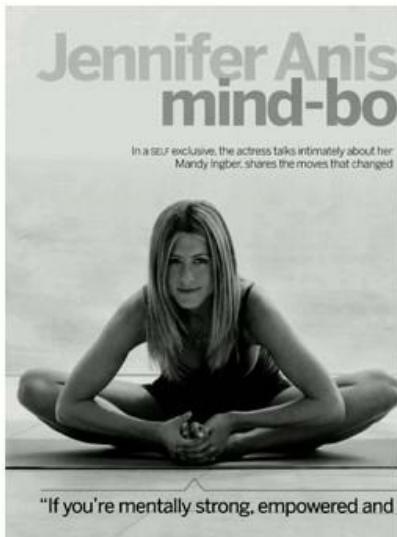
Based on Foucault's ideas one can visualise a triangle (see below) showing how: *Yoga Knowledge – Power - Self* are related mutually to each other. The three corners of the triangle so to speak flow into each other and generate each other simultaneously<sup>77</sup>.



### Yogic self-discipline as social control

Foucault adds to this analysis an interesting observation about how social power in this

way flows into the individual and not only empowers but also controls the individual. We can confirm that his conclusions also seem applicable to much of contemporary yoga discourse. We can see, that the ‘yoga self’ as ‘the idealised image of power and beauty’ or ‘the ethical self’ can only emerge through the application of discipline – self-mastery, the harnessing of body and mind through body postures, extended breathing or ethical self-scrutiny; the self, monitoring and conducting itself. This happens through a strict regiment – often driven to perfectionism by a modernist mind set - of regularisation, rationalisation and disciplining of body and mind. Diet, emotions, categories of thinking, movement, posture, attitude, hygiene, fitness, and relations: every aspect of the body-mind is surveyed, regulated and governed. We can with Foucault say that modernist postural yoga discourse has become a way of *disciplining the body and the self*.



*Hollywood actress in a yoga pose  
– ‘mentally strong and  
empowered’*

However Foucault makes the point that this self-discipline is not only about the self, disciplining itself. Of course this effort of self-mastering can be a liberating act, where the individual breaks many fetters and conditions of society. This is exactly what the yoga discourse is so busy discussing. Often it gets so busy praising its own use-value that it loses credibility. But leaving this aside there is little doubt for most modern yoga sympathisers, that yoga really has something useful to deliver – physical and mental benefits; meaning in life; values; and ethics. This book is not trying to deny this. But self-mastery can easily turn into a process, according to Foucault, where the individual *internalises* the discipline of society. How?

This can happen if the act of yogic discipline conforms with and internally re-enforces the competitive needs of the organisations (or society) within which the individual is working (living)! By that I mean that the individual’s craving for an empowered self conflates with the corporation’s cravings for a top-performing employee. The individual and the corporation both require empowering self-discipline: rationalisation, regulation, and self-control. However in such a case there is no need for management to push and urge the individual. It is not necessary because the competitive force embedded in the corporation/ society already drives and

motivates the individual. In fact, the competitive pressure has been *internalised* – the yoga self/ individual disciplines itself.

In this way the yoga discourse can become a part of the latent power structure of society - yoga-knowledge and social power merge. They become a self-disciplinary tool: the desire of the individual for self-discipline is also the desire of the company.

Let us take the case of the spiritual bohemian, the CEO of the hedge fund, or the secretary of the social security office who each morning – day after day, year after year - gets up one hour earlier than normal to perform her strenuous, sweating and acrobatic first series of Ashtanga yoga. This is the question each of them face: why are you *really* practising – why yoga? The initial answer could be that it is in order to find the inner truth, to de-stress, to empower body and mind, to shape those thighs, to increase flexibility of hip flexors, to increase inner awareness, or just to keep fit. These are all valid use-values of yoga.

But the answer should be followed with a second question. “Why is this important; what do you want to achieve by being flexible, to be mentally strong, to be de-stressed, to look like your celebrity idol?” So the second question is, what instigates our motives and desires? What conditions and informs our cravings? Are they generated and ruled by blinding symbols and desperate yearnings for power in order to prosper?

This is the kind of question that the cultural criticism of Lasch, Bourdieu, Baudrillard and Foucault invites yoga sympathisers to investigate: we might call it a post-modern yoga discourse with a sociological twist. It directs us to yogic self-reflection based on the acknowledgement that social processes flow into and shape the individual’s self and identity – and that includes (and this is the critical point) a self that is constructed by yoga technologies. Their point is that yoga discourse like a coin has two faces: the one, official, side promises transformation and liberation, the other, hidden, side carries the threat of social control and servitude. It is a post-modern yoga reflecting on the “yoga self” as a social constructed self.

Finally how will we know if we are participating in a discourse of this cultural narcissistic medical-therapeutic yoga? I will suggest that one starts to listen for words and sentences like: “keeps you young and fit; .... healthy body; .... feeling great and looking good; .... makes you relaxed; .... will re-juvenate you; ... improves your posture; the anatomically correct way is to....; .... restores your inner balance; .... good for back posture; .... counteracts office work; ....cures problems of ... ; ... leads to weight loss and toned legs, ... gives mental energy and surplus”.

## 8. The Janus face of yoga as a religion

### Popular yoga as folk religion

The chapter on western modernist yoga traced the diffusion of the “yoga bug” through the social body of modernity. It started among the cultural elites and ended among the masses of

women of the emerging middle classes. With caution we could describe this as a process where an ‘elite religion’ gave rise to a ‘popular religion’. As the “yoga bug” spread we also saw how it became shaped and re-contextualised by the various sign fields of modernity. Elite yoga of year 1900 is not the same as popular yoga of year 2000. Throughout history yoga was an elite discourse. But with the advent of modernity we see yoga increasingly as a popular discourse conducted in different social strata.

Anthropologists often apply the distinction between ‘elite’ and ‘folk’ religions. So following the anthropologists we could replace the word ‘popular’ with ‘folk’. Let us now finally visualise modernist ‘popular yoga’ in the perspective of a ‘folk religion’. What is special about a folk or popular religion as opposed to an elite religion?

McMahan, an American scholar of religious studies, summarises ‘popular religion’ in the following way:

“Scholars often describe popular traditions as the relatively unsophisticated local religion of the common people. They contain more ritual than complex doctrine, blend traditions liberally, and employ magic and the manipulation of material objects for protection and other this-worldly benefits. They may include fetishism and witchcraft and are often disruptive of orthodoxy.” (McMahan 2008, p. 261)

McMahan points out that some currents of Buddhism actually share many of these features. In some ways this description also is a fair outline of some branches of the popular modernist yoga discourse. Compared to the elite discourse of yoga, the ‘folk yoga’ discourse is relatively unsophisticated and is increasingly becoming a hodgepodge of various modernist trends and fashions. It is in a process of explosive hybridisation. We have seen how certain branches of the ‘folk yoga’ discourse have effortlessly mixed romanticism, Transcendentalism, psychology, fitness, therapy, spirituality, rational scientism, commercialism, beauty ideals, health, dance, mass media and so on. We have seen how ‘folk yoga’ especially has mixed with New Age spiritualism – itself a patchwork of discourses - and in this way has become one of the new species of modernity’s individualised folk religions. The creativity and innovation brought to ‘folk yoga’ is stunning and never-ending.

Opposed to this dynamic creativity is the “elite yoga religion” of the academic world, which today as in pre-modern India still plays its traditional role of philosophical sophistication, cool lines of argument, methodological adherence, textual rigorousness, linguistic expertise, educational institutionalisation, and sense of normative superiority - to mention a few. Throughout Indian history we witness how the upper strata – often urban intellectuals or Brahmin priests - typically frame their written yoga discourse in such a context of elite superiority. We observe how this elite religion tends to lack dynamism and innovation. Change came to it from outside – in fact change was largely forced upon it.

Innovations like Tantra and *hatha* (before it became a yoga) grew out of folk religions and were then adapted and shaped by the elites. They often gave the new ideas inferior status as they included these folk discourses in their existing yoga universe. Under modernity we saw new vigorous folk yoga discourses surface beneath the banner of hybridisation. They were frequently embraced and tamed by the elites of modernity – often scholars and orientalists, at other times ignored or their existence denied. But a few of the folk yoga forms managed to maintain some of their independence and hence their dynamic. We saw under modernity how elite and folk “yoga religion” separated and then slowly drifted apart and today have lost sight

of each other.

Sociologists like Durkheim ([Wikipedia link](#)) have since long pointed out that religion in pre-modern societies were a kind of storehouse. Here society stored, legitimised and institutionalised values, customs, habits, beliefs, norms, memories. Religion functioned as DNA, a system of information shaping the social body. Hence religion was a significant institution giving people social identity, community, values and meaning. We have seen how this holds true for pre-modern ‘elite yoga’. Similarly we have seen how this also holds true for modernist ‘folk yoga’ - in colonial India as well as in the West: yoga, as a totem or sign, radiating power, status, and social identity.

Without doubt, folk religion is a field for and generator of empowerment, inspiration, personal development, political resistance, social change, compassion, and cultural enrichment. Folk religion is also the field where the amateur has a voice. The values, orientations, beliefs, passions and impulses of the amateurs – the yoga sympathisers – become here a factor to be reckoned with. As there is no institutional control, no highbrow attitudes, and no authoritative valuations of good and bad taste, such a field can under certain circumstances develop an incredible inner dynamic not possible within the elite religion controlled by professionals. This means that folk religion can slide in *any* direction. This holds true for modernist colonial- and Western popular yoga – one fuelled by colonial repression the other by commercialism and cultural narcissism. The pace of change of popular modernist yoga is formidable – like it or not. No one can predict its future directions. Its inventions are staggering and a challenge to any guru or scholar who claims, and wants to defend, a core of yogic authenticity and essence. Many even dream of closing Pandora’s box again – but as we all know this is by definition too late. The genie is out of the bottle.

Having appreciated the dynamic of ‘folk yoga’ religion we have also warned about religion’s dark side -- be it folk or elite. Sociologists for instance have pointed to religions’ oppressive dark side throughout history. How it can for instance create and legitimate social hierarchy and power; how it disciplines and controls through tacit assumptions, enabled through its ontological axioms and metaphysical orientations ingrained in language and habits. The analysis of modernist Western popular yoga has made this aspect very evident.

### The dream of recreating the yoga past

Many yoga popularisers find popular yoga’s present situation extremely unfortunate and disgraceful. They would like to bring the modernist yoga discourse back to its ‘original roots’ by means of new translations and interpretations of old yoga texts. However as we investigate the multitude of pre-modern and Colonial yoga cultures and as we realise how each of them represents different historical and cultural contexts, we have to ask: which of all these contradicting yoga cultures can meaningfully be linked to modernist yoga? We will see how ‘the signified’ (meaning) of the yoga ‘signifier’ (the sound) is utterly unstable and constantly re-configured by various historical contexts and signs. So any definition of the yoga signified would in the end be a choice and hence subjective.

We have been here before. The old Orientalists also embarked on such a search for the

roots of yoga and they did not realise that instead of excavating an ancient yoga they had instead re-constructed a hybrid one. The idea of finding a single and stable meaning of the yoga sign in the past is in the view of my cultural studies a romantic fantasy. Such honourable efforts in the end are *inseparable* from defining and constructing a *new hybrid* modernist yoga sign based on intensive reading of ancient texts. From the Orientalists' philosophical mistakes today's yoga discourse could learn much: you cannot recreate the past and whatever you create will be a hybrid of old and new.

## Summary

We have now followed the yoga sign's way into the West. We saw initially how this gave rise to a significant re-configuration. A new hybrid yoga emerged where pre-modern signs were given meaning in a modernist sign universe of the 19 Century. After about a hundred years in the West this elitist and intellectual yoga discourse gave rise to the first shoots of a popular movement introducing an element of practice into the discourse. Yoga's social roots were still to be found in the bourgeoisie and its cultural elites. However, after WW2 this social base changed, as yoga spread into the wider female middle class. This signalled the start of a viable milieu of yoga popularisers and sympathisers.

This movement adhered to female body discourses of health, beauty, romanticism and spirituality and they now included popular yoga discourses originating in late colonial India. Colonial modernist yoga was already strongly informed and configured by 19 Century Western modernism. Now, as the post-war West imported yoga, the wheel of hybridisation and reconfiguration took another turn. A new modernist and popular yoga discourse emerged interweaving post-war social processes like commodification, modern spirituality, holistic-romanticism, narcissism, fitness and celebrity culture – all changing the use-value as well as the symbolic-value of yoga. This yoga milieu gained critical mass in the 90s.

The signs and practices of yoga during those years became related to and received their meaning from a wide range of Western themes and issues. The use-value and the symbolic meaning of yoga hence became manifold. Thus yoga became a therapeutic tool for the well being of body and mind; a method to reach your inner god or true self; a commodity for sale; a tool for survival and coping in Western institutions; a part of the social identity of counterculture and New Age; a tool for female beauty; a way to connect mind and body; a source for values and norms; a tool to become successful in business and private life; a way to keep fit; a tool for relaxation; a lifestyle guide; and a way of signalling connection to a remote past and distant nature. Within this context yoga became celebrated and loved. Countless books and DVDs praise its virtues.

Yoga has also within the elitist scholarly discourse – mainly its historical and meditative forms - been praised, although in a much more reasoned way. So the positive effects and the description of the use-value of yoga in its various forms are well known and they are not disputed in this book. The issue has rather been to identify the implicit signs and purposes attached to yoga: yoga as a signifier and totem; yoga's entanglement in modernity, politics and power. This, I believe, will give the yoga practitioner a good foundation for the self-reflective question of why she and others throughout history practise yoga - a post-modern yoga

reflecting on the yogic self. By engaging with thinkers like Foucault, Bourdieu, Lasch and Baudrillard we can maybe find a sociologically – i.e. *not* the typical phenomenologically - based answer to the popularity and celebrations of modernist yoga: why modernist popular yoga?

*There is one stratum of the modernist yoga discourse not much discussed in this chapter. This is the academic scholarly discourse. As mentioned this discourse among intellectuals is actually a rather secluded branch of the contemporary yoga discourse. It lives in an isolated cultural field transacting its cultural capital – its knowledge - primarily with the state and religious institutions. I will give a few critical comments on this intellectual yoga discourse in the following contemplative chapter about the modernist yoga discourse of intellectuals. Hence the chapter is mainly for the academic reader.*

# 3<sup>rd</sup> Contemplation – The modernist yoga discourse of intellectuals

## Key Concepts

Sacred                  Outsider vs. insider

Modernist sensibilities/filter    Theology vs. science

Sui generis                  Oppositional reading

We have already seen how the yoga renaissance and the Hindu revival in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century colonial India owed a lot to yoga “outsiders”, the early European Orientalists who excavated, collected and translated India’s cultural past. Their efforts had a large impact: discourses and historical records on the brink of extinction were revived, glorified and brought to the attention of the general public in West and East alike. So even if the Orientalists did not see themselves as a part of the yoga tradition – i.e. as insiders – they re-vitalised, re-constructed and certainly left strong marks on the Indian colonial yoga discourse. And the colonial yoga discourse significantly influenced our present understanding of yoga. I would dare to claim that without the Orientalists there would have been very little yoga Renaissance! Hence mainly due to the Orientalists it is sensible to talk about a yoga discourse of modernity, a hybrid yoga discourse, where ancient discourses are re-configured and re-imagined through the lenses of modernity.

So it is paradoxical that some of the most influential people of the yoga discourse, do not count for many yogis as a part of their tradition! They are typically just seen as messengers and neutral observers, but today we can see that they were much more than deliverers of a neutral message. This chapter will have a brief look at the elite or intellectual yoga discourse of modernity. For a more general cultural sociological critique of the cultural field of intellectuals, educational field and the institutions of higher education, I refer the reader to the many and very influential writings of P. Bourdieu or to some of the excellent introductions to Bourdieu’s complex thinking (Grenfell 2012, Schwartz 1997). Most of this general critique also applies to the intellectual yoga field.

In the following contemplation, I would like to investigate further the modernist filtering of yoga especially as it happens among intellectuals. The aim is not a

*comprehensive examination of the habitus of intellectuals, but rather to draw attention to some issues I have stumbled over. This contemplation is an attempt to sketch some of the limitations of much of the academic yoga discourse – while still appreciating many of its discoveries, translations and detective efforts in solving historical puzzles.*

### **The discourse of the neutral “outside scholar”**

Today yoga scholars – who are often hard to distinguish from scholars of say Hinduism and Tantra - are often labelled Indologists. For the most part they – and I - have inherited many of the basic Orientalist notions of yoga developed between say 1800 and WW2. Academic scholars until recently tended to define themselves as transparent in relation to their subject. Hence they positioned themselves as ‘neutral outsiders’, who merely observed, systematised and interpreted the varieties of religio-cultural traditions they studied. However, such a claim of academic neutrality has come under strong criticism within social and cultural sciences in the last 40 years. Thus my first task is to give some examples of this kind of criticism and how it applies to the modernist yoga discourse.

I would like to take *Mircea Eliade* ([Wikipedia link](#)) as an example, as he has been so influential on both the study of religion and the study of yoga in particular. Some scholars might think: “*Why once more Eliade? – we have long since left him, and what he stood for, behind us*”. However, this has not been my impression, studying the scholarly literature on Indology and yoga. It is my impression that the tacit filters – a *habitus* of intellectuals - that we observe in work at Eliade are still active in much research. To deny these filters sounds to me like saying: “*We have grasped the criticism of feminism – now let’s move on*”. As many will probably agree, the dominance and repression of male discourse still runs inadvertently, however now in much more refined disguises and not so easy to detect. I believe the same holds true for the hermeneutical-phenomenology represented by Eliade.

### **“Outsiders” actually being “inside”**

Eliade matured in a period where religion had been attacked by a range of leading intellectuals representing science and modernity (Olson 2001). It was people like H. Spencer, E.B. Taylor, L. Levy-Bruhl, J.G. Frazer, Emile Durkheim and Sigmund Freud who came up with different explanations of what religion and god is. Durkheim claimed for instance that god was nothing but a projection of the collectivity of society: the mores, habits and morals of the tribe had been elevated to god status to underpin power and status. Eliade reacted to this kind of ‘reductionism’, where the sacred was reduced to a phenomenon in society or to psychology. As he said:

“The confusion starts when only one aspect of religious life is accepted as primary and meaningful, and the other aspects or functions are regarded as secondary or even illusory. Such a reductionist method was applied by Durkheim and other sociologists of religion”. (quote taken from Olson 2001)

Eliade had been to India in the 1930s and studied with professor S.N. Dasgupta, a leading Indian religio-philosopher, who was himself deeply involved in the Orientalist project. In this context, Eliade also visited Sivananda to study yoga with him. So Eliade actually became heavily influenced and involved in the yoga renaissance and Neo-Vedanta then unfolding in India.

*Neo-Vedanta* ([Wikipedia link](#)) advanced the idea that ‘god consciousness’ underlay and penetrated reality and that through yogic exercises one could calm the mind, so that the ground of consciousness – pure consciousness; i.e. god – would emerge. So for sympathisers of Neo-Vedanta, yoga experiences were a sign and proof of ‘the ultimate’ and it was possible for humans to reach it. It was their task as scholars to investigate, clarify and circulate this knowledge about yoga. Their ‘studies of yoga’ were in other words directly motivated by ‘religio-cultural campaigning’ – they wanted to substantiate the point of their religio-philosophy.

Let us return to Eliade who became a part of this milieu. By only studying his background and CV we immediately have to put a question mark over his neutrality and disinterest. The word ‘scholar’ usually signals ‘academic neutrality and objectivity’ but this does not seem to hold in Eliade’s case. He was deeply involved in the religio-cultural debates and discourses of his time. He was a part of the joint efforts of not only Neo-Vedanta, but also modernist colonial yoga discourses to transform yoga into a scientific sign: yoga was constructed as a ‘universal scientific method’ giving access to ‘the non-dual ground of all things’ – to ‘pure god consciousness’.

It was with such filters of admiration and respect for the power of yoga that Eliade approached his subject. We see this habitus reflected already in the title of his book, whose final version was translated into English in the 1950s: *Yoga - Immortality and Freedom*, a title strongly loaded with symbolic value and veneration. As one read through Eliade’s Foreword it is clear that Eliade was extremely enthusiastic about yoga and Indian spirituality. He believed the West had much to learn from the yoga wisdom of the sages. In fact he felt that it was impossible to disregard India’s discoveries of how to emancipate oneself:

“The conquest of this absolute freedom, of perfect spontaneity, is the goal of all Indian philosophies and mystical techniques; but it is above all through yoga, through one of the many forms of yoga, that India has held it can be assured. This is the chief reason we have thought it useful to write a comparatively and full exposition of the theory and practice of yoga.” 1958 (1969ed), P.XX

These are not really the cautious words of a critical scholar but those of a campaigner or a missionary. Eliade wanted to show the West that India’s impressive yoga system could deliver ‘absolute freedom’. He does nowhere critically challenge the truth of the claim that yoga can lead to ‘ultimate freedom’. With such an agenda we can deduce that he did not float above or ‘outside’ the religio-political debates of his time, but deliberately participated and took sides against various social scientists. The yoga discourse was for him a central and specific example of an overall Neo-Vedanta religious outlook. It was a tool that could deliver the mystical experiences discussed in Neo-Vedanta. This does not mean that Eliade’s *preferred reading* – as opposed to a *critical* or *oppositional reading* - was entirely wrong about yoga. Far from it; but his depiction of yoga had severe limitations.

So Eliade was not a neutrally observing ‘outsider’. He was actually a participator and an

‘insider’. His task was through his writings to clarify and promote his pre-conceptions – his personal symbolic projections - about yoga. He is more correctly described as a ‘populariser or theologian of yoga’, clarifying, explaining and *advancing* his favoured symbolic associations to yoga.

There is nothing wrong in debating and promoting philosophical views. The problem emerges if one also wants to wear a scientific hat, as Eliade did. He wrote about yoga under the impression that he was a scholar of religion ‘neutrally’ creating ‘objective yoga knowledge’. But as we can see today, he was instead stepping into and promoting a religio-political discourse of romanticism antagonistic to modernity and the ‘reductionism’ of the enlightenment project. He left us a very biased and filtered version of yoga – a modernist hybrid habitus. In this way, I fear, Eliade became an example of a trend among contemporary scholars of religion and Indology.

### **When theology is called science**

The observations above give us a key to discovering what Eliade actually understood by ‘the sacred’ – exemplified with the mystic experiences of the yogi - which he claimed to be the core of religious studies. In *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion* (1969) Eliade claimed that ‘the sacred’ is *an element of consciousness* as such – a claim very similar to Vedanta philosophy. This was also a concept popular among Eliade’s peers in Europe, where for instance the similarly influential Rudolf Otto would see ‘the holy’ as an “original and underivable capacity of the mind implanted in the ‘pure reason’ independently of all perception” (Murphy 2001). In other words ‘the sacred’ is to be found within all of us. It – “pure reason” or “consciousness as such” - is a part of our human nature. In Kant’s words: the sacred is in this discourse an *a priori* ([Wikipedia link](#)) category (something which exists before perception and makes perception possible). Eliade therefore thought about humans as *homo religiosus*: it is our *nature* to be religious.

The guiding idea of Eliade was that ‘the sacred’ would manifest itself through a rich variety of human religious activities where humans would in various ways subjectively *experience* ‘the sacred’. One of them was through the yogic mystical experience of *samadhi*. The task of religious studies was to phenomenologically record, decipher, compare and interpret the various historical manifestations of the sacred. By historical comparisons of phenomenological religious experiences (reports told by the experiencing individual) the scholar would then be able to deduct the essence of ‘the sacred’. As D. Allen, who acts as a mediator of Eliade’s work, argues, Eliade’s intention was to show:

“.... that the primary symbolic structures of religious experience have the power to illuminate the fundamental structures of the human consciousness and mode of being generally, of the human condition as such.” (Allen 2001)

Or expressed critically, we could say that the task of Eliade’s religious studies was to create observations, which would substantiate Eliade’s romantic or Neo-Vedantic hypothesis about ontological reality and human anthropology. The purpose of the science of religion – in our case Eliade’s writings on yoga - was in other words to confirm and substantiate Eliade’s *a priori* assumptions – his preconceptions - about human nature and ontological reality: the

existence of the immanence of the sacred.

And most will agree that such endeavours are *not* the task of science! This is the task of theologians and campaigners.

### A research programme entangled in fascination and politics

If we read the continuation of the quote from Allen above we also now see Eliade's research programme fully exposed:

"Indeed, such a level of ontological analysis will reveal that only by experiencing the symbolic structures of the sacred, only by renewing ourselves through new revalorizations or religious symbolism, can modern Western humans beings overcome their "terror of history" and their existential anxiety and live truly meaningful existence" (Allen 2001)

We are presented with the purpose of the science of religion. By excavating the sacred – through for instance yoga exercises and their accompanying mystical experiences - we moderns would re-discover the deepest meaning of our existence. And 20 century man was according to Eliade indeed suffering under the conditions of modernity. It is apparent from a range of Eliade's writings that he regretted this malaise of modernity: human alienation, anxiety and sense of meaninglessness. Sociologists like Weber, Tönnies and Durkheim shared this diagnosis, but they would not have shared Eliade's medicine. Our nihilism and our profane lifestyle, according to Eliade, had to be overcome by *radical cultural and spiritual renewal*. Here he sounds very similar to his Neo-Vedantic gurus and friends in late colonial India. In this view, this is where the study of religion – and yoga practice - helps us and provides us with a liberating sense of transcendence and freedom. It is within this overall symbolic sign system that Eliade gave meaning to yoga so explicitly expressed in the Foreword to his legendary work on yoga. In this way he constructed a new hybrid modernist yoga discourse - yoga as medicine for the unease and debility of modernity.

So Eliade does *not* merely neutrally present and explore archaic-, mystic-, yogic- and other similar experiences of the sacred. He has an implicit agenda reflecting his romanticist and spiritual habitus: to substantiate his *a priori* hypothesis that such experiences are loaded with signs, symbols and myths about the sacred. He has in other words a political purpose in his research: he is actually *endorsing and holding the sacred – the yogic mystical experience - up as a political cure* for society (Allen 2001).

Yet this is not what critical scholarship is about, according to the philosopher of science K.R. Popper ([Wikipedia link](#)) . Following Popper's critical rationalism Eliade's aim does not contribute to our 'growth of knowledge', as he only substantiates his conjectures. According to Popper, instead of indulging our conjectures, we should give them a hard time, expose them to critical investigations.

However, I believe that Eliade is not alone in this project. It is clear from my reading of many contemporary scholars of religion and yoga that they share the underlying habitus and politics formulated by Eliade, (1) the discomfort with modernity and (2) the discourses of sacredness (expressed in for instance discourses as yoga, Tantra or Saivism) as medication for the symptoms.

Research which, intentionally or not, is entangled in a political programme to solve the present political, cultural and ecological *Weltschmerz* by reaching back in time, should, I

suggest, be labelled a romantic and nostalgic research programme, the belief that pre-modern, mythic, symbolic, cosmic, and religious modes of being will solve the disease of modernity.

I along with many others do not disagree at all with many religious and yoga scholars' disregard for the contemporary life situation. Neither do many post-moderns like me disagree with their fascination for ancient religions and liberations discourses – we are also charmed. However, most contemporary social scientists would be cautious about any research being uncritical and admiring. Any scholarship which inadvertently reinforces ancient religio-political power discourses would similarly today be met with deep scepticism.

### The blind spot of the filter

I doubt whether such a research programme as Eliade's - *entangled by romantic fascination and politics* – is able to capture the symbolic aspect of religious discourses and practices, because it is itself blinded by such symbolic projections. It will tend to accept uncritically what is presented as the 'truth and wisdom of sages', because this claim is *a priori* believed to be so by the scholar. With Baudrillard, we could say that when such research believes that it has identified the *use-value* of for instance yogi practices (i.e. that it has illuminated and explained the underlying actual reality to which the yoga sign – for instance *samadhi* - points) then such scholarship in reality only confirms and reinforced the *symbolic-value* implicitly propagated by the yoga discourse. Such scholarship cannot contemplate the idea that yoga signs are 'empty' – to use a phrase from Baudrillard - as it assumes *a priori* that they *must* point towards something real – the sacred. There is, in other words, a blind spot in this filter, making it blind to the possibility that yoga signs could be social symbols only pointing to other social symbols – a system of mirrors mirroring each other.

I do not believe from my studies that Eliade's discourse of the sacred entirely died out with Eliade and his contemporaries. Habitus like this – often composed by unconscious cultural heritage - have considerable inertia and only change slowly over time.

### Symbolic projecting on the *sui generis*

My considerations find support in McCutcheon (1997 & 2003). He also concludes that despite the denial by many modern religious scholars, the research programme underlying Eliade's hermeneutic and phenomenological approach to the sacred remains valid for a majority of religious studies. Eliade, according to McCutcheon, represents an ongoing research programme – or a symbolic projection - claiming that it deals with a category of human experience, which is so special – *sui generis* - that it can only be explained from itself. The task of the scholar, they maintain, is to observe and interpret religious data neutrally. However the filtering of the sacred, *a priori* putting it on a pedestal above history and society, has the implication that its symbolic energy and anchoring in society cannot be contemplated.

Hence this research programme ends up *amplifying* what holy men – the yoga sages - claim about themselves: that they are special; their experiences are important and unique; their insights beyond testability but still true; their practices, ideas and solution transcend history

and culture; and their wisdom is of universal character. When modern scholars *a priori* agree with the claims of holy men that these sages express *sui generis* knowledge, then the scholars' research programme protects such claims from critical investigation. Such a research programme is not and can never be critical, as it is an implicit glorification of its subject of study. This means that the reader looking for critical evaluations and wanting to see the sacred (the yoga experience) treated contextually – as part of and influenced by human society and culture<sup>78</sup> – will have to sift through much literature before finding anything of the kind.

### **The neglect of the forces of historical conditioning**

Sadly, only a minority of historians, sociologists, political scientists - who often for good reasons do not participate in the hermeneutic-phenomenological research programme, as they instead are trained to explain any cultural phenomenon including religion by *socio-historical conditions* - are engaged in investigating India's religio-cultural systems. Regrettably, they leave it to scholars of religious departments to write about Hindu mysticism, yoga, and Tantra. And such religious scholars – let us call them Indologists or Sanskrit specialists - often tend to focus on translation issues, conceptual clarifications, theological issues, sectarian comparisons, the metaphysical symbolic meanings of myths, and canonical developments.

It is however important to acknowledge that such often painstaking research, translating, clarifying and historical dating of ancient texts, is outstanding and admirable. The problem and limitation with such research is that it stops where the next level of analysis is supposed to commence. Too often such work will only in a minimal way involve social processes, conflicts and structures of society in order to explain religious behaviour and ideas. In such research, sociology ends up as background staging with no decisive impact on the content displayed on the stage itself.

This means that the symbolic-value – the signs' interaction with society - too often gets lost. And when such research does deal with the symbolic-value, it is often mistaken for use-value.

More and more methodological critiques of this research programme - often preoccupied with words and their many possible meanings – are emerging. Here is for instance a quotation from a critical article from L. A. Renza ("Influence"): "Spotting certain thematic likeness or disclosing related verb patterns between as well as within texts seems to inaugurate the excitement fuelling the critical act" (From Ernst 2005). In summary, this fixation and infatuation with words, still seen in too many works, must be supplemented with attitudes much more sensitive to politics, power, signs and society.

The task of translating, dating, systematising, grouping and interpreting genres of texts – for instance cataloguing Brahmin *dharma* and Tantric discourses - is of course fundamental and should not be devalued. But contemporary scholarship should not stop at this point, as hermeneutical-phenomenology encourages us to do. An important aspect of dealing with such texts is to weave them into society and history, the conflicts and socio-historical changes they represent; the texts as signifiers.

### **The Buddhist sister discourse**

It is surprising and puzzling that yoga and Hindu researchers actually do not need to look very far for inspiration. Within Buddhist academic discourse – a discourse with large thematic similarities to yoga, Tantra and Hinduism – the reader will find abundant literature meeting the requirements that I have outlined above, despite the fact that this discourse is also often limited by the same issues as yoga discourse. However, here is a field – like most other cultural studies – which over recent decades has been invigorated by sociology, post-structuralism, criticism, social history, and methodological reflectivity. In my research, I often had to draw from such Buddhist research in order to illuminate the yoga discourse with the critical approach that I wanted.

By just listing some few titles we get a feeling of the difference: R. Faure: *The Rhetoric of Immediacy: A Cultural Critique of Chan/Zen* (1991), R.H. Scharf: *Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience* (Numen 42 – 1995), G. Schopen: *Buddhist Monks and Business Matters* (2004), D. Ryukan Williams: *The Other Side of Zen: A Social History of Soto Zen Buddhism in Tokugawa Japan* (2005), D. McMahan: *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (2008), G. Bailey & I. Mabbett (2001): *The Sociology of Early Buddhism* (2001), R. Gombrich: *Theravada Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo* (1988), R. Gombrich and G. Obeyesekere: *Buddhism Transformed* (1988), J.R McRae: *Seeing through Zen* (2003), R. DeCaroli: *Haunting Buddha: Indian Popular Religions and the Formation of Buddhism* (2004).

The yoga student will find very few titles where the yoga notion is seen in such a context. It is left to us to wonder why there is such a significant difference.

### **The two separate yoga discourses**

But does all this really matter? Does the modern scholar play much of a role in the popular yoga discourse? My enquiries into contemporary popular yoga discourse looking for knowledge of Eliade or any other modern religious scholars have shown that there is almost no knowledge of them and their writings. By reading the huge amount of popular yoga literature written by non-scholar yoga popularisers and by talking with large numbers of yoga sympathisers, it is abundantly clear that there are very few if any references to or knowledge of scholarly literature. So, the irony is that very few of those practising yoga – sympathisers or popularisers - read the scholarly literature.

However, this is also true the other way round. You never see academic literature quoting or referring to yoga popularisers: scholars quote scholars. Of course, you cannot blame hermeneutical-phenomenology for the communication breakdown. This is rather encouraged by the academic power discourse *as such*. By this I mean that most academic literature is so segregated and specialised and is often written in such insider jargon that no-one outside the specialty can be bothered to – or is actually able to - read their texts. So even if ‘educated yoga readers’ encountered academic research, they would struggle to decipher it.

However, it was not always like this in the yoga discourse of the West. The difference between the modern hyper-specialised scholar and the Orientalist writer around 1900 seems to be that the Orientalist discourse did manage to become a part of cultural elitist public circuits. Their writings were filtered down to a broader elitist yoga discourse. The Orientalists were

indeed ‘insiders’.

However, too many contemporary scholars really deserve their own label ‘outsiders’. Not in the understanding of being neutral observers, but instead in the meaning of having lost touch with popular yoga discourses of society. The result is two separate communication circles, each ignoring the other. The modern cultural field of yoga is divided in two: an intellectual field and a popular field. Each of them is structured by different external power fields (the state and the market) and each has its own dynamic, discourses and institutions.

In the last few years, there have emerged some young scholars who came to yoga through encountering popular yoga in society. During this process, as they matured they probably turned their love and interest for yoga into an academic study and commenced an academic profession. Their aim is often to establish a bridge between the two cultural fields. We should welcome their efforts.

### **The need for cultural sociology and discourse analysis**

Based on my methodological criticism, I believe it is really time for historians, sociologists and cultural theorists to turn their gaze again on yoga and religion as did Weber and Durkheim a century ago. This does *not* mean that the great writings and insights of the many great yoga scholars have to be dismissed. On the contrary. We need instead to understand the limitations of existing methodology and filtering – the influence of our modernist habitus. My suggestion is that to the too often apologetic research of the later part of the 20 century - exemplified and defined by Eliade some 50 years ago – there needs to be added some of the first sociologists’ provocative and stimulating investigations and theorising.

Or to quote McCutcheon (2001):

“Instead of uncritically deploying such categories as the sacred, the real, Being, and experience, the post-Eliadean study of religion ought to be concerned with the ways in which power and authority are constructed and legitimated through so-called religious claims and practices *as well as* through the very scholarship on such beliefs and behaviors.”

And this is what I have tried to achieve by *supplementing* yoga scholars’ often brilliant research with critical discourse analysis and counter-hegemonic readings.

### **The intellectual habitus of modernity**

I am not going to give a further dedicated deconstruction of the academic yoga discourse as it developed in the 20 Century. Neither will I conduct a systematic investigation of all the great Orientalist scholars of the early 20 Century – L. De Vallee Poussin, H. Zimmer, L. Renou, R.E. Hume, E.W. Hopkins, E. Senart, S.N. Dasgupta, F. Heiler etc - whose works eclipsed with Eliade’s *Yoga – Immortality and Freedom* around the middle of the 20th century. Nor is there a deconstruction of all the rather more specialised Indologists - as they tended to label themselves - of the last part of the 20 century. Such a task is too comprehensive and would require a book on its own. My focus here is rather on filtering, habitus and politics, which I believe requires much more attention.

Within the academic Buddhist discourse, the reader will find examples of such *reflexivity*<sup>79</sup>. As the Buddhist and yoga discourse in Western society has so many similarities,

many of the investigations within modernist Buddhist discourse also are valid for yoga, Tantra and other Hindu discourses. In for instance David L. McMahan: *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (2008) it is shown how Buddhism as it was imported to the West became re-configured by Western habitus. In order to fit into Western sensibilities, according to McMahan, Buddhism had to be re-presented so it could fit into three major cultural currents or filters of modernity: *Christian monotheism, Romanticism and rational science*.

Hence in order to be acceptable to modern discourse, Buddhism had to be

(1) *de-traditionalised* (that is, a shift in orientation from external to internal authority – for instance that beliefs and practices of a tradition can be rejected, selected and reinterpreted on the basis of individual preferences, reason and experiences),

(2) *de-mythologised* (that is, the significance of myths and rituals are muted and given meanings which are acceptable – ‘ghosts’ are for instance made into ‘symbols of psychological states’)

(3) *psychologised* (that is, notions and practices are related to psychology and internal experiences while rituals and religious elements are de-emphasised – for instance Buddhism becomes an ethical psychology engaged in psychoanalysis, Gestalt therapy, psychotherapy).

This does not mean that Buddhist modernism does not have any correspondence with Buddhist reality, but according to McMahan it is rather that

“....elements of Buddhism that many now consider central to the tradition – meditation, internal experiences, individual authority – are so constructed because of the gravitational pull of modernity. Modernity has attracted particular elements from the vast corpus of the tradition and not only made them central – leaving others that have actually been more typical of Buddhist experience throughout history – but also reconstituted them in terms of modern discourses. (McMahan 2008, p.44)

The processes through which Buddhism travelled in order to be adopted by the intellectual habitus of modernity are the very same as all the other Asian religious discourses entering the West – as for instance yoga - had to go through, in my view. They all had to fit into the our Western intellectual habitus which is the

“tacit cultural orientations deeply ingrained in modern western cultures” (McMahan 2008, p. 62), which were “virtually non-negotiable axioms of modernity – for example, the superiority of democracy, the necessity of individual rights, the role of science in establishing claims about physical realities, the role of the artist as a purveyor of individually creativity. Any novel or foreign element must in large measure harmonize with these, even when it may challenge or re-envision some their associated assumption” (McMahan 2008, p.63)

It is my impression that Buddhism has been easier to re-construct and integrate within the intellectual habitus and discourses of modernity than yoga and Tantra. This might be due to real internal differences between yoga discourse and Buddhism – but many other external factors might also be involved. However, I find that the analysis of McMahan should be of interest to all of us writing under the umbrella of modernist academic yoga discourse. Filtering, habitus, academic reflexivity and methodology need to be more highly prioritised in future research.

# **Chapter 2**

# The yoga of modernity - Colonial modernist yoga

## Key Concepts

<u>Orientalism</u>	<u>Hindu reform</u>
<u>Yoga science</u>	<u>Hindu nationalism</u>
<u>Bhadraloks</u>	<u>Use-value as simulation</u>
<u>Hatha-jogi</u>	<u>Medical scientific yoga</u>
<u>Spiritual fitness yoga</u>	<u>Healthy Hindu lifestyle yoga</u>
<u>Popular yoga culture</u>	<u>Spiritual scientific yoga</u>
<u>Modernist re-construction</u>	<u>Guru-student-cloning-myth</u>

With India's incorporation into the British Empire it also succumbed to the processes of modernity unfolding in Europe. Slowly the social processes, institutions and cultural practices of the British imperial centre charged and transformed Indian society. India became a member of the periphery of a modernist empire. As India went from the administration of a merchant company to the rule of a modern state bureaucracy, there was not much left of the pre-modern yoga culture in India. The Indian elites who traditionally had been the interactors of the yoga discourse showed only sporadic interest in and knowledge of yoga. Their yoga discourse seemed mainly to be a fading theological one. The milieu of ascetic itinerants (the renouncers) traditionally associated with yoga culture, had under the Moghuls utterly lost its elite character. It was transformed into an institution of social outcasts – what Marx and Engels called a Lumpen-proletariat, a rural surplus population. In such a milieu dominated by vagabonds, orphans, thieves, rascals and tramps there was not much sign of yoga culture.

With the full arrival of the British state and the institutions of modernity the remains of India's yoga discourse was however profoundly re-vitalised and popularised. This chapter investigates this process. I have chosen to call the yoga discourse emerging in India in this period for 'colonial modernist yoga' as I see modernity and India's colonial situation as the two crucial political-social conditions for this new yoga discourse to arise. As in the West it was basically a hybrid discourse, where "global" and "local" cultural practices merged in seamless ways. India's emerging modernist yoga discourse is in this

*way another example of the trans-localism of modernity.*

*A critical ideological source for the new global circuit and its understanding of yoga was the Orientalist writers – an emerging intellectual group whose members had tremendous influence on the yoga discourse. With them yoga moved into intellectual institutions like universities, libraries and various Societies – for instance William Jones' Asian Society. An entire new cultural field of yoga emerged. Here the yoga discourse became a tool in Western religio-cultural conflicts. The Orientalists constructed yoga as a timeless and mystical system designed for realising an 'inner divine dimension of transcendence'. This discourse was accepted and co-developed by many of the emergent middle class of Indians - the bhadraloks. Another popular discourse among these educated Indians formed by modern institutions was to construct yoga as a science – a spiritual super-science.*

*Then in the 1920s the cultural field yoga underwent a renaissance in India. It became a part of popular Indian culture and Hindu nationalism. In this political reform movement yoga was reconstructed once more, this time within a framework of Western physical body and gymnastic cultural practices. Thus we witness how re-designed modernist postural yoga techniques moved into new institutions like research laboratories, fitness gyms, modern ashrams and how yoga was performed by the Indian masses. Yoga became a tool for building a reformed national Hindu character. Once more in yoga history not only the field but also the signified of the yoga sign had changed dramatically.*

*In my opinion, this chapter flags the beginning of the yoga genealogy as we know and understand yoga today. The yoga 'signifier' (the sound) was ancient but the 'signified' of yoga (the mental thought, the meaning) and the referent (the practice) were dramatic new hybrids.*

## **1. The yoga discourse of Orientalism and the Bhadraloks**

### **Orientalism and its yoga discourse**

As India in 1857 became a formal part of the British Empire, it also felt the full impact of the unfolding of *modernity* (Wikipedia link ) taking place in the West. Once more, the sociological and political matrix of India underwent significant changes. Out of this new matrix evolved new institutions and with the new institutions evolved new discourses and cultural fields . A significant new yoga discourse evolved which I have named modernist colonial yoga.

To understand the conditions of modernist colonial yoga, we need to look at the Europeans who brought with them modernity and Christianity. The institutions they brought

with them would heavily influence the yoga discourse. The Europeans representing those institutions were initially very critical towards Indian culture. From the 16 century, Christian missionaries arriving in India – especially the Jesuits – started to write critically about the ‘heathenism, paganism and superstition’ of the subcontinent. The Hindus – labelled ‘idolaters’ - were blamed for not believing in the Christian god. Soon others followed up with contemptuous criticism and it was agreed that India represented stagnation and backwardness and actually benefitted from enlightened European rule. But slowly there emerged Europeans who amidst all the criticism began to advocate what they thought was the ‘ancient wisdom of India’.

From about 1750 – as the Mughal Empire crumbled and European colonial powers rooted themselves in India - a huge project was commenced by Europeans to translate the ancient scriptures of India and to identify their historical sources. For the British, this knowledge was important in order to control the Indian colony (early translations were therefore about Hindu law) (van der Veer 2001). For the French, it became a part of the Enlightenment’s combat with *L’Ancien Régime* (Clarke 1997). For the Germans, Indian religio-philosophy became a crucial part of romanticist discourse and national identity building (Herling 2006, Watson 2010). Chairs of Sanskrit and Indian studies were established at major European universities – the first in Bonn in 1818. Some of the pioneers translating ancient Sanskrit texts were people like William Jones, Thomas Colebrooke and Max Mueller, the *Orientalists*.

Between the lines of their writings and translations one can often see that many of the Orientalists shared an admiration of what they understood (or constructed) as the ‘different and mystical orient’.<sup>80</sup> They often contrasted the Eastern with the Western identity: we were rational, materialistic and male and they were mystical, idealist and female. Some Orientalists thought that the ‘Hindu culture’ possessed something that we needed in the materialistic west: ‘spirituality’. Some Orientalists were part of Western cultural currents of *Romanticism* ([Wikipedia link](#)) or were critical of institutional Christianity, and were looking for what they termed ‘Natural Religion’ (a common denominator of all religions).

We can see today in their writings that they often projected Western understanding onto translations of Sanskrit words – like ‘*brahman*’ often became similar to a Western notion of ‘god’. However, it is mainly through their lenses (their construction) that we today experience Indian historical culture and yoga. Even today, many contemporary scholars of Hinduism and yoga share the Orientalists’ positive evaluation of Indian culture and also share their nostalgic spiritual-political agendas (McCutcheon 1997 & 2003).

The Orientalist discourse – initiated by European intellectuals - was the first to apply recently developed source-critical methodologies to the historical sources of Indian culture. Before that the Indian yoga discourse was mainly internal commentary and textual redaction (if we exclude Persian and Muslim writings) adapting yoga to new religious-political realities. For the first time the written discourse on India received a Western style documented history. Until then, a substantial part of its cultural heritage had been orally transmitted. The *Vedas* for instance were kept alive by minor Brahmin clans in a mixture of oral and written teaching. First in 1876 with the Orientalist Max Mueller’s ([Wikipedia link](#)) translation, the world – including India! – came to read the entire *Rig Veda*. Soon increasing numbers of Indian

intellectuals became engaged and involved in this global communication circuit.

The works of the Orientalists – discovering, translating, historical dating, classifying and explaining historical sources - are not only one of today's main historical sources for Indian culture, but also became a main source for the understanding of Indian religious history among the Indian colonial middle classes. The Orientalist discourse was the initial driver in constructing notions like ‘Hindu religion’, ‘Classical yoga’ and ‘Tantrism’ (Viswanathan 2005, Sweetman 2003, Urban 2003).



*Max Mueller*

The yoga sign which the Orientalists in the 19 century excavated and constructed from ancient scriptures was a high caste or high culture yoga, an *elite yoga* abstracted from texts mainly created and controlled by a single caste – the [Brahmins](#). In this way the Orientalists unconsciously reinvigorated Brahmin ideology. The Brahmin texts, their concepts, practices and identities were given a central place in Indian history, because this was of course where Brahmin discourse situated itself. Brahmin notions became mixed with the European – often Protestant based – imagination. Hence in the Orientalist discourse, the yogi identity became the holy monk we know today: a loving pious sage, deeply spiritual and concerned with peace within and in the world. Gandhi would become a vivid example.

As discussed earlier, most of the Indian colonial elite (and most modern popularisers of yoga) received their understanding of yoga directly or indirectly from the works of the Orientalists (Brekke 2002, Killingly 2005, Singleton 2008). Without the Orientalists, the revival and resurgence of “Hindu” culture among the colonial Indian middle classes would hardly have been possible in the form it actually took.

The Orientalists and neo-Hindu nationalists initiated a process of constructing the ‘ancient Hindu culture’ as a continuous tradition based on rational philosophy comparable to Western Greek philosophy and Western science. It was within this project that the extinct *Yoga Sutra* of Patanjali (400 AD) was revived, translated and imagined as a snapshot of an unbroken [‘classical yoga tradition’](#) dating back to the dawn of time.

The Orientalists should therefore not be classified, as they often are, as ‘scientific outsiders to the yoga tradition’, but actually as a crucial ‘internal’ part of the yoga discourse. The Orientalists – a stratum of humanist and religious intellectuals mainly based in emerging academic institutions and universities - became the main carriers of the yoga discourse. They

were the yoga interactors of modernity who came to dominate and redefine the cultural field of yoga. They revived and transformed an almost extinct discourse.. Their contribution was to charge the yoga sign with fresh symbolic powers giving rise to a radically different yoga signified. They gave birth to a hybrid *modernist yoga sign*, which drew much of its symbolic meaning from Romanticism, Protestantism, esotericism and rational scientism. The Orientalists were the fathers of modernist Indian colonial and Western yoga cultures

The Orientalists represented a type of yoga interactors who – like many pre-modern Indian intellectuals – had primarily an intellectual, cerebral and religious-political relation to the yoga sign. For them yoga did not signify a lifestyle which defined your life and self-identity. However some of their enchanted audience in the cultural elites in East and West got much more involved. These yoga sympathisers often enthusiastically took up the yoga practice and discourse and seamlessly wove them into their respective colonial and Western cultural hybrid practices. Here the yoga signified began to refer to signs in emerging Western spiritual cultural practices and Indian colonial politics. Slowly the new yoga sign even reached into peoples' lifestyles and self-identities.

### **Modernist yoga - re-constructing the yoga discourse**

Even if Orientalist researchers like Max Mueller claimed that they were scientists (often *philologists* – “the combination of literary studies, history and linguistics”), they did not describe yoga itself as a science<sup>81</sup>. Rather, they stood in a humanist tradition of performing historical investigations of religio-cultural issues. In other words they investigated the *historical, philosophical, metaphysical* aspects of yoga in what they conceived was a scientific manner – trying to analyse, understand and give meaning to the West.

Based on their intellectual *habitus* they were occupied by the past as represented in ‘holy’ (!) scriptures, but gave readers very little insight into yoga’s actual situation in India. They were occupied by issues such as: what is mind, what are the limits of consciousness, how can we transcend consciousness? They were preoccupied with yoga as rational philosophical system and ignored yoga as ritual, as exorcism, as caste purification, politics, chanting, demon management and alchemy. Especially yoga signified as a ‘meditative system’ held their interest. Accomplishing this, they constructed yoga as a ‘timeless mystical system’ enabling us to ‘transcend the self/ego’ and our human condition (making us into something extra-human). They would tell us that this ‘mystical yoga’ cannot be understood – it can only be experienced. Yoga for them became an a-historical event, a phenomenon not anchored in society, but free floating above it, transcending culture and time. A symbol charged and associated with religious imagination and symbols – for instance ‘the sacral’.

This hybrid Orientalist yoga discourse de-contextualised ideas and practices and re-contextualised them in a modernist ecosystem of signs. The yoga sign received new meaning and was linked to issues occupying discourses of modernity.<sup>82</sup> Today, more than a century later, most contemporary yoga discourse among scholars and popularisers still - implicitly or explicitly - shares this conceptual platform when talking about yoga. It has become a significant part of the habitus of modernist yoga.

In many ways this construction of a coherent, timeless and mystical system was inadvertently a repetition of the way the orthodox Brahmin caste constructed yoga and the overall Vedic cultural heritage: as a continuous orthodox system kept alive by a ruling caste. Based on a Brahmin textual tradition, Orientalists and the later colonial Hindu reformers ignored India's myriad of popular religions, mainly based on oral traditions, which were about spirit worship, ecstatic rituals (sometimes even sexual), worship of stones and other natural objects, relentless devotion to gods, euphoric festivals and exorcism. They often explained such things as the 'sad degeneration of India's former noble religions'. They further ignored the millions of rural *jogis* and *fakirs*, the naked warrior ascetics, the rural surplus population whose yoga was about supernatural powers. In summary the Orientalists constructed Hinduism and yoga as orthodox, textual based systems, ignoring popular aspects they did not like.

So the Orientalists and Hindu reformers, by relying on Brahmin scriptures, replicated Brahmin orthodox discourse and unwittingly reproduced their orthodox ideology. It was an ideology making the Brahmins into custodians of truth ingrained in old texts which only they understood and which embodied their caste power.

### **Colonial middle class, Evangelicalism and Hinduism**

A decisive driver in creating the modernist colonial yoga culture as we know it today was the new Indian town-based middle classes – the *bhadraloks* ([Wikipedia link](#)). They arose as an integral part of the modern British state and its accompanying modernist institutions. They became an important part of British rule that the Indian colonial middle class working for or with the colonial state was educated in Western culture, law and sciences. From about 1850 a system of universities and colleges was in place in India.<sup>83</sup> Many students became doctors, administrators, chemists, engineers, professors and lawyers. They came to represent a kind of modernist *hybrid* class of overlapping global and local cultures and processes. They came to represent a hybrid habitus shaping the yoga sign in new revolutionary ways. Hence the *bhadraloks* experienced and read the world through combined global and local eyes. Within this new middle class arose political ideas about reforming both Indian culture and society, which they like many Europeans also saw as degenerate. The first Westernised Hindu reformers emerged in the early 19 century with names like Ram Mohan Roy and Debendranath Tagore.

This Hindu reform movement - representing modernist hybridisation - has been studied by the Dutch professor P. van Veer in his *Imperial Encounters* (2001).<sup>84</sup> Their discourse arose as a reaction against Evangelical missionaries who were allowed to proselytise in India after 1813. *Evangelicalism* ([Wikipedia link](#)) aimed in the UK to spread middle class piety and combine religious feelings with rationality. Their target for reform was the working class. From around 1800 Evangelicalism turned missionary and saw it as a Christian duty to 'save heathen souls'. The Evangelicals invented modern institutions to implement social and moral reform programmes in UK. Later on these institutions were exported to India. Beginning with education (Sunday schools, missionary schools) and hospitals and later on employing military discipline (Salvation Army in 1880) and leisure activities (sports, YMCA in 1840, boy scouts

in 1900) they wanted to build up a moral Christian character: healthy, sporty, honourable, playing fair and guided by conscience. In India they targeted the bhadraloks with little success.

However the *bhadraloks* reacted to this Christian barrage by building similar modernist institutions, but based on ‘Hindu’ religion, according to van Veer. Yet there was nothing like a ‘Hindu religion’ so they first needed to construct it. Inspired by the Orientalists’ newly published translations and compilations, the Indian middle classes started to read old Indian scriptures with modernist rational eyes. For this they did not need guidance from any guru – they used their own modernist individual and independent judgment. Many now wanted to rationalise ‘Hinduism’ and cut away ‘superstition, ritual magic and mysticism’ from their cultural past, exactly in the same way as modernist Protestantism had changed the Christian religion (Brekke 2002). Inspired by the Orientalist modernist discourse the *bhadraloks* started to talk about their ‘Hindu spirituality’ as opposed to ‘Western materialism’. This reconstruction was hence made following typical modernist strategies: elevating individuality over tradition and deleting the irrational. (McMahan 2008). As discussed, the mind-set of the bhadraloks – their habitus - was like their discourse: a modernist hybrid.

In this way Mohan Roy founded the society *Brahmo Samaj* ([Wikipedia link](#)) in 1828. He wanted to form a ‘natural religion’ by combining elements of Christianity and Hinduism. The religious leader Dayananda Saraswati founded in 1875. - inspired by European racism - *Arya Samaj* (Society of Aryans) ([Wikipedia link](#)). He perceived present Hinduism as ‘degenerate’ and wanted to go back to the Aryan *Vedas*, identify their scientific and rational core and then build a new Aryan Hindu religion.<sup>85</sup>

Many of these middle class formed social reform movements began to built up modern institutions parallel to those of the Evangelicals. The Indian masses were targeted through the modern institutions of schools, hospitals, sport clubs and so on. By combining education, sport and spirituality the reformers wanted in the best European style to create a new ‘Hindu character’: sporty, healthy and Hindu morally conscientious, says van der Veer.

This middle class bhadralok habitus of protestant reform conditioned and framed the emergence of India’s colonial modernist yoga at the end of the 19 Century. Increasingly the modernist yoga sign was involved in defining lifestyles and self-identities.

### Hindu tradition and nationalism

As the ideology of nation building swept over Europe in the 19 century, so it also emerged in colonial India among the metropolitan middle class. In Europe, nation building was grouped around perceived identities like language similarities, shared religion, common culture and history (i.e. German *Volk*) ([Wikipedia link](#)), ideas of race. India - like Europe - was a cultural, religious and politically diverse geographical area. How could one construct national identity out of India’s multiplicity? Again, the Evangelical missionary activity of the early 19 century was the catalyst. The Indian middle class reacted to this perceived Christian threat by adopting the Orientalists notion of ‘Hinduism’, says van der Veer - Hindu-ness as the foundation for the nation! This became the ideology called ‘Hindu nationalism’ ([Wikipedia](#)

[link](#)).

Hindu nationalism wanted independence and to build a Hindu nation.<sup>86</sup> Inspired by European 19 century nation building, Indian elites thought that by constructing their present culture as having direct historical roots in ancient culture – even older than European culture – they could build up a national identity. Again the discovery, compilation and translation of the written past became important. The Orientalists once more entered centre stage. Onto the newly discovered scriptural past was projected a long on-going cultural *continuity* - a tradition - starting with the *Vedas*: no conflicts, no diversity, no sectarianism, no discontinuity. Modern India was – paradoxically enough - claimed to be a direct descendent of this past which just needed to be re-discovered - a cultural archaeological project excavating the national Hindu identity. To build a nation, one first had to construct a Hindu. To construct a Hindu religio-social identity, one needed a written Hindu history of continuity and tradition.<sup>87</sup>

This Aryan, rational, scientific Hindu past had “sadly” degenerated under foreign dominance, but it could luckily be re-generated. The construction of this Hindu history allowed bhadraloks to maintain that they were inheritors of an ancient spiritual tradition much more sophisticated (i.e. spiritual) and older than the Western. The myth of a continuous Hindu history since the *Vedas* was in place - supporting strong national-political interests.<sup>88</sup> This myth entered the yoga discourse.

With Hindu nationalism, the new middleclass wanted to build up morally and to politically reform the Indian masses (as they saw them with Western eyes as uneducated and backward). They wanted to make the masses ‘healthy and disciplined’ through ‘Hindu spirituality’ enabling the masses to build up the poor ‘backward’ Indian society. In summary it is with this social and political agenda – loaded with global modernist signs - that late Indian modernist colonial yoga was re-constructed.

### The yoga-science discourse

India’s colonial elites constructed Hinduism and yoga as unbroken trans-historical traditions originating in the *Vedas* ([Wikipedia link](#)) . Further this ‘timeless Hindu culture’ including yoga was now expressed in straight, modern, scientific and non-mystical terms. The bhadraloks in best modernist style tried to eradicate all mysticism from their re-discovered history (Brekke 2002), to erase the mystical veneer added on to Hindu culture, and to uncover the rational and scientific core of their ancient Hindu tradition. It is from such circles that we begin to hear about *yoga as a science!* Yoga signified in this new construction the ‘science of the mind’ – an *Indian* science that the West did not yet have, a super science going where Western science could not go.

Out of this modern scientific interest grew two related discourses of colonial yoga – (1) the *spiritual scientific yoga* of Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo and (2) the *medical/therapeutic scientific yoga* of Swami Kuvalayananda and Sri Yogendra. When these people explained yoga (or the *Vedas* and Vedanta scriptures) they would use Western scientific signs. So it was this new Indian colonial middle class who constructed the discourse of yoga as a science, which still is adhered to by many contemporary yoga popularisers. It was

claimed that as there was a ‘science of physics and nature’ there was also – and had been for thousands of years in *India* (!) - a ‘science of the mind, body and self’: the yoga phenomenology!

The same representation in scientific-rationalistic terms happened for instance to Buddhism as it entered the West (McMahan (2008). Both yoga and Buddhism were from now on seen to precede and surpass Western science. Their ideas and practices – habitually receiving meaning from traditional religious and political ecosystems – were now introduced and used in a modernist context. Relieved from superstition, priests, demons, rites and ceremonies, they were now directed to issues related to modernity. They became a ‘science of the mind’ and entered the sign universe, themes and notions of especially romanticism, psychoanalysis and psychology. They became a part of tests, laboratories, experiments, and measuring. They became involved in modernist notions of ‘creativity, unconsciousness, therapy, spontaneity, stress, and self-realisation’.

They were seen as scientific tools helping us to overcome our modern ‘spiritual alienation’ and enable us to ‘reach and find peace in our inner nature’. This rhetoric became part of a the global yoga habitus and is today a central part of popular yoga cultures.

### **The conflation of the *jogi* with *hatha-yoga***

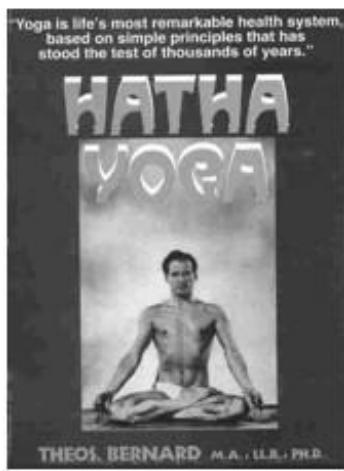
These new Indian middle classes, who now dominated the yoga cultural field did however not agree on the status of the stepchild *hatha-yoga*. The more spiritually oriented of them would, like many others, tend to connect *hatha-yoga* with the detested *jogi* (Albanese 2007). At that time the *jogi* frequently seemed to be identified with the *hatha yogi*. Most educated people saw the *jogi* as an impostor, whose main interest was not honourable spiritual liberation but egoistic eternal life and supernatural powers. As they did not approve of the *jogi* identity they deemed *hatha-yoga* unworthy of pursuit. It was too worldly, too closely linked with superstition, with supernatural powers and with the vanity of the body. This deprecatory view of *hatha-yoga* and its conflation with the *jogi* identity tended to dominate the public yoga discourse until 1920.

But through the Western discourse of *physical culture* (called ‘fitness’ to day), *hatha-yoga* slowly became revived in India. The Western discourse of physical culture’s preoccupation with modern signs like ‘health, hygiene, diet and the maintenance of the body’ found resonance in India for instance among bodybuilders striving for the perfection of body, mind and soul. They thought that these ambitions were similar to the goals of one of their own ancient cultures: *hatha-yoga*. Hence, in the 1920s India within the medical/therapeutic scientific yoga discourse and strong nationalism, *hatha-yoga* was totally rehabilitated. The *hatha-yoga* techniques seemed again to make sense. Now it was *hatha-yoga*’s turn to become overlapped and woven together with global modernist signs – a *hybrid hatha-yoga*.

The *hatha-yoga* re-constructed in these years within the habitus of science and physical culture had very little to do with the ancient texts. Initially *hatha-yoga* was an independent path of liberation and a life style of its own. But in the late 19 century the Medieval *hatha-yoga* was a dying species. It is a question whether what remained of it had much to do with

earlier forms. Around 1900 only very few Sadhus practised a *hatha-yoga* life style and there are very few indications that the often antinomian *hatha-yoga* techniques were practised by urban elites<sup>89</sup>.

So, what did the remnants of *hatha-yoga* actually look like at this point? From the few sources around 1900 we can see that what remained of the *hatha-yoga* liberation practice was still – like the ancient texts - strongly based on *pranayama*, visualisation and *mudras*.<sup>90</sup> So even then, *hatha-yoga* was not an *asana* dominated yoga. G. W. Briggs' book from 1938 *Gorakhnath and the Kanphata Yogi* studied the life of the Nath- and Kanphata yogis. In his book Briggs hardly mentions *asana*. *Hatha-yoga* is among the Kanphata yogis mainly about *pranayama* practices. This corresponds with Muslim and European accounts from the previous centuries.



Furthermore the American *Theos Bernard* ([Wikipedia link](#)) travelled in India in the 1930s to study and experience *hatha-yoga*. The practice he claimed to have learned had nothing to do with the *hatha-yoga* we practise today<sup>91</sup>. Bernard described how he was instructed in the *asana* known from the Medieval *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*. One by one he learned to master each *asana* until he could keep it for hours. These *asanas* were used as thresholds for building up his discipline and strength. First when he mastered one, he would move to the next *asana*. The purpose was to purify body, harden/ discipline/ strengthen body and mind – all done in combination with *shatkarma* techniques (cleansing). First when Bernard was seen to be ready by his teacher, he was moved into serious *pranayama* exercises. This was the core of the teachings. Here the ultimate release and goal was to hold the breath for an hour or so (Bernard 1939 & 1950).

Of course it is highly questionable whether the *hatha-yoga* Bernard was taught was a direct descendant of the old teachings. Much of the training we know he did receive was from the new middle class Indians – for instance Sri Yogendra – who were Western educated and who framed *hatha-yoga* in a modernist discourse of healthy body and science (Albanese 2007). However, in his defence we should say that Bernard demonstrated a teaching which seems much more in line with Medieval *hatha-yoga* as seen in the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* than the hybrid *hatha-yoga*, which was re-constructed in India in the 1920s within discourses of science and physical culture. I will return to this shortly.

## 2. The yoga popularisers of modernist colonial India

### The emergence of popular yoga and yoga popularisers

Around 1900 there were significant indications of change in the personal motives underlying the yoga field of modernity. A critical threshold has been reached. Let us summarise the process so far.

Increasingly through the 19 Century Indian cultural and religious practices merged with Protestant discourses of spirituality, esotericism and Transcendentalism. It was a global *interactive habitus*, because these Western Protestant discourses also on their side turned to India's religious cultures to find inspiration for their own agendas. In fact many in both East and West explicitly wanted to construct new religions – now called *spirituality* - on the ruins of what was believed to be 'old and dying religious institutions, rituals and beliefs'.

Within this context we have also seen that until now it was the intellectuals and the high cultural elite who had mainly conducted the yoga discourse. But slowly the underlying social drivers and sentiments were changing. Globally the middle classes were increasingly re-orientating, re-constructing and re-guiding their values, beliefs, and activities in light of the uprooting and fragmenting forces of modernity. Thus globally – not only in India – new social interactors under modernity turned to yoga culture (among other things) and made it an integral part of their struggle with their modern religious [habitus](#) and life situation. Hence for many, to become involved in yoga culture around the turn of the century was therefore not a question of converting to a new religion, but part of an emerging feature of modernity: the process of *individualisation*, where the individual selects and compiles a personal lifestyle and belief system according to subjective sentiments . A part of creating a meaningful life and self-identity within modernity (Giddens 1991)

In India the colonial situation added fuel to this process. So here the yoga sign – as we will investigate soon - became increasingly involved in the specific local life situations, institutions, politics and cultures of late colonial India and its middle classes. The yoga sign became a part of local religious and cultural practices forming and giving meaning to peoples' lifestyles, habits and self-identities. It spread from the global institutions and books of the elites and moved into the local daily life and institutions of the middle classes and the masses. It became a highly visible cultural practice. In India - propelled by the colonial situation - yoga quickly became a part of what is often (with elitist contempt) termed 'mass' or 'popular' culture.

However we have also seen that the yoga sign which in 1900 moved out into society was

an entirely different species. Mainly - and increasingly - it got its meaning from modernist habitus, signs, themes and conflicts. The irony was that it presented itself as the opposite: an exact clone of ancient yoga forms.

The yoga sign was now more and more getting signification from '*popular culture*'! If we instead use terms from the *Anthropology of Religion* ([Wikipedia link](#)) , we could say that the hybrid yoga culture was moving from 'elite religion' (of the [Great Tradition](#)) to 'folk religion' (of the [Little Tradition](#)). 'Elite religion' is rather stiff and conservative while 'folk religion' is fluid and plastic - which is exactly what came to pass with modernist yoga. A new cultural field of yoga was evolving with new interactor and institutions.

I will designate this shift in the sentiments and dynamics underlying yoga culture as '*popular yoga*'. From this point the popular aspect becomes central to yoga's future evolution. This move came to have seismic consequences for the content and signification of the yoga culture. It started up a process of accelerating change and mutation which came to characterise modernist yoga globally. Pandora's box was now open and the wind of change gathered force.

Those who came to shape and dominate the modernist popular yoga field of modernism, I call the '*yoga popularisers*'. They are individuals who already have adopted yoga in their lives and now for various reasons want to spread the passionate message. These enthusiastic popularisers train, teach and inform the public about the merits of taking yoga into their life. They became in some way *yoga missionaries* – sometimes maybe better described as *yoga sales- and business people*. They brought new energies and sentiments to the yoga culture charging it with signs and signification from popular culture. With them emerged a new cultural yoga field of professional specialist configured by anonymous market forces. However they were not alone in this process. There was a co-player.

The co-player was the *yoga sympathiser* – the amateur practitioner. They represented the demand side of the market. They became the elite or mass, East or West who during the following century attend the classes, listen to the lectures, followed the instructional manuals, browsed the blogs and watched the DVDs of the *yoga popularisers*. As the '*yoga sympathisers*' became a mass phenomenon, they also became a force. Increasingly through the 20 Century the modern *yoga sympathiser* became defined by corporate capitalism and consumer culture. Through the market the demands of the *yoga sympathisers* would become a significant factor in shaping the modernist yoga sign. The two together – the *popularisers* and the *sympathisers*: the new main *interactors* of modernist yoga.

With *popular yoga* there was a new twist to the cultural field of yoga. A new type of professional specialist emerged who traded his hybrid yoga know-how – his cultural capital – in a huge, general and anonymous market. This was very different from his predecessors who had transacted locally, mainly with the ruling elites and the indigenous populations of pre-modern India. As the nascent *yoga entrepreneur* was selling in a different market, he adopted the methods and channels used in a capitalist market. This often made him look and act more like a professional and a Western intellectual than an Indian guru.

We will now identify and follow some of the most influential *yoga popularisers* in late colonial India. As we move forward in this account, we will follow their discourse as it leaves its initial cultural elite milieu and spreads out into the middle classes in general.

## 1. Spiritual scientific yoga



Vivekananda

We have discussed the emergence of the notion of framing yoga as applied science. In order to introduce one of the very influential yoga popularisers, let us look at an example of the yoga-as-science discourses. We will call it the ‘spiritual scientific yoga’ discourse. Another term for *spiritual scientific yoga* could be ‘neo-Vedantic meditative yoga’, as it was also based on Vedantic philosophical ideas. Now this version of Vedanta philosophy claimed that it was and always had been a science. Historically spiritual scientific yoga evolved in the late 19 century. It became an ideological cornerstone of middle class nationalism, but it quickly turned into a ‘worldwide religion’. It maintained that it represented a timeless system valid for all nations and races. But its originator – *Vivekananda* ([Wikipedia link](#)) - was no scientist; he was a religio-philosopher. And his project was religio-political – not scientific.

Inspired by Romanticism and *American Transcendentalism* ([Wikipedia link](#)) , Vivekananda explained/ constructed yoga as an ‘ancient super-science’, which could connect the practitioner to the ‘spiritual dimension of life’ - god. The basic idea was that by following different yoga practices, the inquirer could find the divine – the spiritual - within himself and be transformed into a kind of super-human. In this connection Sri Aurobindo even speculated that through yoga ‘humans would evolve’ (we clearly hear Darwin here) to a ‘new stage in the evolution of the human race’ - having achieved ‘super-human consciousness’.

Vivekananda propagated the meditative techniques of yoga (now named *raja-yoga*) plus some *pranayama* techniques as the tools for finding the spiritual within.<sup>92</sup> Despite the fact that he imported some Tantric and *hatha-yoga* ideas and concepts - like the crucial sign of the snake god Kundalini - he did not hold much with *hatha-yoga*. He rather saw Patanjali’s meditative yoga as the real yoga, while *hatha-yoga* at best was an inferior yoga form (Singleton 2010). This attitude was similar to those of the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (HYP) of Svatmarama. This late Medieval text displayed similar attitudes as it subordinated *hatha-yoga* in a meditative *raja-yoga* discourse. With Vivekananda it seems that Tantric and *hatha-yoga* concepts have no other purpose but to invigorate what was basically a Gnostic meditative discourse.

He became enormously influential in India. In 1893 he went to the USA and became popular, especially in esoteric circles who felt he delivered exactly what they needed:

*practical tools* for finding the spiritual divine. This modernist re-constructed spiritual scientific yoga – a mirror image of Western modernist protestant and romanticist discourse - had returned to the West. Westerners believed they were enlightened with original ancient wisdom, but the package was in large part a re-exported reflection of their own habitus of Western esotericism and Protestantism (Brekke 2002, de Michelis 2004).

The neo-Hindu-ideologists like Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo ([Wikipedia link](#)) reconstructed yoga as the Orientalists had done, defining it as an intellectual high culture tradition. But other Indian groups would turn it in a different direction of a populist system designed for fitness and approved by scientific medical research.

## 2. Medical/therapeutic scientific yoga

Around 1920 yoga experienced a Renaissance in India coinciding with the rise of an institutionalised Hindu movement like RSS (a paramilitary organisation founded in 1925) and Hindu Mahasabha (a Hindu nationalistic party founded in 1915). The whole previous century had prepared the ground for this yoga Renaissance, according to J. Alter (who teaches anthropology in the USA) in *Yoga in Modern India* (2004). There emerged a desire among town elites to build up the national Hindu character. The build up of this character was set in motion through modern institutions of schools, hospitals and sports. The Western gymnastic movement was adopted in India: military gymnastic discipline creates, as we all know, ‘character’!

It was within this context that old techniques like *asana* and *pranayama* were dusted off and became an *Indian* alternative to Western gymnastics. The process - see Singleton (2010) - had already commenced around 1900 when Western bodybuilding in particular was picked up by Indian urban middle classes. But with the rise and dominance of Hindu nationalism, the whole project took on more urgency. The conditions were now right to invite *hatha-yoga* into the light – but still leaving the actual and detested *jogi* out in the cold. It was now argued that *hatha-yoga* – earlier frowned upon – could with its body disciplines deliver a Hindu character.

This gave rise to new studies of the [3 central \*hatha-yoga\* texts](#) (HYP, *Gerandha-* and *Siva-samhita* – all three belonging to the Muslim era of India), which had recently – about 1900 - been publicised in modern translations. In line with the trends of the time, the efforts were now to de-mystify and disassociate *hatha-yoga* from the arcane and make it into a modern super-gymnastic, says Alter.

In this period, there emerged further writings describing *asanas*, maintaining that the writings themselves were authentic and belonged to an ancient yoga tradition. Actually, today we can see that they combined modern forms of gymnastics, physical training and hygiene with *asana*, *shatkarma* and *pranayama* techniques. This reveals that the texts were not as old as they pretended to be, according to Alter. However it was firmly believed that this mixed bag of techniques belonged to the ‘*hatha-yoga* tradition’. Ideologically the texts combined old techniques with modern exercise-forms maintaining that it was all rooted in a remote past. It was claimed that these ‘discovered’ *hatha-yoga asana* techniques were ideal for a modern

body exercise regimen. The old yoga ‘signifier’ had attached to itself a true new ‘signified’/signification.

### **Yoga in the white coat of science**

Newly founded schools surfaced based on the teaching of athletic and acrobatic yoga exercises – *asanas* as we know them today. In Bihar in 1917 the brother of the later famous Yogananda founded *Yogoda Satsanga Brahmacharya Vidyalaya* – a school for boys. In 1920 B.C.Gosh founded *Gosh's College of Physical Education* in Calcutta. Both schools taught 84 *asanas*, claimed to stand in ‘the old tradition of the 84 *asanas*’ often mentioned in the pre-modern *hatha-yoga* discourse. However, closer inspection shows that they had absolutely nothing to do with *hatha-yoga asana* as taught before 1900 (Bühnemann 2007). The 84 *asanas* were rather similar to exercises from Western callisthenics, as investigated by Singleton<sup>93</sup>.

As the *hatha-yoga* wheel had been set in motion again, it was now up to modern medical science to prove that these *Indian hatha-yoga* techniques worked, and that they could deliver a new social identity: a strong Hindu body with a moral and spiritual mind applicable to the masses. Much medical research was undertaken (continuing to the present day) investigating all kinds of physical and psychological aspects and benefits of practising these yoga techniques. This heralded the birth of the discourse of *medical / therapeutic scientific yoga* (not to be mixed with the spiritual branch of Vivekananda).

Alter claims that the two main pioneering figures - hardly known in the West today - were *Sri Yogendra* and *Swami Kuvalayananda*. Sri Yogendra (1897-1989) had a background in the physical culture movement, where he practised wrestling and gymnastics. He also graduated from university. Like Vivekananda, Sri Yogendra travelled in the US from 1919 to 1924. He also set up an organisation – *The Yoga Institute* ([Wikipedia link](#)) - to promote ‘a scientific yoga’, and worked closely with American scientists. Unlike Vivekananda, who dismissed *hatha-yoga*, Sri Yogendra promoted his hybrid *hatha-yoga* as ‘physical culture’, which had an effect of ‘physical sublimation’ (Albanese 2007). However, if one looks at his poses as seen in some of his publications – *Yoga Asana Simplified* (1928) and *Yoga Personal Hygiene* (1931) – it is evident (Singleton 2010) that these poses had their origin in J.P. Müller’s System of callisthenics. We see that by including *hatha-yoga signs* in a Western habitus of physical culture – combining physical and mental health and strength through body regiments – the scientifically oriented bhadralok of India like Sri Yogendra re-invented and re-instated *hatha-yoga*. Its signs now referred to modern habitus and signs from where they received new meanings. *Hybrid hatha-yoga* was constructed as a ‘powerful physical education’ giving ‘moral strength and access to mental powers’ – which was central to modernist discourses (Albanese (2007).

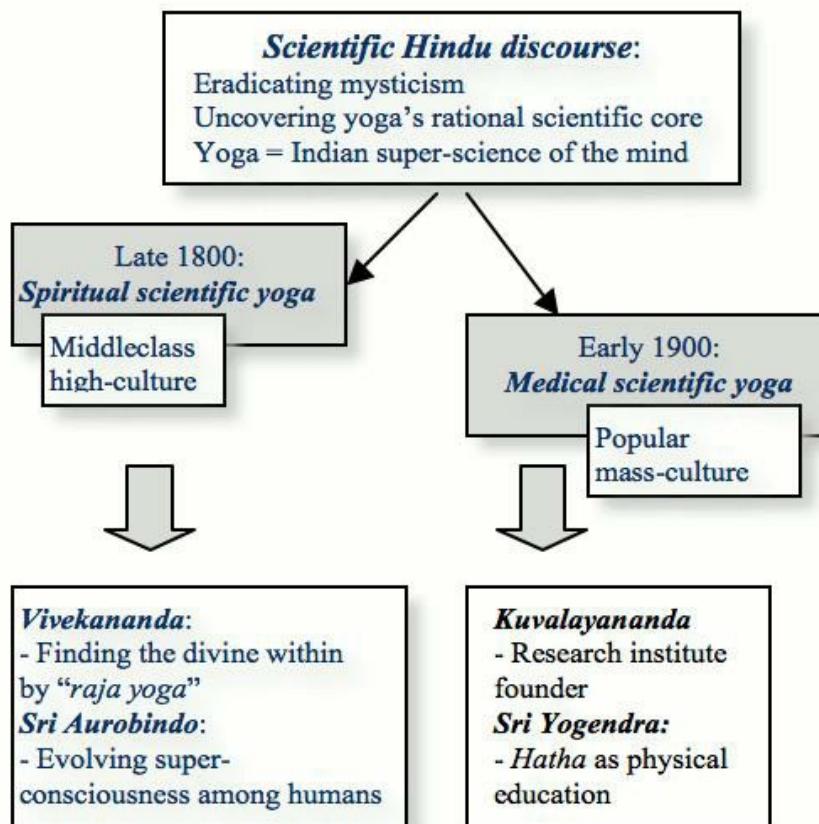
Kuvalayananda (1883-1966) – the second main figure - is mainly known for the foundation of his institute and laboratories and for not managing them in a loin-cloth of a yogi, but in the white coat of a scientific laboratory worker! He founded his own *ashram* or research institute named *Kaivalyadhama* ([Wikipedia link](#)), which worked closely with many Western researchers over time. In their journal *Yoga Mimasa*, they have since then regularly published

their research.

Kuvalayananda devised *hatha-yoga* series, some of which were almost direct copies of the Dane Niels Bukh's (1880-1950) *Primary gymnastics* (1925), according to Singleton (2010). These combined exercises of poses and interlinking movements show striking similarities to what today is known as '*ashtanga vinyasa*'. Hence it is no surprise that Singleton reports Kuvalayananda receiving a visit from Krishnamacharya, who would be later renowned as the father of Ashtanga yoga.

The research of *Sri Yogendra* and *Swami Kuvalayananda* research took two directions. In this way they commenced a modernist research programme now being conducted everywhere in the world. One direction was to measure the physical effects of yoga techniques. How could the activity of a body and brain be measured when doing *pranayama* or in a state of deep meditative *samadhi*? What chemicals, hormones, brainwaves and neurological impulses would define this? Could scientific measurements define what impact techniques had on body and mind? They took the body out of the Tantric discourse of *hatha-yoga*, where it was rendered divine and loaded with symbolic units like *chakras* and Kundalini. Instead they implanted the *hatha-yoga* body sign in a modern scientific discourse.

This sometimes led them into blind alleys and absurdities. For instance their research tried to *physically* locate and measure the Tantric *metaphysical* concepts of the subtle body (*prana*, *apana*, *chakra*, *nadis* etc.), a mistaken belief that metaphysical concepts can be measured and defined scientifically. It was the blunder, says Alter, of trying to measure what your discourse defines as *beyond* measurement – *meta-physical*! Or – we could say – the problems of a hybrid discourse bringing together notions from disparate sign systems.



## **Healthy Hindu lifestyle yoga discourse**

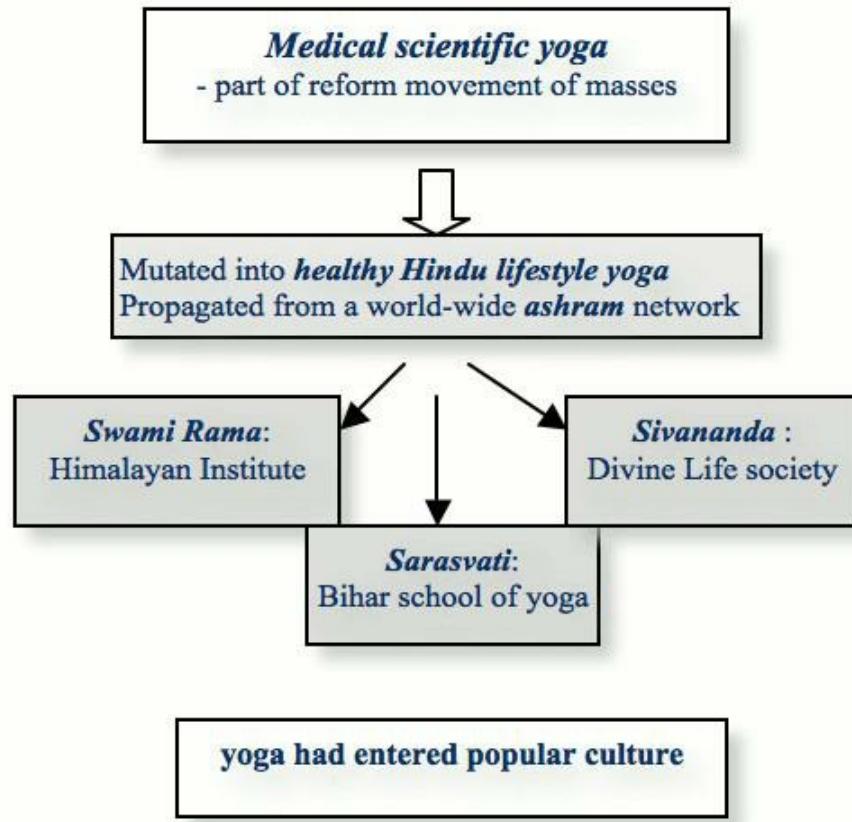
The medical/ therapeutic scientific yoga discourse became a cornerstone of the Indian reform movement of the masses. Modernist yoga practices had become a tool for health, curing all kind of diseases and problems and often prescribed by doctors. But this therapeutic and medical yoga discourse (based on science) was much more than that. It was a crucial part of the social and political reform efforts directed at the masses. It was about building the new national character, according to Alter.

To achieve this, physical fitness, exercises and mass drill became a common sight in Indian public parks and squares and in Westernised fitness institutions. As in the West - where the gymnastic movement started in the early 19 century (in Germany with L.F. Jahn's *Turn Verein*) – in India one was also aiming for a healthy mind in a healthy body. Military discipline became important. “Boot camp *asana* yoga” was underway! It was soon used by the Indian military and by militant Hindu nationalism – RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh).

Soon the medical/therapeutic scientific yoga discourse became involved in the wider discourse of Hindu lifestyle and spirituality. This gave raise to a new discourse of a ‘Hindu lifestyle’, based on health, a spiritual lifestyle – and yoga culture. This discourse - combining health with spirituality - once more emerged among the new colonial Indian middle class – reflecting their new life experiences. We see for instance this in the fact that one of the main contributors – Sivananda – was originally trained as a Western style doctor. Hence his concern with health, education and science – enveloped in spirituality.

Central to this cultural field of popular yoga became the establishment of ashrams – a kind of educational high school combined with executive propaganda offices. Students could enrol and be trained in a healthy Hindu lifestyle. Crucial to this lifestyle was to live a yogic life. Thus these ashrams turned yoga into an integral part of a healthy lifestyle founded on Hindu culture – as understood by Neo-Vedanta. Students were therefore encouraged to study Hindu classics (for instance the *Bhagavad-Gita*), eat only vegetarian food and follow ascetic moral values. Physical yoga practice alone was not enough – what was required was a neo-Vedantic spiritual Hindu lifestyle.

So this new Hindu healthy lifestyle yoga became linked to the old ashram institution. This institutional and well-organised environment became very successful in spreading yoga as a Hindu lifestyle. *Sivananda* formed his *Divine Life Society* ([Wikipedia link](#)) and started up numerous ashrams in India and later in the West. So did *Sarasvati* with his *The Bihar School of Yoga* ([Wikipedia link](#)) and similarly *Swami Rama* created his *Himalayan Institute of Yoga Science and Philosophy* ([Wikipedia link](#)).



The ashrams continued to construct yoga in neo-Vedantic style as science and did their own research on health and spiritual matters. They became influential centres publishing pamphlets, regular journals, self-help yoga manuals and specialised books of in-depth studies. Their founders all maintained that they had achieved *jivan-mukti* and were themselves taught by yogi masters representing the source. So even if these yoga ashrams were scientifically minded, they also claimed to have direct roots in the authentic tradition through the founders.

### Patanjali-yoga signifying physical exercises

This branch of colonial modernist Indian yoga field influenced the West on a large scale after WW2. With the healthy Hindu lifestyle-yoga propagated by a strong ashram organisation, yoga moved out of Indian nationalist circles and became part of a worldwide offering of a globalised healthy Hindu life style applicable for all nations and races.

So far the origin of three discourses of colonial modernist yoga has been accounted for: (1) *spiritual scientific yoga* (high culture), (2) *medical/therapeutic scientific yoga*. We then saw how from this second therapeutic and scientific discourse branched a third style: (3) *healthy Hindu lifestyle yoga* (the last two discourses both popular culture). It became this last sub-branch, which after WW2 became the first popular yoga style to be adopted by the Western mass audience. The organisational environment of the ashrams proved to be an effective export mechanism.

However there was a second sub-branch of medical/therapeutic scientific yoga discourse, which was much slower in becoming popular. It originated in the context of the *Mysore royal palace* ([Wikipedia link](#)). It toned down the Hindu culture aspect and stayed tuned to the

physical and gymnastic aspect of yoga practice. What would become the particular flavour of this sub-branch was its insistence on linking the new physical exercises ideologically not to *hatha-yoga* but rather to [\*Patanjali's Yoga Sutra\*](#) – a sixteen hundred year old text increasingly defined as the ‘bible of yoga’. While this Mysore style remained strongly in the tradition of celebrating the medical therapeutic value of *asana*, it also insisted on being an authentic form of Patanjali-yoga. Hence it claimed it could deliver ‘spiritual liberation’. While it was a conscious and deliberate sub-branch of modernist yoga, which clearly *introduced* and experimented with Western aerobic strenuous exercises, it still claimed to be solely rooted in ancient Indian practices (Singleton 2010). This strongly polarised situation - due to its strong hybridisation of modernity with alleged tradition - has plagued this sub-branch since then, and led its adherents to almost impossibly contradictory contentions and efforts. So I have given it the label ‘spiritual fitness yoga’ of Krishnamacharya.

### Spiritual fitness yoga

We have already heard about what J. Alter termed the *1920's yoga Renaissance* and about M. Singleton's descriptions of the penetration of the Western physical body culture of Indian middle classes. These discourses were strongly adopted by the Mysore palace. The palace took an active part in promoting national politics and the new discourses. It already had a long tradition of mixing Western and Indian exercise systems in order to train its soldiers and princes. In line with this, the yoga trained Brahmin Y.J. Krishnamacharya was employed in 1930 as instructor at the palace to train the Raja and the soldiers. In best modern reformation style, he was also employed to educate the public in the old *asana* techniques. The gym and the library – the new institutional framework of modernist yoga - were at his disposal.

While working at the palace, Krishnamacharya developed a huge range of poses and linking movements called *vinyasa*. He deliberately explored and experimented in order to develop new exercises, often tailored to the capabilities of the students whom he was instructing. In his later books he added a layer of Patanjali-yoga philosophy to give meaning to his *asana* practice. This of course gave the physical training a strong mystic and spiritual profile, pulling it away from being merely gymnastic exercises. But actually, he was signifying a modernised Indian physical exercise system with ancient liberation signs. It seems that the guiding idea was that extreme demanding poses focus the mind and move it through [three levels of meditations](#) : *dharana* and *dhyana* culminating in the liberating *samadhi*. What was promoted was a kind of physical meditation, which over time often became associated with the motto “the harder the better”.<sup>94</sup>

This is what I call ‘*spiritual fitness yoga*’; ‘Fitness’ because the exercises are much more strenuous, dynamic and demanding than most rather gentle yoga *asana* exercises, ‘Spiritual’ because this notion points to the modernist esoteric discourse that through physical exercises – that is the body – one can have ‘spiritual benefits’. What the word ‘spiritual’ actually means is up to the individual to interpret. As we see in Western Popular Yoga chapter such hybridisation and framing makes this style very compliant to the modernist Western mind-sets and sentiments (habitus).

It was this hybrid Mysore yoga discourse – heavily influenced by Western gymnastic, physical culture, modernity and the medical/therapeutic scientific yoga discourse – that in the late 20 Century became the main yoga style exported to the West. However, despite Krishnamacharya's ideological positioning of his exercises, this yoga clearly belonged to the medical/therapeutic scientific yoga discourse. When teaching the exercises, they were clearly praised for their therapeutic effects by Krishnamacharya (Singleton 2010).

*On the following pages we will recapitulate the main people and characteristics of the cultural field of Indian popular yoga.<sup>95</sup>*

### Krishnamacharya (1888-1989)

Learned as young 26 *asanas* in a temple  
7 years with guru  
Sri Ramamohan Brahmachari

**1930:** to Mysore as educator  
Taught in a firm military style  
Concept: Framing Mysore exercises  
in *Yoga Sutra* philosophy  
Claiming exercises were leading  
to the goals of Patanjali yoga



One of the main sources for postural yoga in the West is Y.J. Krishnamacharya (1888-1989) ([Wikipedia link](#)) and his spiritual fitness yoga. He had a good education in Sanskrit and he had extensive knowledge of Indian philosophy. The very young Krishnamacharya was initially taught 26 *asanas* by a swami at the temple *Sringeri Math* – the same place where Sivananda was taught *asana*. Later on he lived with a guru – Sri Ramamohan Brahmachari - for seven years studying *asana*, *pranayama* and the *Yoga Sutra* and the therapeutic aspects of the techniques. This guru-based training provided Krishnamacharya with an air of authenticity. Later on, based at the Mysore palace, Krishnamacharya actively promoted *asana* based yoga as a part of Patanjali-yoga. He was very skilled in performing *asana* and in training others. It seems that he mainly trained people belonging to the Indian elite, but some Westerners also became his students.

From students' reports and photos of youngsters lined up in military style, we understand that the training was conducted in the almost military disciplined style of the time. Students were taught to endure pain. Techniques used by wrestlers to build up more flexibility were employed. The poses were not just static poses but were contained in a series of strength exercises similar to western push-ups. The exercises were combined with special breathing techniques (*pranayama*) and muscle group contractions (*bandha*). Singleton (2010) shows how this combination of breath, movements and poses to a large extent derives from an

influential Danish vigorous gymnastic form developed by Niels Bukh in the first decades of the 20 century called *Primary Gymnastics*. As Singleton (2010) says:

“At least twenty-eight of these exercises in the first edition of Bukh’s manual are strikingly similar (often identical) to yoga postures occurring in Pattabhi Jois’s Ashtanga sequence or in Iyengar’s *Light on yoga* (1966)”. Bukh’s system was known for “emphasizing continuity of movement, rhythmic exercise, and intensive stretching to seek elasticity, flexibility, and freedom”, according to Singleton. This is also a fair description of *vinyasa* based yoga. Krishnamacharya probably got the exercises from a visit to Swami Kuvalayananda, who also taught the exercises of Bukh under the name *asana*.

It was daring to signify these vigorous gymnastic exercises as *asana* within Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra*. It was only in very few places where Patanjali in his ancient *Yoga Sutra* actually mentioned *asana*. In the *Yoga Sutra* *asana* were described as postures intended for long series of meditations and only played a marginal role. Now they were brought to the centre of practice. This was however a marketing stroke – a spin - of genius in respect of popularising yoga. The yoga student was no longer just becoming ‘healthy and disciplined’ but actually also ‘liberating’ himself! - a considerable change in the signification and power of *asana*.

It was Krishnamacharya’s ingenuity that led him to orientate these physical exercises to *Patanjali-yoga* and not *hatha-yoga* as customary in this period. Patanjali’s yoga was signified as a highly respectable, rational and still mystical ‘classical tradition’. Thus this linkage of Western exercises with Patanjali conveyed the exercises with more symbolic capital than linking them to *hatha-yoga*. However there was a wide conceptual gap to bridge.

Krishnamacharya’s invention accordingly created a theoretically stimulating intellectual challenge to his followers in explaining exactly how and why Samadhi and liberation could be achieved. Modern physical exercises now had to be signified by ancient meditation signs!<sup>96</sup>

Overall this Mysore style, which became further developed by Krishnamacharya’s students, was extremely focussed on *asana* and – unlike the healthy Hindu lifestyle yoga - left it to students’ own initiative to study “yoga philosophy”. It was primarily a gymnastic regime.

With Indian independence the Mysore palace came to an end and Krishnamacharya had to find a new way of life. Inspired by Swami Kuvalayananda and his scientific therapeutic yoga Krishnamacharya turned to training individuals to cure their individual physical problems.

### Iyengar and Indra Devi

It was Krishnamacharya’s students who brought his *asana*-centred yoga discourse to the West, as the West some years after the Second World War became ready to receive these teachings. Often young Westerners travelled to India to be taught mainly *asana*. This created one of the many new direct links between Western and Indian popular culture – both cultures becoming more and more obsessed with the body and its cultivation and discipline.

One of the first Western students was actually a woman from Latvia who took the name *Indra Devi* ([Wikipedia link](#)). Because of the Bolshevik revolution her bourgeois family had to flee to Berlin where she worked as a dancer and married a diplomat. She came to India, where she encountered the emerging *hatha-yoga* milieu. She was taught by a reluctant Krishnamacharya how to teach yoga and migrated in 1947 to the USA, where she taught

celebrities like Marilyn Monroe, Elizabeth Arden, Greta Garbo and Gloria Swanson *asana* based yoga.

Due to Devi's promotional talents, her skilful targeting of celebrities and stars, her framing of yoga as a no-nonsense instrument for health and beauty, she helped to drag yoga out of elitist spiritual circles and introduce it into the modern mass market (Syman 2010).

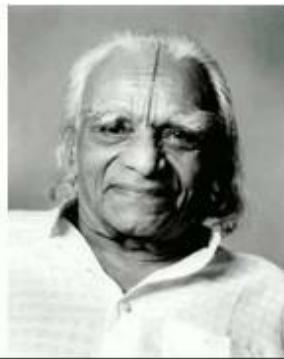
Devi – like the American [Pierre Bernard](#) – represents an early model of modern mass dispersion (using celebrities as role models and promoters plus the use of modern media), which in the 1990s took on its full form. You could say that she is the mother of modern postural yoga marketing, as we know it today: she framed it and via the media brought it to the masses.

**Indra Devi** – Latvian born  
Taught to teach by reluctant Krishnamacharya  
To USA in 1947  
1953: "**Forever Young, Forever healthy**"  
Taught celebrities:  
Marilyn Monroe, Greta Garbo, Gloria Swenson  
**Early dispersion model:**  
celebrities and modern mass media



The other main proponent of *asana*-based yoga in the West following Devi some ten years later was *BKS Iyengar* (1918-) ([Wikipedia link](#)) .<sup>97</sup> Unlike Devi he was an Indian and hence carried the guru mystique attached. He was a very skilled and perfectionist teacher adapting the demanding poses to the Western body and mind-set. He also had writing skills and wrote a series of influential books in which postural yoga was placed in a Patanjali-yoga and neo-Vedantic worldview. He was the right man to communicate with the West. He was promoted by the Indian elite, especially the world famous violinist Yehudi Menuhin. His association with such celebrities opened the doors to the wider world and enabled him to influence millions in India and the West.

In the early 1960s he wrote the book *Light on Yoga* which immediately became a best seller with almost biblical status for the modernist postural yoga discourse.



### BKS Iyengar

Perfectionist adapting poses to modern bodies  
Skilled writer – “*Light on yoga*” became a bible  
Promoted by Indian elite  
His style dominated West until 1990s  
Today Guru status and corporate manager  
of worldwide centres

Today Iyengar is treated as a guru by many of his students and he runs his Iyengar centres worldwide with the firm hand of *corporate identity*. In other words Iyengar also had the management skills to set up an international corporation, which Indira Devi never achieved. This was probably one of the decisive factors behind his success. His teaching style was extremely accurate, where every body part and every single muscle was aligned according to exact definition. There was a strong sense of military discipline in the poses – often one moved into the poses with gymnastic jumping jacks and froze like a soldier standing straight.<sup>98</sup> Iyengar developed a whole set of tools and techniques, enabling unfit students to approach the demanding poses slowly. Many of these techniques were lifted out of the wrestling tradition (Sjoman 1999).

Iyengar’s style of yoga came to dominate the West from the 1960s until the 1990s, when another student of Krishnamacharya entered the eye of the storm of popular fitness fashion.

### Jois and Desikashar

In recent years another student of Krishnamacharya has had enormous success in the West: *Pattabhi Jois* (1915-2009) ([Wikipedia link](#)). Unlike BKS Iyengar, Jois was no well-formulated theoretician. He only published a single book, which is best described as a dry instructional manual. Unlike Iyengar, Jois was no creative re-designer. He has instead systematised a very strenuous series of *asanas* and *vinyasas*<sup>99</sup> combined with special breathing techniques and body locks, all very similar to Krishnamacharya’s original style. This is a classical example of the student Jois making the teacher’s Krishnamacharya creativity into a comprehensive system.

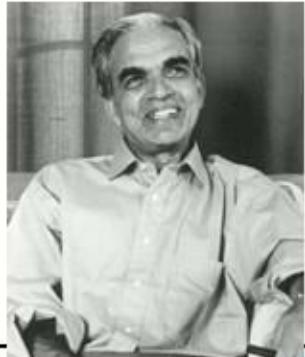
Jois called his system *ashtanga-yoga*, which was a smart spin, linking it directly to the *Yoga Sutra*. In that spirit, Jois also maintained that he and Krishnamacharya discovered the *ashtanga* series in old Sanskrit scriptures called *Yoga Kuruntha* – “sadly” enough those

scriptures have “disappeared” again.<sup>100</sup> But instead we have a nice myth.

Jois’ practice was extreme physically demanding and there was a hierarchy of series to strive after<sup>101</sup>. This is probably one of the reasons why it has recently become very popular in the present Western culture of achievement and body fitness. This style is now gaining more and more ground and is often known in a variant called *power yoga*. Students are encouraged not to think too much about the practice. Instead “*just practice!*” will bring the student to goals as defined by Patanjali. This has reduced the *Ashtanga-yoga* discourse to a rather weak theoretical creature: students are pushing on in the hope of one day suddenly being *there* - not knowing what “*there*” actually really means.

**Pattabi Jois**

Systematiser of his guru’s creativity – *ashtanga yoga*  
Vigorous and hierarchical practice fitting Western culture  
Spreading as *power yoga*



**YKV Desikachar**

Son of Krishnamacharya and creator of *Viniyoga*  
Therapeutic, gentle and individual yoga of K’s late years

Finally one of Krishnamacharya’s sons – *TKV Desikachar* – has been successful in the West with a gentle *asana* style adapted to the individual body (he maintains that this focus on individuality was also his father’s style). Desikachar reflects the therapeutic yoga of the late Krishnamacharya. His style of yoga is often known as *vini-yoga* – similar to Pilates in its synchronisation of breath and movement - and is often solely used for therapeutic reasons.

In general, it can be said of the practitioners of this Mysore discourse that they are very focussed and preoccupied with *asana* in a way reminiscent of modern gymnastics; that they are often theoretically weak on yoga doctrines (except Iyengar) and finally that they pack various body cultures into a meditative *Yoga Sutra* discourse, making it difficult for practitioners to make sense of their physical *asana* centred yoga. In the [Western Modernist Yoga chapter](#) we see how this discourse of yoga fitted perfectly into Western currents of cultural narcissism and New Age spiritualism.

Finally we will have a closer look at a modern Indian yoga discourse already mentioned

– Sivananda's healthy Hindu lifestyle yoga. His yoga style promoted by a corporate ashram network (signifying its “Hindu roots”) also influenced Western popular yoga from the 1960s, often reaching more marginalised groups. Today, however, this style has been overtaken in popularity by the Mysore style as the latter is more congruent with modernist popular sentiments.

## Sivananda

Another popular branch with a large impact in both India and the West was founded by *Sivananda Saraswati* (87-1963) ([Wikipedia link](#)). Originally a doctor he became according to legend a *jivan-mukti* in the late 1920s and settled in Rishikesh. In 1932 he established a yoga ashram which four years later became the *Divine Life Society* – a centre for development of ‘spiritual knowledge’. He was very influenced by Vivekananda, Neo-Vedanta, Sri Aurobindo and Swami Kuvalayananda scientific yoga (Strauss 2008). In the Sivananda discourse, *asanas* were not as intensively cultivated as in the Mysore tradition. They restricted themselves to 12 *asanas* plus sun-salutations and tried to integrate them into a yogi lifestyle – very similar to the [ashtanga module](#) (the eight-limbs of a yoga life) of Patanjali. Sivananda knew about Iyengar and called him the king of yoga; he was not as obsessed with the perfectioning of *asana* as was Iyengar. Sivananda organised his movement in ashrams and was very much the educator of Indian culture. In the ashrams many of the old scriptures and philosophies were studied. Sivananda's philosophy mixed together most of the Indian worldviews: Vedanta, Tantra, *Bhagavad-Gita* and yoga.

Sivananda clearly used the language of science, health and western physiology to explain the yoga practice in down-to-earth terms clearly inspired by the scientific therapeutic yoga discourse of Swami Kuvalayananda and Sri Yogendra. They also both founded their ashrams in the 1920s undertaking medical research and popularising yoga. However, Sivananda pulled in a slightly different direction, wishing to create and propagate his perception of a Hindu lifestyle.

**Sivananda** (1887-1963)  
 Scientist and trans-national missionary  
 1930's founder of ***Divine Life Society***  
**Ashram** – sites of education in “Hindu culture”  
 Influenced by Swami Kuvalayananda and  
 Sri Yogananda  
 Only 12 *asanas* – part of ***healthy yogi lifestyle***



Sivananda actually moved yoga out of narrow national goals and turned his organisation into an international or transnational missionary movement preaching universal peace based on individual physio-spiritual reform (Strauss 2008). He actively sent out the top people from his ranks as missionaries to the West to set up ashrams. In other words he was much more in line with Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo in promoting Hindu culture as a transnational salvation religion. At the heart of Sivananda's business corporation are the ashrams. The ashrams function today as colleges for students who pay fees in order to become yoga *asana* teachers. The students' main interest today is not the Hindu lifestyle, but mostly to get a certificate allowing them to conduct *asana* classes within public educational institutions. Students believe their style to be *hatha-yoga*. It is mainly marginalised Westerners who are interested in adopting the whole lifestyle of Sivananda.

A mutation of the Sivananda movement was the *Bihar School of Yoga* with very similar organisational structures, but better theoretically formulated, leaning towards Tantric views and practices. They also set up ashrams in the West. Its founder Sarasvati was himself a pupil of Sivananda.

Today Sivananda's organisation is powerful and influential in Indian national politics. It has become a strong promoter of Hindu national culture. It endorses the view that India's wise spiritual masters – the Sadhus and gurus – should have a strong voice in politics. These gurus - running not only the Sivananda organisation but many other similar sects - like to rub shoulders with politicians and successful business entrepreneurs (Rigopoulos 2005). In this way, they all gain increased status: the businessman or politician is perceived as a serene spiritual person and the guru is constructed as a powerful person, mixing equally even with the political-economical elites. Spirituality, politics and economy mutually re-enforce each other under the banner of building a Hindu nation.<sup>102</sup>

### **3. A yoga discourse rooted in the past or the present?**

#### **Modernity, the cultural field and its guru**

Colonial modernist yoga is a hybrid *modernist* yoga discourse in the socio-cultural sense of the word. Its roots are not *hatha-yoga* or the *Yoga Sutra*, but primarily physical culture discourses, British military training, wrestling, Orientalist writings, Romanticism, Hindu nationalism, modern science, ideas about character building and Protestant esotericism and so on. It is a true hybrid brought together by the colonial Indian middle classes.

This Colonial cultural conglomerate of course also contained cultural habitus *unique* to India, which I have not discussed much in this chapter. There is a lack of cultural sociological studies of India's cultural habitus around 1900. How much was left of unique Indian cultural and social habitus after first Muslim and the European rule? How much was left of for instance Brahmanism, rural Tantra and caste systems and how much had these habitus changed during centuries of foreign rule?

Nevertheless the advent of the British not only meant the arrival of a modern state, but also exposure to the global market and commodification. These processes reconfigured the cultural field of yoga and its professional specialists: a new breed of gurus emerged some of them inventing modernist colonial yoga. The gurus became involved in spiritual business – selling their yoga and spiritual products in different ways to their Indian and later Western clients (McKean 1996). Some of them became petty bourgeois business people, while others became international corporate managers (Iyengar, Sivananda, Maharaji, Bhagwan Rajnesh). Many of them found new ways of reaching the nascent burgeoning spiritual market: classes, ashrams, publications, self-help manuals, therapy, branding, world tours, and celebrity promotion - categories of a very modernist discourse indeed.

In the chapter on [Western modernist yoga](#) , I investigate how this process of commodification escalated dramatically in the West. We can see today that India's modernist yoga guru has become a businessman. His success is not so much dependent on his cultural capital (skills in yoga or spirituality), but is much more a reflection of his skills in marketing, communication skills and corporate management - like all other businessmen. The guru exchanges his symbolic capital for money: he bestows praises and blessings upon the donor; the status of the donor is elevated by the guru's divine symbolism (Mines 1989). The donations received are then re-invested, as any entrepreneur would do. Often they are channelled into social services for the local community, schools, hospitals and temples, which feed back to the guru, whose symbolic capital further swells (Rigopoulos 2005). In this cultural field the

ashrams are similarly competing for donations and status – the winner obtaining national recognition and celebrity. This in turn will attract more money and political power and so on.

However, many Western yoga sympathisers do not understand the changes enforced by modernity and commodification upon the guru. They do not see him as a professional within a cultural field. Instead they celebrate and treat their yoga guru according to the way these gurus construct themselves; as semi-divine beings standing in a line of direct guru transmission; as embodied tradition. My suggestion on the following pages is that we should rather listen to them as *modernists* than as *transmitters* of tradition.

### The myth that the guru embodies the cultural memory of yoga

After independence India's political and social agenda and priorities changed dramatically. Few new re-constructions of yoga have occurred since then – the underlying fuel for constructing a new Indian yoga discourse has temporarily disappeared.<sup>103</sup>

In this chapter, late colonial Indian modernist yoga discourse has – in opposition to how it presents itself - *not* been explained as abstract systems of ideas and practices growing out of a timeless pure tradition of faithful transference from guru to student. Rather colonial modernist yoga has been shown to grow out of India's political and social situation – its emerging institutions, habitus and cultural fields. We have seen how new concepts of colonial modernist yoga discourse were invented in a dialectical exchange (mutually influencing and defining) between East and West framed by the conflicts of late colonial India.<sup>104</sup>

I believe it is important for contemporary modern yoga popularisers and sympathisers to encounter such a critical re-construction of the cultural memory of yoga. This critique puts a question mark at the celebrated assertion in popular yogic discourse, that yoga DNA over generations was faithfully and precisely transferred from guru to student. The 'guru-student-cloning story' is not only a romantic fantasy but also an orthodox ideological myth used to create symbolic value, in this case *authority* and social difference. To explain this let us examine the student side of the relationship.

The colonial modernist guru maintained as an essential point that he was the heir to a guru tradition of transmission. However, listening closely to his rhetoric we also realise that he was highly fluent in Western modernist thought. Like Sivananda, Yogananda, Sri Yogendra and others he was often educated at Western style universities. Freud, Marx, Darwin and Einstein were always an intrinsic part of his knowledge and vocabulary. So we wonder how much remained of his ancient Indian habitus under such strong Western socialisation? Still the guru ignored this question and maintained that he and his mindset *directly* represented the past and denied that his was a hybrid identity.

However the early 20 Century guru was also once a student himself. As a student, when he met his guru, he was, as we have seen, already deeply influenced by Western science and culture (many were trained in universities) and hybrid colonial habitus. It was with that background of late *colonial ears and eyes* that the soon-to-be-popular-yoga-guru started to listen to his guru or started to study yoga scriptures. Even these old scriptures had been processed, translated, signified, categorised, adjusted and compiled by Orientalists and hence

were not as authentic as one would wish them to be. Anything the student could absorb from the cultural past would have to be filtered through his *modernist colonial sensibilities* – *his modernist hybrid habitus*.<sup>105</sup> Any modern observer would wonder how could such a transmission of knowledge be neutral? Of necessity, cultural memory is not cloned but *filtered*. This also applies to the soon-to-be-popular-yoga-guru's guru (“the granddad guru”): in the late 19 Century he was also a student and a soon-to-be-guru, who *digested and signified* the cultural memory he was taught through the sensibilities of his cultural background and horizon – his late 19 Century habitus. Not even gurus – despite their claims of uniqueness - can transcend language and habitus.

This situation was aggravated by the fact that the cultural memory of yoga of 19 Century India was almost non-existent. The cultural field of liberation was hard to find any more. The Buddhists were long forgotten. The Jains were reduced to local geographical pockets. The itinerant renouncers had been overtaken by a *Lumpen-proletariat*. The Vedantic Brahmins had retreated into mysticism, intellectualism and theological infights. The yoga discourse was almost unintelligible.

Thus the Colonial liberation discourse had to be started up almost from scratch. Many more or less dropped the liberation discourse and mainly signified old liberation signs with medical and health discourses. No one protested, as there were no institutions and specialists to guard the cultural memory of the field of liberation. Hence the hybrid yoga discourse constructed by the bhadraloks was a product of how their social group/class *understood yoga at that moment of time* and how their social group *would like yoga to be* (that is, as a tool for Hindu nationalism).<sup>106</sup> As they constructed *their* ‘yoga tradition’, they totally eradicated from their tradition the detested rural *jogi* and *fakir* – who were actually some of the few examples of real living *jogis*.<sup>107</sup>

In summary there is no such thing as an objective linear transfer of “discourse DNA” or cultural memory over generations especially not when a society is undergoing dramatic change. Every new generation will have new experiences and sensibilities – a habitus - with which they approach the past – which holds true whether that past is filed in books or in the mind of a guru. Any generation – also our gurus - will face a dialectic interpretative (hermeneutic) meeting between past and present – which in the Indian colonial case led to a paradigmatic fracture with the past and the raise of a hybrid: the colonial modernist yoga discourse.

### **Summary: Why Colonial modernist yoga? – the different answers**

So why did they practise yoga in late colonial India – what is ‘the signified’ of yoga? There is no single answer to this question. An implicit common denominator was the struggle to legitimise the specialists and the guru within the reconstructed yoga field as (1) knowledge experts (2) charged with symbolic significance. Due to the gravity of the habitus of modernity, it was about establishing the new field as embodying *knowledge*; to become recognised as valid producers of truth and certain skills.

Thus the cultural field of yoga contained several strata signifying yoga in various ways.

First of all there was the cultural elite stratum of “spiritual intellectuals” – almost a branch of Orientalism - informing and orientating their meditative yoga practices with Neo-Vedanta religio-philosophy interlaced with various discourses of modernity. Their explanations would simultaneously deploy signs like *samadhi*, *brahman* realisation and god union mixed with Western signs derived from Protestantism, psychology and Romanticism.

Vivekananda and Aurobindo – gurus or religio-philosophers? – both belonged to this stratum. They would for instance answer our “Why yoga?” question with the answer that they did yoga because it was a scientific way to reach ‘personal inner spirituality’ and thereby live a ‘divine life of love and tolerance’. The use-value of yoga was the accumulation of symbolic capital: the distinction of having achieved ‘god realisation’ – a ‘divine principle to be found within’. The cultural agenda was, among other things, to build up a ‘Hindu spiritual identity’ – a new self-identity superior to the Christian aggressor, an anti-Christian establishment policy.

Then there was the popular and physically oriented yoga stratum aiming at the body culture of new middle classes. What did its specialists offer with yoga? This stratum mainly aligned their new *asana* exercises with *hatha-yoga*.<sup>108</sup> Like the old *hatha-yoga*, this colonial *hatha-yoga* stratum attracted its modern colonial audience by primarily talking about the therapeutic and medical health benefits gained by practising. This was the main use-value. Tantric liberation signs were a nice symbolic add-on to this use-value: they gave body-oriented practices a halo of romantic mystique and authority. Here the guru’s promise would employ the rhetoric of mainly Tantric liberation discourses promising to deliver bliss consciousness, god union, *jivan-mukti*, *moksha*, *prana* and Kundalini experiences. All contributing to the symbolic capital of the guru.

This hybrid discourse of science, Tantra and physical culture (i.e. fitness culture) was then further wrapped in the rhetoric of Hindu nationalism. Hence the medical/therapeutic scientific yoga of Swami Kuvalayananda and Sri Yogendra would offer a body-oriented yoga to the Indian masses delivering a healthy spiritual Hindu character in a fit body. Once more yoga culture was engaged in the symbolic act of social- and self-identity building – the construction of spiritual lifestyles of modernity.

The transformative use-value for the individual was simultaneously palpably concrete and loftily otherworldly: *physical* transformations signified by *metaphysical* and psychological benefits. The pre-modern metaphysical goals – the signs of ‘yogic union’ - were often misunderstood or left in veils of mystery. However the *ultimate* social symbolic meaning of this yoga discourse was evident and clearly spelled out: proud nationalism, identity building (character) and reformism. This physical yoga was seen as superior to Western body regimens of health and fitness – a totem radiating national *self-reliance*.<sup>109</sup>

The sub-branch of Krishnamacharya and his students-to-become-gurus adhered to the same discourse. Their merits were to refine the gymnastic and physical aspects of practice. They elaborated on the precision, accuracy, refinement, rigour, standardisation and thoroughness which modernity typically brings to body practices. They chose to tie this regimen closely to what Orientalism had defined as ‘classical yoga’ . Accordingly – like the Orientalists - they also muted the Tantric aspects of this yoga discourse. So their yoga was not signified as a revival of Tantric *hatha-yoga*.

Instead these gurus found the origins of their yoga even further back in historical times. Their yoga practice was rooted in the ancient rational yoga philosophy of the *Yoga Sutra*. Out of this conceptual and ideological exercise the Mysore school managed to re-package vigorous calisthenics with Patanjali's *Samkhya* liberation discourse. The goal of the *Yoga Sutra* – the *kaivalya* of *purusha* - was promised as the ultimate fruits (use-value) of practice - whilst the students were taught very little about what these signs actually meant.

This ultimate goal – which by closer consideration turns out to be symbolic - was left open as a white screen upon which future sympathisers could freely project their romanticist fantasies. In this way the Mysore school had created a yoga totem ideal for global export and modernist fitness culture. In the end Krishnamacharya and his assistants had constructed a *gymnastic-spiritual identity*, an identity that would find resonance in the West.

### **And do not forget the Orientalists and the *jogis***

Colonial modernist yoga is more than the popular yoga field and its gurus summarised above. There are also two often forgotten strata belonging however to separate sub-fields of yoga. The colonial discourse was to a high degree influenced by the intellectual Orientalists. The Orientalists – functioning within state institutions - are normally seen as ‘outsiders’ of the yoga tradition, but this chapter has shown how they actually functioned in any respect as ‘insiders’. Their writings, initially consumed by a Western audience of esoterics, anti-Christians, romanticists and anti-modernity, soon became the cornerstone for the emerging colonial Indian yoga discourse.

Then there was the neglected rural and “dark” violent past, the *jogis*, [\*fakirs\*](#) , [\*Kanphata yogis\*](#) and alchemist [\*Nath jogis\*](#) or the [\*fighting warriors\*](#) and wrestling monks. This stratum seems to show real social *jogi* identities made of flesh and bone, rather than the two figures of the “holy meditative Brahmin monk” of theological treatises and the “baleful *jogi*” superman of mediaeval tales. Curiously none of the colonial yoga popularisers claimed to stand in this tradition of *fakirs* and alchemist *jogis*.

### **Is the use-value a *simulation*?**

There is from the beginning within colonial popular yoga discourse an inbuilt tension between the alleged ancient purposes of liberation on one side (the ultimate use-value which also simultaneously was symbolic in character). On the other side we find self-identity-build-up and social-political agendas defined by the colonial situation (the symbolic-value, the power discourse).

Sceptics could start to wonder whether this strong presence of anti-colonial politics embedded in colonial yoga hijacked this yoga discourse to such a degree that the guru’s rhetoric and promises of *samadhi* and Kundalini actually turned into ideological signs without any content? In other words: the signified ‘mystical experience’ (the ultimate use-value) is under suspicion of being symbolic empty.

The reader might protest that even if we concede that colonial modernist Indian yoga was

constructed with a range of political agendas and symbols in mind, that does not necessarily affect the stipulated goals of ‘the mystical experience’ - ‘realising the truth of the sacred’. Colonial modernist yoga – despite its entanglement with symbols and politics - could still lead to *samadhi*, god union, Kundalini, or Siva consciousness. This hybrid yoga could still have a metaphysical use-value for the individual despite being heavily re-constructed.

I agree with this line of thought; however, we need to take into consideration that yoga techniques – and hence their use-value, we would presume – totally changed during this period. It was not just the meaning – ‘the signified’ –, which was re-constructed, but also the physical practice – ‘the referent’. What has not been explained to us in this hybrid yoga discourse is why and how these mainly Western technologies could achieve the same old liberation and salvation goals previously achieved by ancient liberation technologies. How can for instance the callisthenic exercises of Krishnamacharya produce states of mind normally only accessible through Patanjali’s *samadhi* meditation? And if they can, why cannot cross-country skiing or jogging do the same?

We know that the inventors of colonial modernist yoga maintained that their yoga was authentic and genuinely old. However, a historio-sociological examination has shown that this claim does not hold. We are talking about *new* technologies – not ancient. Hence it is reasonable to assume that these technologies have different use-value – different utilities, different meanings. The new technologies are in other words in need of new justification.

Before a contemporary yoga student spends several hours a day for the rest of her life doing colonial modernist based yoga, she should first reflect over the truth of, for instance, Krishnamacharya’s assertion that his gymnastic technologies lead to yogic liberation. Hence we should ask with Baudrillard if the liberation sign linked to the physical practice is a *simulation* – a fake?

# **Chapter 3**

# India at the dawn of Axial Age Civilisations

## Key Concepts

Vedic societies

Axial Age civilisation

Shamanism

Asceticism & symbolic value

Axial Age ontology

Dhyana & element meditation

Upasana

Tapas

Sociological Habitus & semiotic code

Ascetic Brahmin lifestyle

Three parameters of proto-yoga

Philosophical lifestyles

*When did yoga begin? Did it evolve in a linear way from earlier Northern Indian societies and their Vedic religious beliefs stretching back to the arrival of the Aryans about 1500 BC? Some believe yoga is even earlier and can be traced back to the Indus Valley civilisation (3300-1300 BC). This chapter places the conditions for the surfacing of yoga clearly in the world-shattering transformation that Northern India experienced commencing about 6-500 BC. As we go through this period it should become clear that yoga could not have evolved before this period; the conditions were not there.*

*Almost all popular books and many academic books on yoga portray its history as originating within the Vedic tradition. It is an image originally constructed by the Brahmins themselves, but in the last couple of hundred years it has been re-invigorated by Hindu nationalism, Western Orientalists and yoga popularisers in East and West. Today this construction dominates public perception. Hence this chapter spends some pages showing that this is not and probably could not be the case: yoga technologies and ideas could not have evolved among the Brahmins, as they would have threatened the social power of these groups. The emergence of yoga has to be found among other groups.*

*To identify the emergence of yoga this chapter investigates first the economic, political and cultural situation of numerous small Archaic kingdoms going through a tumultuous and conflict-ridden process of civilisation and empire building. Old habits, institutions and cultures were breaking up and new social groups, social hierarchies, conflict lines and cultural practices were coming to the front.*

*This chapter's main argument is that the genealogy of the first forms of yoga – a cluster of new cultural practices and ideas – is located in yoga's contemporary society instead of in the Vedic society which preceded it. Having said that I hasten to add that this*

*chapter also identifies some cultural structures – ‘habitus’ - which created some background conditions necessary for yoga to emerge. Metaphorically speaking these habitus are kinds of ‘cultural grammar’ making ‘the yoga language’ possible, understandable and acceptable to its surrounding society. The technical expression for this is as indicated ‘semiotic code’ and ‘cultural habitus’: interiorised, taken-for-given mental patterns forming our perceptions, appreciations and categorisation of reality.*

*So this chapter is about conditions – what was possible and what was not possible at the time yoga emerged. The chapter is directed towards the voices who throughout history for various ideological and cultural political reasons have claimed that yoga represents an ancient tree – so old that it and its specialists float over history and time and should be respected accordingly. At the end of the chapter, having left such discussions behind, we can then in the following chapters begin to look at the specific processes and conflicts which enabled yoga to surface – first as cultural practices and ideas without a name (which I hence call proto-yoga) and then with the yoga name – which I categorise as early-yoga.*

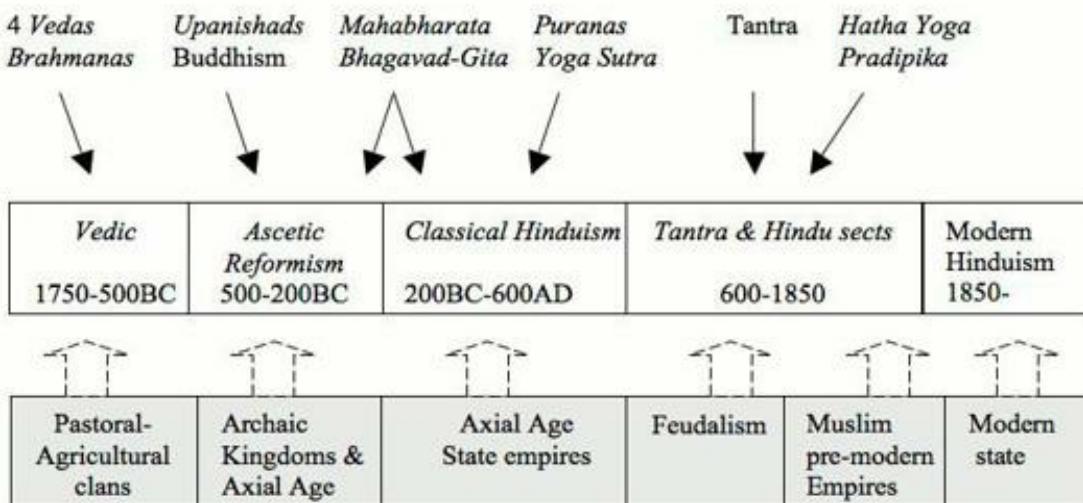
*This chapter comes with a warning. A major part of this chapter investigates a range of technical and historical notions, institutions and social groups that are essential for understanding Indian society until at least the Middle Ages. Many unfamiliar concepts have to be clarified and illuminated, if the reader is to have a cultural sociological understanding of what enabled yoga to emerge. This means that my argument sometimes moves forward slowly. Armed with some patience however the reader will be able to contemplate a time and society very fascinating and different from our own times.*

## **1. The eco- and socio-political matrix of emergent yoga discourse**

### **Society and culture**

Most classifications of Indian history in books on yoga are based on religio-cultural classifications of the texts of the Indian elites. Such classifications can be very useful but I prefer to use a historio-sociological classification, based on technological/economic/political criteria, as shown below. The religious classification shown in the figure is a slightly modified version of the religio-cultural classification in Michael (2004). The figure below shows approximately how religious eras fit into the different social formations – often referred to as the socio- economic matrix. The starting point of most chapters will be such social formations and the social conflicts within them.

### India's socio-economic matrixes & religious eras



The point of departure for all explanations in this book is the underlying *socio-economic matrix* – fundamental structures like ecology, demography, technology economy and socio-political structures like gender, ethnicity, kinship, class, race, social stratum - and the aim is to show how yoga culture emerged, was formed and changed under such changing circumstances.<sup>110</sup> The fundamental method of the book is to investigate what are the *conditions* (eco-material and socio-political) in the underlying matrix that would *allow or help* a phenomenon like the yoga discourse to arise, evolve and adapt. I will start with a short general sketch of the *socio-economic* matrix in Northern India in which yoga emerged: the advent of the Axial Age civilisations/ State empires <sup>111</sup>. As we begin to have an overview of these revolutionary social and evolutionary conditions – the advent of civilisation and state empires - I will become more specific about the yoga discourse.

### Northern Indian Vedic societies before yoga

The Aryan-speaking village based communities *preceding* yoga arose mainly in the area around the five Punjab Rivers and along the Ganges.<sup>112</sup> It started between 1500 and 1000BC as cattle-herding Aryan-speaking ([Wikipedia link](#)) tribes migrating from the Eurasian steppes settled along the rivers in Northern India. They were tribal and clan-based pastoral steppe communities, cattle based semi-nomads who had managed to domesticate and use horses. The Indo-Aryans were relatively egalitarian communities consisting probably of two social tiers – the commoners and the nobles – which were typical of Eurasian Bronze and Early Iron Age societies (Kohl 2009, Anthony 2010, Krämer 2002). As with most semi-nomadic steppe societies, they would probably have been organised in loose confederations run by charismatic leaders from the upper tier. They possessed superior military steppe technology consisting of a deadly combination of chariots and bows easily defeating the aborigines (Keegan 1993).

Based on sociological and historical research into migration patterns, it can be assumed that they probably arrived in waves of migrations settling in different areas. Slowly they settled as agriculturalists (Heather 2009). They fought and mixed with the aboriginal non-

Aryan speaking people already living there and installed themselves as an aristocratic upper tier (Bandyopadhyaya 2007, Chatterji 2007).

Probably due to demographic pressure new agricultural methods and technology emerged which allowed the area to produce an increasing surplus. Hence large-scale trade appeared along the rivers. Out of this grew geographically larger and more rigidly stratified communities dominated by castes of warriors (Kshatriyas) and priests (Brahmins)<sup>113</sup>. Soon these previously ethnic- and clan-based local communities outgrew their locality and kinship organisation and merged into small kingdoms or chieftaincies. By this we mean small autonomous political units, where a village or a lineage dominated the surrounding villages and communities. Central power increasingly became hereditary. This implied that a nascent state structure was emerging: the kingdom as a hereditary institution materialised. We could call this late Vedic society ‘Archaic’ state forms (Bellah 2011).

More recent research suggests that there actually emerged two distinct Aryan-speaking cultural centres: the *Vedic culture* (North-West India, first half/ Western part of Ganges) ([Wikipedia link](#)) and the *Greater Magadha culture* (Eastern part of Ganges from the Yamuna – Ganges confluence) ([Wikipedia link](#)) (Bronkhorst 2007, Samuel 2008).

The *Vedic culture* had clearly Iranian roots. As some of the Aryan-speaking Vedic people settled, they further developed and refined their culture maybe under some influence of indigenous non-Aryan groups.<sup>114</sup> ‘Vedic culture’ is a name based on old religious hymns: the four *Vedas* dating from probably 1500-1000 BC. The *Vedas* are mainly poems about a range of gods and description of rituals of how to serve these gods. The *Vedas* were initially orally transmitted from generation to generation until writing came into use much later on (about 300 BC). The Greater Magadha culture, however, developed traditions such as Buddhism, Jainism and Ajivikism. This area became the dominant power centre from where the empire impulse radiated.

Reading the *Vedas*, we can see that rituals - especially those based around the fire sacrifices - were central to Vedic public life and the power of the king. If the daily sacrifices maintained by the Brahmin caste – a kind of priestly class – were not made, it was feared that the whole order of the cosmos would break down ending in chaos and the collapse of the kingdom.<sup>115</sup> Rituals in other words played a central role in defining and holding these societies together (Bellah 2011).

We have now reached about 600 BC, when significant social changes occurred signifying the end of the Vedic societies. Northern India’s Archaic societies were on the verge of urbanisation. India like Greece and China was entering what is called by comparative historical sociologists the *Axial Age civilisations and state empires*: the emergence of Iron Age civilisations and empires (600 BC to 600 AD) which were all conditioned by military expansion, slavery and coinage (Graeber 2011 – and see footnote Error: Reference source not found). For India the entrance into this process of civilisation happens as we move into an era often labelled the *Maha-janapadas* (meaning “foothold of a tribe” - 700-300 BC) where the power centralisation process narrowed down to 16 kingdoms and republics fighting for dominance with surrounding monarchies. Before investigating them, I wish to look briefly at the geographical environment in which they took place.

### **An environmental perspective – forests, small and large societies**

The existence of different types of societies living side by side in a landscape dominated by thick forest and endless wilderness is a major factor in my understanding of developments in Indian culture. More than mountains, seas, deserts and rivers *the forests* were the main barriers and obstacles for human movements and activities in India (Bailey & Mabbett 2001). This probably holds true until 1500-1600 AD.

The history of India witnesses an ongoing expansion of human settlements into impenetrable forest areas. As dynasties and civilisations emerged and collapsed there was a continuing expansion or contraction of agricultural based society into the surrounding dangerous forest area. In periods of expansion tracts of land were tamed and settled and the indigenous tribes and semi-nomadic groups were incorporated into larger and more socially complex societies. This contact generated a social and cultural clash energising India's religio-culture towards change. Both large and small societies adopted and incorporated each other. In particular, orthodox conservative religious groups – often represented by the Brahmins and the Buddhists - were time after time forced to change dramatically, as new religious and cultural movements swept across the area they inhabited or had settled in.

At the dawn of Northern India's Axial Age civilisation its societies were a network of small relatively homogeneous groups surrounded by forest, a patchwork of groups based on kin and occupation, and tribes living and travelling mainly along rivers. The social diversities – the division of labour - between the groups would not have been great. However, all this gradually came to an end as the area moved into the Iron Age proper.

As these village-based communities increasingly employed improved metallurgy, improved steel, new agricultural technologies (such as the iron plough and irrigation systems) and started to burn down forests and tame the wilderness, they were able to increase their populations and agricultural surplus. Small local kingdoms merged, often through warfare, into larger regional kingdoms signalling the end of the Vedic era. Around 600 BC there were only sixteen competing power centres left – the *Maha-janapadas*. A process of urbanisation and social differentiation/ work division accelerated in parallel with this.

Surpluses were traded over long distances. Within small fortified towns there emerged garrisons, manufacturing, administrative and ritual centres. In these towns we would soon find carpenters, distillers of alcohol, dyers, potters, ivory workers, fletchers, and joiners and garland makers. These large centres were enmeshed in a political and economical network of small societies: socially diversified and specialised lineage groups, extended families, clans and craft organisations (Bailey & Mabbett 2001). Many of those were semi-nomadic communities, but still living in close economic interaction with the centre as forest guides, timber suppliers, elephant tamers, cow herders, and hunters. In other words, the emerging regional kingdoms of this period actually consisted of a network of large-scale societies encapsulating smaller groups. This was a hugely heterogeneous society, caught in a painful process of emerging civilisation and empire building.

## Axial Age: an earthquake in the social-political foundation

This civilisation and state building process of the Axial Age underwent a major acceleration and centralisation drive between 600-300 BC. New iron technology enabled an agricultural surplus and gave rise to unprecedentedly violent forms of warfare. Revolutionary new institutions such as written language and monetary economy emerged. Fortresses and market places turned into large towns and slavery became widespread. This process immensely increased the power of the State and created a new style of large-scale warfare among competing power centres of kingdoms and republics never experienced before (Witzel 2003, Gat 2008, Graebel 2011, Bellah 2011).

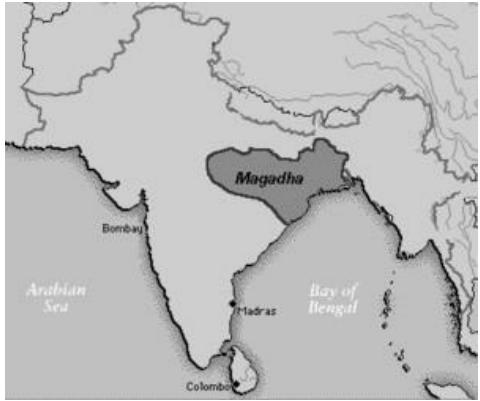
The process of urbanisation, division of labour and state centralisation culminated in the evolution of some all-dominating Northern Indian empires: first the Nanda Empire (424-321BC) and then the all-Indian Mauryan Empire (321-274BC). Thus, during an intensive period of about two to three hundred years Northern India was radically transformed into an empire and an urbanised civilisation. This advent of the Axial Age civilisation was a seismic rupture having a significant impact on life conditions and people's outlook. It is this period of transformation, from small village based kinship societies and petty Archaic states to huge urbanised, regional dynasties and empires that creates the social environment for this chapter on proto-yoga and the subsequent early-yoga.

Sociologically, based on the emergence of specialised division of labour, we would expect, that under such dramatically changing circumstances a wide range of new social groups and worldviews would evolve. And indeed there did evolve a plethora of new social groups. One was the *Sramanas*, who emerged at the beginning of this period of transformation. The Sramanas could be classified as 'itinerant intellectuals' (representing the increasing crystallisation of cognitive labour strata within Axial Age civilisation) and we see similar social groups surfacing in Greece, Israel and China (Bellah 2011) introducing new ways of abstract thinking. These groups – typical for Axial Age civilisations - distanced themselves from the existing intellectual groups of ritual-based priests and were often very critical of existing political relations (Bellah 2012).

The Sramanas representing such groups are central to the origin of yoga, as it was among those diverse groups that practices and discourses evolved out of which the yoga discourse finally metamorphosed. One of the Sramana group, which emerged about 400 BC was founded by a *Kshatriya* widely known today. It was Buddha. His name is also intrinsically connected with the yoga genealogy. The earliest Sramanas – probably the Jains - preceded him by some one hundred to two hundred years. The Sramanas did however not initiate the yoga sign, understood as referring to a technical discipline. The notion was first used in a new genre of texts from this period authored by the Brahmin priests: the *Upanishads*.<sup>116</sup>

In this period of transition Sramana groups started, to wander along the rivers within Northern India's social network of diverse cultural settlements surrounded by forests. Many of them subscribed to an ascetic life style. The Sramanas evolved and initially roamed mainly in the Greater Magadha area. They represented a new *cultural field* of "itinerant intellectuals" and we see similar groups in many other civilisations. In the Middle East for instance they

were often called prophets (Vermes 2012). There are also signs that not only the Magadha area but also the Vedic cultural area had its own ascetic-like specialists living in the wild with names like *Munis*, *Kesins*, *Tapasins*, *Vratyas*, *Yatis*. However, it seems that unlike the Sramanas these Vedic ascetic specialists were not a response to the ongoing social transformations – the civilisation building process. Instead like the Brahmins, they were related to the dynamics of the previous village based Vedic societies.



The Sramanas lived on the fruits of the forest, received alms and gifts from the population or traded their special skills. They positioned themselves – and were perceived by the general population as – semi-divine men. A new social group of specialists creating a new cultural sub-field had emerged among professional holy men, specialists who based their living and power neither on economic nor political power but on status (symbolic capital). It is from this new status based species of specialists creating their own sub-culture – their own cultural field - that there emerged what I have called the discourses of proto-yoga.

The Sramanas entered a wider cultural field of religious specialists, hitherto dominated by the Brahmin priests. These two groups of specialists – both charged with high status and symbolic power – started to compete with each other for status and economic survival. As we reach the end of this social upheaval about 300 BC, the previously dominant Brahmin priests had seriously lost ground to Sramanas and their radical new worldviews. Brahmin rituals were scarcely practised at royal courts any longer. Vedic fire rituals were now often replaced by Buddhist and Jain rituals, early Vishnu worship or other new rituals. However the Vedic discourse had not become totally extinct. Some clans of village-based Brahmins maintained the *Vedas* and the fire ritual now mainly the rites of passage (birth, death, marriage) of the households.

And still, as we shall see in another chapter, it was in the period from 600 to 300 BC of civilisation and state building – despite all opposition - that a few Brahmin clans started to redefine themselves. They did this, by adopting and reconfiguring elements from the Sramanic proto-yoga discourse. <sup>117</sup>

I have now identified two of the main social groups, which I maintain are connected with the genealogy of the yoga discourse – the Sramanas and the Brahmins. I also maintain that they belong to the same “social species” of *holy professional men*. Both were high status cultural specialists rich in symbolic capital. They represented *two different cultural sub-fields* belonging to the same overall cultural field of holy specialists. The Brahmins were the oldest of them, emerging in and adapting their cultural field to village based kinship communities and

Archaic state forms, while the Sramanas were a later arriving subpopulation, evolving in and adapting their cultural field to urbanised and state building societies of the Axial Age. Both groups and the conflict between them signified the specialisation and crystallisation of cognitive/intellectual labour taking place in Iron Age civilisation- and state-forming processes. Both lived by accumulating and transmitting symbolic capital.

However, as we shall see, both the Sramanas and the Brahmins were socially and politically tightly intertwined with a third group - the Kshatriyas. Without involving this group of warrior nobles, who were rich in political (military power) and economic capital, we do not get the full picture of conflict and hegemony fuelling the dynamic of yoga. This will be the theme of coming chapters.

I will now briefly sketch the first mentioned two main groups based on the account of a foreign visitor – Megasthenes - to the Mauryan Empire, the state that finalised this period of transition.

### **Yoga imagined as a philosophical lifestyle**

By comparing the different Axial Age civilisations at the time yoga emerged, many scholars have suggested that yogis can be compared to an intellectual group that we in the West call *philosophers*.<sup>118</sup> Philosophy and the social groups of philosophers – as we know them from Greek history - represented wisdom discourses, which emerged in all the Axial Age societies. In such discourses wisdom and insight into the underlying structures of reality were seen in general to lead to happiness. Hence the Greek word ‘philosophy’ – meaning “love of knowledge”. The wisdom discourses of Axial Age societies signified new ways of abstract thinking and meta-thinking (thinking reflecting on its own foundation), which might have been conditioned by the emergence of a monetised economy.<sup>119</sup> Thus philosophical lifestyles of itinerant intellectuals were well known to the Greeks when they later came into contact with India’s Axial Age empires.<sup>120</sup> In fact, when the Greeks after Alexander experienced Northern India's ascetic wanderers like the Sramanas, they called them *Gymnosophists* – “the naked philosophers”! This was their way of giving meaning to a social group which they quite rightly found similar to their own philosophers.

The Greek Ambassador Megasthenes (Bronkhorst 1993 & 2006, McEvilley 2002), who was based at the king’s court of the newly founded Mauryan Empire, describes around 300 BC two ascetic lifestyles – the Brahmins and the Sramanas. “Women live in their society without sexual commerce” says Megasthenes (according to the Greek historian Strabo). While the Sramanas (like the Buddhists) often were described as bald. Megasthenes tells us of the Brahmins “that they all wear long hair and long beards, and that they braid their hair and surround it with a head-band”. But there is no mention of groups of yogis in Megasthenes’ account.

What is important from the fragments of Megasthenes is that they provide clear evidence that asceticism was not just a technical part of rituals (as we know from many other cultures) but had become a *lifestyle*. Here is what Megasthenes had to say:

“In classifying philosophers [the writers of India] set the Pramnai [i.e. the Sramanas] in opposition to the Brachman [i.e.

Brahmins]. [The sramanas] are captious and fond of cross-questioning; and [they say that] some [philosophers] are called mountain-dwelling, others naked, and others urban and neighboring' and [the] mountain dwelling [philosophers] use [i.e. wear] hides of deer and have leather pouches, full of drugs, claiming to practice medicine with sorcery, spells and amulets"<sup>121</sup>

We understand from this that there are various groups of “philosophers”, who like the Greek philosophers liked to engage in debate. They lived modestly, some retired to the mountains but others living in the cities. They were not only intellectuals but also physicians. Megasthenes briefly mentioned a third group, who would soon rise to become dominant – the Buddhists:

“Among the Indians are also those hylobioi [philosophers] also who follow the precepts of Boutta whom they honor as a god on account of his extraordinary sanctity”

There is another fragment from Megasthenes, where he describes the Brahmins as almost a death cult, where a strenuous life was seen only as preparation for happiness in death:

“The Brachmanes have their abode in a grove in front of the city within a moderate-sized enclosure. They live in simple style, and lie on beds of rushes or deerskins. They abstain from simple food and sexual pleasures. Death is with them a very frequent subject of discourse. They regard this life as, so to speak, the time when the child within the womb becomes mature, and death as a birth into a real happy life for the votaries of philosophy. On this account they undergo much discipline as a preparation for death ...”

The Brahmins seemed according to Megasthenes to be very confident about what he described as their philosophical lifestyle. It seems that only those who practised philosophy would live a happy after-life. We also see that they practised some kind of strict discipline in preparation for death. As the notion of ‘yoga’ was often conceived as ‘discipline’ one can wonder whether this is what Megasthenes describes. We shall see that these beliefs and practices of the Brahmins were actually themes initially introduced by the Sramanas: disciplined management of the process of death, the soul’s eternal afterlife, the importance of philosophical knowledge.

These issues of the soul were also the concern of the contemporary Greek philosophers. Hence Megasthenes continued with a direct comparison of the Indian Brahmins with the Greek philosophers concluding, that they share the same philosophical themes:

“...on many points their opinions coincide with those of the Greeks, for like them they say that the world has a beginning, and is liable for destruction, and is in shape spherical, and that deity who made it, and who governs it, is diffused through all its parts ... concerning generation, and the nature of the Soul, and many other subjects, they express views like these maintained by the Greeks. They wrap up their doctrines of immortality and future judgment, and kindred topics in allegories, after the manner of Plato”

I will return later to these observations of similarities between Greek and Indian Axial Age wisdom discourses with which many modern historians agree. What comes across in Megasthenes' account is that both he and the locals saw the Brahmins and Sramanas as variants of the same social classification: in sociological terms they were perceived as belonging to the same ‘cultural field’. In Megasthenes' imagination, it is mainly philosophy that unites these two groups – their “love of knowledge” and debate so well known to him and to the Greeks. But it is also evident from his observations that these groups seem to share an unusual way of living – an austere *lifestyle*. They are not only philosophers – they are *naked* philosophers; ascetics. Somehow these groups of “ascetic philosophers” turned their lifestyle into a way of living: a profession embedded in its own separate culture, a *cultural field* in other words. They managed to turn into a profession what made them special and different culturally. This cultural difference, this distinction – their cultural or symbolic capital – they exchanged with

society<sup>122</sup>. Finally we can conclude that these groups must have had a significant presence in Indian society, like “similar philosophers” had in Greek and Chinese Axial Age civilisations. The Indian Gymnosophists could not just have been tiny marginal groups, since a foreigner representing a different Axial Age civilisation was able to recognise them as a social entity, worth mentioning in his description of India’s social life.

However, it is not clear from Megasthenes’ philosophical discourse what exactly divided the Sramanas and the Brahmins except external clues. And we do not know why the Indians categorised these two very different looking cultural specialists as the same social species. These are some of the questions we need to answer now. We need to understand better how the Brahmins and Sramanas were perceived by themselves and the local population. Why was high status ascribed to them? What was seen to be their contribution to society? To answer this, we need to understand the notions of *symbolic capital*, *cultural fields* and a range of *discourses* of that time, because this is exactly what these notions do: they define social entities, self-identities and cultural practices. They create and ascribe difference, meaning, value, authority, and power.

## 2. Three defining principles of yoga as it surfaced

### The three cultural principles of early-yoga

We are now going to investigate the genealogy of yoga. Genealogy is like searching for the source of a river like the Nile. In the end you have to make choices as you travel up the river and as it branches out. Do you go for volume of water, length of a branch or do you stop at major lakes (like Lake Victoria) or do you further investigate small rivers feeding those lakes? The same problematic applies for the origin of yoga – there are choices, which I will discuss in the following.

In the previous section we developed a broad and introductory overview of the general eco-material and socio-political matrix, which set out the conditions for a phenomenon such as yoga to arise. We now need to become more specific. On the following pages I would like to look into the socio-cultural institutions and cultural fields and the specific discourses, which made the yoga discourse possible. Some of this involves trying to identify cultural processes, which were taken for granted, mental habits originating much earlier than yoga, which we find in the pores of the general habitus (cultural dispositions) of Northern India. Without such codes the claims and goals of yoga would not have been acceptable and understandable.

Some prior understanding of what defined the yoga discourse initially is required; otherwise we would not know what early signs and codes to look for. Today, most people

imagine yoga is about performing complicated and strenuous poses. But there is no evidence that physical postures were a part of yoga as the sign emerged referring to specific practices. The first texts describing yoga as it appeared as a technical term about 400 BC among the Brahmins outline yoga rather as *a cluster of (1) ascetic (2) meditative practices aiming for the (3) liberation (release) of the soul*. So in my opinion, embedded in the first accounts of yoga are three defining elements: asceticism, meditation and liberation (of the soul).<sup>123</sup> It is this *combination* of principles which seems to configure the yoga discourse *as it emerged*.

We could call these three principles my prototype-definition of yoga, *as it emerged*. It is important to underline that I am *not trying to define yoga as such*. Rather I am trying to define some critical principles of yoga at a *certain point of history*. The principles are a specific historical configuration. They are *not* a trans-historical definition of the core principles of yoga as such!

So why do I employ a definition – a so-called proto-definition<sup>124</sup>? I want to use my prototype definition to guide and tell me what to look for when searching for what preceded or conditioned the early-yoga discourse. We need to find something which “looks like the first yoga practice and rhetoric but was yet not called yoga”: something similar to the yoga sign as it appeared for the first time. So we will separately trace these principles to a time *before* early-yoga. We will see how they were brought together within specific institutions and cultural practices and we will see how this very act of combining meant that a new cultural field surfaced. The arrival of the yoga signifier – an umbrella word – was a late-comer in this process.

As we progress we will find that the three principles can be categorised more precisely. We will find that asceticism can meaningfully be framed as a code or habitus – a cultural grammar –, which in Northern India informed and took the historically specific form of the *tapas* discourse. We will spend much time on this parameter because without the codes underlying asceticism, yoga would not have been acceptable, understandable or even thinkable for its contemporary society. Meditation – the second parameter - on the other hand seems to be a genuinely new physical practice. One could frame meditation as a new variety of asceticism or one could see it as something genuinely new emerging out of the current social transformations. Finally, the parameter of liberation, a revolutionary new and different discourse, a discourse, which defined and became a cornerstone of a new cultural field. This parameter clearly points to the up and coming Axial Age way of thinking – the *episteme* ([Wikipedia link](#)) of the Axial Age. By *episteme* is understood a *fundamental way of thinking* which *conditions* (“defines the limits, possibilities and interest of”) the actual thinking and knowledge of a given culture. The Axial Age episteme is characterised by issues like thinking about thinking, transcendence, the priority of knowledge (wisdom discourses), ethics and individuality.

The combination of three principles – asceticism belonging to Bronze Age (or earlier) cultures, liberation belonging to emerging Axial age civilisation and meditation falling exactly in the middle of those two social formations - conditioned a new independent discourse and cultural field – a powerful energy field - of which yoga became a part.

*Thus even before the technical notion of ‘yoga’ emerged in written discourse, this combination of principles had already been in use among some groups for some time: the Sramanas. I suggest that we call this combination of practices, codes and rhetoric ‘proto-yoga’. These ‘proto-yoga groups’ – the Sramanas - might have given the principles other names or had different perceptions of what their significance was. Proto-yoga is the subject of the following chapter. In the rest of this chapter we will investigate the two first principles – asceticism and (the Brahmin branch of) meditation - because they tell us much about what made yoga possible. However they also reveal what was not possible – how claims that yoga evolved out of the Vedas with the Brahmins as its originators cannot stand scrutiny. In later chapters we will see how such claims reflect the ideology or cultural-politics of the Brahmins, Hindu nationalism and anti-modernity romanticism.*

### **Semiotic code and cultural sociological habitus**

The task is now to capture the genealogy ([Wikipedia link](#)) of the three principles of *asceticism, meditation and liberation*. In this and the following chapter we need to identify how they were woven into socio-cultural institutions and cultural fields like shamanism, *tapas*, fire rituals, young warriors’ rites of passage, suicide rituals and how these were then woven into social conflicts. During this investigation, I will establish that there was a *power discourse of semi-divinity* preceding proto-yoga and early-yoga – which we could call a ‘code’ (using semiotics) or a ‘habitus’ (using cultural sociology). ‘Habitus’ is our cultural and social socialisation revealed through our attitudes, practices and dispositions. It is cultural history that guides our actions and interpretations in the present. This code or habitus (we could also call it ‘mental habit’ or ‘cultural grammar’) made it possible for yoga discourses to evolve and become power discourses in their own right. This is a critical point in my argument. Without an ancient code or habitus of semi-divinity many of the Sramana groups would not have been possible. Neither would the yoga discourse.

To illustrate the power of the words code and habitus, let me propose a thought experiment. Imagine someone today walked into your neighbourhood or office half naked and claimed that he was able to communicate on equal terms with gods and spirits. More than that, he claims, he is able to fly through space and time and he can, if he so wishes, take over your body. He claims that he is immortal and can see into the past and the future. Hence he now wants to be in charge. How would we react to such a person? Worship him, make him the CEO or call a psychiatrist or an ambulance? Would we perceive him as a rather ‘disturbed person’ or as a ‘magnificent super-natural being’ like ancient India did? Would we ascribe to him high or low status? Most contemporary people would probably call the asylum or hospital because our code and habitus identifies and classifies such a person as ‘mad’. So habitus and especially codes can here be explained as *unconscious, taken-for given dispositions and assumptions guiding our behaviour*. They are woven into what we perceive as meaning, authority and value: in this case they guide us moderns to categorise this as ‘madness’. But in Northern India, around the time of Buddha, such an extraordinary person was treated with awe and fear. Hence we need to identify the genealogy of the code and habitus that makes such a

construction and imagination possible. We need to investigate the culture of the Shaman which is found among many hunter-gatherer communities and semi-nomadic pastoralists.

*I will start my genealogy of the three principles of proto-yoga with an investigation of asceticism, in India often synonymous with tapas ("heat"). In order to understand the importance of asceticism in Northern India, I will investigate a social model which anthropologists call Siberian- or Asian-Shamanism, where asceticism played a major role. The Indo-aryan tribes most probably subscribed to some form of the culture of Asian Shamanism before they migrated into Northern India. So did the non-Aryan North Indian communities. The theory is that even if the Vedic communities had evolved into more ritual oriented communities and left many aspects of Shamanism behind them, they were still under the influence of Shamanism and asceticism – embodying a code or a habitus. This came to expression in the significant role asceticism played in Northern Indian societies. Further, the conflicts inherent to Asian Shamanism might also apply to the way some of the conflicts of the Vedic kingdoms were played out. So I will return to this model several times in my account.*

*As I have said, when we have introduced Shamanism and the code and habitus it quietly passed on to Vedic societies, we can then investigate asceticism which was inherent to Shamanism. We can see that asceticism actually has many of the hallmarks of a code and habitus itself – that it also embodies a kind of cultural grammar or unconscious mental habit, which is silently transmitted. Alternatively we could say that within asceticism we find a code, a habitus which we could call semi-divine power. Either way, we will see how this habitus – asceticism or semi-divine power - informed the Northern Indian discourse of tapas.*

*If the reader is not interested in this investigation of what made yoga and its symbolic power possible you may jump these modules on Shamanism, asceticism and tapas. This chapter concludes with an investigation of Brahmin styles of meditation, which acknowledges that some Brahmins seems to have developed new styles of meditation.*

### 3. The genealogy of asceticism

#### **Shamanism – as a politico-cultural model and cultural field**

Over the last 70 years or more there has been extensive anthropological research into

Shamanism<sup>125</sup>. Asian Shamanism is a general anthropological model for a wide variety of hunter-gatherer and semi-nomadic herder communities spread over Asian and Northern and Southern America, all having in their midst a medicine man, healer, magician or spirit mediator. The anthropological and sociological studies of I.M. Lewis *Ecstatic religion* (1971, 1989 2 ed.) has become a classic account of Shamanism, so we will explore some of his theories, as they will be useful in elucidating my own explanation.

The word ‘Shaman’ derives from one of the communities under study - the Arctic *Tungus* ([Wikipedia link](#)) herders. It means “one who is excited, moved, or raised” according to Lewis. The Tungus’ Shaman is a cultural specialist who masters the spirits and who can and will introduce them into his body for the benefit of the community.<sup>126</sup> Among the Tungus the Shaman was a mediator having access to spirits and ancestors.<sup>127</sup> When in contact, he could ask hostile spirits to leave or ask good spirits for help and advice. This gave the Shaman a very powerful role in the tribe. In many Asian and Mongol cultures a tribe without its own Shaman was unthinkable. In many societies, the Shaman might often have been the leader, doctor, lawyer, judge or consultant of the tribe. He would heal the sick, mediate community conflicts, express the moral conscience, bring into the open hidden troubles of the community, settle disputes, diagnose sources of problems, forecast the weather, secure hunting success (Lewis 1989). The Shaman could do so because through his ecstasy the spirits spoke through his mouth. This was his symbolic capital. The ecstatic transformation of the Shaman had enormous symbolic meaning for these non-centralised societies of small groups.<sup>128</sup>

However, the Shaman was not only a specialist central to power and society, but could also be the opposite: a marginalised person or group. So within the cultural field of the Shaman, there is an opposite polarity to *the centralised moralistic function*: namely *the peripheral cult*. So a Shaman could, according to conditions, move between the centre and the periphery of the tribe having very different functions. Later we shall see that this process also often applies to the yoga adept.

Often the marginalised and peripheral Shaman was recruited from oppressed or poorly performing (economically or socially) groups in order to help them out. Other examples show us, according to Lewis, that when the whole society was under stress – ecological, economical or political – then the Shaman could move from the periphery of society to become a central and leading function in fighting evil. In becoming possessed by spirits the Shamans could in this way regain status and importance. Often they were simultaneously feared and detested by their society. I will return many times to this tension within the cultural field of the Shaman - itself depending on internal and external conflicts – between central and peripheral (marginal) functions<sup>129</sup>.

We will now move on from this general model of Shamanism to some specific aspects of the ideas and practices of Shamanism. What was the ‘labour of the Shaman’ – how did he or she accumulate symbolic capital? In order to make contact with the spirits, the Shaman had a range of ‘technologies of transformation of consciousness’ at his disposal. The Shaman often used *austere practices* like solitude, fasting, holding breath or sleep deprivation as preparation for his performance (Walsh 1993). Together with his tribe the Shaman – now already in an ascetic induced trance - would then commence the ritual of accessing the

spiritual world. Here ecstatic techniques like dancing, drumming and mumbling of syllables were employed carrying the Shaman into states of trance.<sup>130</sup> Even drugs could be used. So we can see from a range of anthropological studies that ascetic and ecstatic technologies and discourses were central to the Shaman and his power – his cultural or symbolic capital.

In the view of many scholars the North Indian societies preceding yoga were variants of such Asian non-centralised societies organised in small tribes and clans. Many of these Aryan and non-Aryan communities were strongly influenced by the Shamanic culture presented above. However, the Vedic communities in the process of becoming settled agriculturalists had probably evolved into societies where ritual practice – strictly prescribed and controlled formal procedures - had to a large extent replaced spontaneous Shamanic practices. But that does not exclude the possibility that Vedic rituals and discourse carried on with practices, interpretations and worldviews from the Shaman culture (Deeg 1993). In other words some of the code and habitus of the Shaman had settled in the unconscious mental habits of society. So our first observation is that even if the cultural field of the Shaman had been replaced by that of the Brahmin, some of the underlying code and habitus – associating the religious specialist with supernatural powers - still persisted in the general cultural DNA.

Our second observation is that even if the Vedic sacrificial priest was not a Shaman as described above, he still shared many of the characteristics of the central-regulatory and community-moralistic functions of the Shaman: the protector of order, the connection to the gods and so forth, all strong symbols generating cultural capital. Some scholars even see the proto-yogis as evolving out of the Shaman identity, merely replacing ecstatic techniques with meditative. The Sramana or proto-yogi might then represent the *peripheral* Shaman role, while the Brahmin represented the *central* role of the Shaman. Such a division of the Shaman role into two - the Brahmin (central conservative) and proto-yogi (peripheral oppositional) - could in this view be related to the structural changes the Vedic societies had been undergoing for centuries: small pastoral semi-nomadic clans settling and becoming agricultural settlements; the development of small kingdoms and larger hierarchical societies.<sup>131</sup>

What is important from a cultural sociological point of view is that the cultural field of the Shaman with its discourse, code, habitus, conflicts and polarities in many ways made yoga possible. I will return to this point again later on. What we have seen is the important role that asceticism played in these societies. The person who practised austerity was propelled into high status of the society undergoing transformation. In other words, asceticism had a strong symbolic meaning – it was perceived to enable the specialist to accumulate symbolic capital.

Thus we can conclude that asceticism provided an essential part of the code and habitus of Shamanism. It therefore makes sense to take a closer view of asceticism as embodying a code and habitus – a deeply interiorised mental pattern – which came to inform Northern Indian cultural DNA and especially conditioned the cultural fields where yoga emerged

### **The technical (transformative) and symbolic meaning of asceticism**

Most if not all scholars agree that yoga grew out of ascetic milieus.<sup>132</sup> But what is actually meant by the Greek word *asceticism*? The word ‘*askesis*’ ([Wikipedia link](#)) means ‘exercise’ and is a ‘practice of chosen self-denial’. An ascetic wants to (1) *control the desires*

*and passions of body and mind (2) in order to achieve a higher good.*<sup>133</sup>

An ascetic overrides the inputs from the senses and the mind – the signals of hunger, thirst, lust, fear, desire, fatigue, heat/coldness, anger, sadness, and pain. The ascetic wants to turn his back on the desires and attachments of this world by disciplining body and mind. Ascetic discourses typically claim that during this process of pain and self-mortification the ascetic becomes purified and strengthens his will. This practice leads to freedom or other metaphysical benefits. (Sarbacker 2008). This is what we might call the meaning of asceticism – ‘the signified’.

Where is the sign of asceticism then pointing – the actual physical practice, ‘the represented’? The physical practice consist of a wide range of austere methods developed in different cultures: fasting for long periods, sitting in the sun for hours, wearing no clothes, sleep deprivation, keeping the body immobile, living in social isolation, extreme simple diet, long breath restraints, sexual celibacy, being silent for years, putting the body under enduring pain.

Most people wonder, why self-inflicted pain? Why do we encounter it in so many cultures? In very general terms, it seems that ascetic practices of painful self-denial lead to *Altered States of Consciousness* (ASC). Various cultures and ascetic discourses then ascribed different meaning to such mental and physical efforts and to the ASC accompanying the painful efforts.

Ascetic discourses then answer the question: what is the *meaning* of voluntarily enduring pain and of experiencing ASC, what does it signify? In answering this, the ASCs are often envisaged as spiritual or ancestral contact; travels to other realms; strengthened subjectivity; and clarification of mind. Sometimes the act of prolonged agony is seen as purifying or empowering, or seen as necessary preparation for performing the ritual and other crucial collective ceremonies. At other times the ability to endure pain is admired by society – it is seen as a sign of character and difference. The strains of asceticism are often charged with respect and authority: the recognition of being perceived as a wilful, tough and fearless person, which are leadership qualities in most warrior cultures.

Another social difference ascribed by ascetic discourse is the build up of ‘purity’. Purity can and does have many various associations and meanings, but it is always an admirable thing to possess.

Hence the *difference* brought by the austerities to the body and mind of the specialist becomes associated with power and recognition in most ascetic discourses. These austere efforts - this ‘labour of asceticism’ - always accumulate high status and symbolic capital. In this way ascetic discourse creates and legitimises social power. But it is not just a question of lust for power. Often the symbolic-value of austerities just reflects human quest for social recognition, popularity and accordingly high ranking.

In summary we realise that the list of competences ascribed to the ascetic specialist, like the capacity to engage with spirits and ancestors, presented as use-value, are in general about generating power and difference – symbolic capital. A person who can talk to ancestors is a powerful person. He needs to be listened to because he possesses a rare resource – cultural capital – that few people have. The discourse charges the ascetic specialist with symbolic

capital - power and difference - which he can use for social transaction and exertion of power. Thus the discourse of asceticism often entitles a person to a leading position in the community.

Each historical culture creates its own version of use- and symbolic-value associated with austere practices. As asceticism is geographically and historically spread over such a variety of societies, we here face an ancient code or habitus which was an integral part of Shamanic cultures and the later societies of Northern India. If we now once more return to Northern India, as semi-pastoral Aryans settled and dominated non-Aryan aborigines, we find that their discourses contained strong elements embodied in the code and habitus of asceticism<sup>134</sup>.

### Various Vedic groups reflecting Shamanism and asceticism

In the *Vedas* ascetic practices are often called *tapas* and we can see that austerity is central to the Vedic outlook. Reading the *Vedas*, we can see a range of people practising all kind of strange austerities. These groups shared many common traits with the Shaman, people who were simultaneously highly respected and much feared, charged with magic and extra ordinary powers. One such groups was the *Rishis* who were even seen to be the source of the *Vedas*. In their drug induced ecstasy they were able to transmit the hymns of the gods. Some of these Shaman-like groups would smear themselves with mud and cow dung or ashes. Some would walk around naked, having special and austere diets – like only drinking milk and eating fruit. Sometimes they were solitary, living at the margins of the tribe, at other times they seemed to live in separate cults or clans.

We hear about the silent *Munis* (sometimes also called the *Kesin* – “long haired”) who could enter states of ecstasy. We also hear of warrior groups – *Vratyas* – who would for practise standing in the sun with an arm raised for very long periods. There were also the *Yatis*, an ascetic clan. And there was the *Brahmacarin* – the young Vedic student going through a rite of passage - who lived for 16 years practising celibacy and other austerities.

So we witness here a cultural field of the Vedic society where more or less religious specialists tapped into the code and habitus underlying ascetic discourse and Shamanism. Like the Shaman – but unlike the Brahmin - they seemed to oscillate between the centre and the periphery of society. An essential part of their symbolic capital was their austerities and their super human powers. This has led many scholars to speculate whether these Vedic groups – and *not* the Brahmins – were the real proto-yogis<sup>135</sup>. These groups certainly shared many of the Asian Shaman’s trance inducing techniques: sensory overload (ecstasy, possession), sensory deprivation (pain and austerities), drug inducement and mind numbing by monotonous repetition. In these groups drugs like *soma* and *darbhga* grass were often mentioned as means of achieving trance – what I call ASC.

However, there is a significant difference. Yoga as it emerged did not produce such ecstatic types of ASC. It actually opposed them. Proto-yoga and early-yoga had instead strong elements of *sensory deprivation*. They wanted to still, not to stir, the mind, as the Shaman and these Vedic groups did. A stirred mind was among the yogis seen as absolutely detrimental to their goals. So whereas yoga was renown for its focus on stilling the mind, there is no indication of this meditative aspect among these Vedic Shaman-like groups<sup>136</sup>. Further – and

this is most significant - in these groups we find none of the discourses of liberation so central to yoga as it emerged. The only thing they shared with yoga was their skill in putting the mind into trance, to create ASC.

In my view these Vedic groups point more backward in time than they point forward towards yoga. I find it highly unlikely that these Vedic groups were proto-yogis. Instead they could more usefully be classified as social identities representing North Indian variations of the Asian Shamanic model – the *marginalised Shaman* discussed earlier (Deeg 1993). With the advent of the Axial Age civilisation these groups were in fact a dying species in many ways. We can now return to the much disputed question whether these Vedic groups' cultural and political opposite – the Vedic Brahmins – were the inventors of yoga.

### ***Tapas – the importance of asceticism in Vedic society***

As we have seen, the *Vedas* witness a range of ascetic practices and many scholars (Eliade 1972 &1990, Feuerstein 1998, Samuel 2008) agree that these practices have their roots in the even older culture of *Shamanism* – practices subscribed to in most Asian Stone-Age hunter-gather and pastoral communities.

In the semi-nomadic clans from which the *Vedas* emerged, ascetic practices were a part of a wider discourse of *tapas* (*heat*). *Tapas* was seen to have enormous importance and had several meanings according to the American professor of religious studies W. Kaelber *Tapta Marga – Asceticism and initiation in Vedic India* (1989). Fundamentally, it was seen as a creative force – as primary energy pervading everything, even the gods. It had similar significance then as *energy* has today post-Einstein: energy is today seen to be inside everything, even what we previously thought were the tiniest elementary particles.

In the *Vedas* *tapas* can directly be translated as ‘heat’. It was a process (something you did) but it was also the result of that process (being heated up). Like *fire*, *tapas* had a transformative power: you would do *tapas* in order to become *tapas*. The gods were pure *tapas*, but by doing *tapas* humans could get rid of pollution and become ‘heated up’, so they also were *tapas* – i.e. semi-gods. The Rishis seen as the authors of the Vedic texts, were able to conceive them because of doing *tapas*.

In the *Vedas*, the discourse of *tapas* was first of all connected to the performance of the fire ritual, central to Vedic societies: the ritual fire had a powerful transformative effect of converting material stuff into energy resources for the gods. It empowered or ‘tapasised’ the gods and the sacrifice would further benefit the universe and the sacrificer.

But it was not only through performance of rituals that one could generate *tapas* – semi-divine high status. Other ascetic techniques – as we know them from Shamanic societies – were seen to have the same effect. Fasting, celibacy, solitariness, prolonged silence, sleep deprivation – all well-known in Shamanic cultures – were popular techniques. This self-inflicted pain within the *tapas* discourse was seen to heat up the adept; he discharged pollution through the ascetic *tapas* by creating inner heat. Later we shall see how the Brahmin priests merged these ideas with yoga, as they envisioned yoga as a variant of *tapas* – an energiser.

The Brahmins specialised in maintaining and performing the fire ritual central to the

coherence of the Vedic Archaic society. That put them in a powerful position. By performing the ritual they would also be *tapasised* – i.e. heated up. This meant that they eliminated pollution, became purified and god-like: pure *tapas* (Kaelber 1989, Smith 1985). As the Brahmins became tapasised – semi-divine – they would accordingly know the cosmos – which was *brahman*. In sociological terms they had become a high status group rich in symbolic capital. All groups involved in *tapas* discourse and practice conditioned and enhanced their symbolic capital in relation to the rest of Vedic society. We see that inherent in *tapas* – an Indian variant of asceticism – there is the taken-for-given-assumption that asceticism can turn a human being into something very powerful – a kind of semi-divine creature.

*The Brahmin tapas discourse has led many to claim that yoga evolved directly out of the Vedic culture. The reason for this is obvious. Often we can see in the Brahmin texts that ‘yoga’ and ‘tapas’ are actually synonymous. Yoga is just a specific variety of tapas. So many conclude that yoga must have its roots in Vedic culture and the tapas discourse. Hence yoga is Brahmin practice, they conclude.*

*However this is very unlikely. Below there is an insert, which shows that the Brahmins in many ways rejected yogic styles of asceticism, as these contradicted Brahmin fundamentals. This insert is not necessary for further reading and can be skipped.*

### **Insert: Brahmin ascetic lifestyles**

*We have seen until now how in the Vedic societies, the code and habitus embodied in asceticism informed the discourse of tapas. We have seen how the Brahmin priests imbued ascetic techniques with Brahmin cosmological significance, power and high status. However in the texts we can also see that the cultural field of the Brahmins were undergoing significant changes generating tensions among the Brahmins. Asceticism could no longer be taken for granted. The ascetic code and habitus – normally an unconscious mental habit - surfaced in the conscious mind and became an object of contention. Let us now see how significant changes to asceticism – around the time that yoga emerged – created divisions and new identities among the Brahmins.*

### **The emergence of the ascetic Brahmin lifestyle**

Asceticism or *tapas* was central to the Brahmin priests. First of all, we can see that the Brahmin sacrificer used austerities to *purify* himself before the fire ritual commenced (Kaelber 1989). This purification by asceticism seems very close to that of the Shaman who also purified himself before his performance. Further, the initiation rites of the young Brahmin male – the practice of *Brahmacarya* – consisted of a period living in asceticism. He lived for many years in chastity in order to build up *tapas*. We also hear about the *Samnyasin*, an elderly Brahmin leaving the household in the order to (sometimes) fast himself to death.

However, at the time we are investigating now – the end of the Vedic period around 600 BC and the following 300 years – Brahmin texts begin to discuss Brahmins, not just practising *tapas* rituals, but turning their whole life into an *ascetic life* of sacrifice.<sup>137</sup> Making *tapas* or asceticism into a life style signalled for them a significant move; a move creating ambivalence and dispute among the Brahmins.

About 400-300 BC the issue of Brahmins living an ascetic lifestyle was addressed in a new genre called the *Dharmasutras* – texts about the rules and regulations of daily life according to the law of the universe. These texts, in the early phase of the genre, dismissed ascetic lifestyles, but later on they embraced it. So we see a change of attitude among some less conservative Brahmins.

This transmission has been thoroughly investigated by J. Bronkhorst, a leading scholar in Indology based in Switzerland, in his book *Two sources of Indian Asceticism* (1993).<sup>138</sup> The discussions among the Brahmins focussed on the question of whether it was permissible to leave rituals behind you in order to live an ascetic life – to turn your entire life into long-lasting *tapas*. Some Brahmins did so in different ways and degrees, but the texts tried to draw up limits for this. It alarmed the Brahmins if ascetic lifestyles dropped *all* the rituals and practices prescribed by the *Vedas*. Why? Because Vedic rituals prevented the world-order and the gods from collapsing. Not performing the ritual could imply military invasions, disease, hunger and evil spirits. In death, it would hurt your ancestors, your present household and clan and later generations. Much was at stake if a Brahmin stopped maintaining the prescribed fire rituals.

The Brahmin *Dharmasutra* discourse – defending and re-defining the Vedic tradition under pressure – could of course only approve of those ascetic lifestyles, which still followed *some* of Vedic injunctions like the fire sacrifice or the recitations of Vedic mantra. Thus an ascetic lifestyle – leaving *all* rituals behind – was not welcome at all. It would not have grown naturally out of the Brahmin culture. It would be like suggesting that socialism evolved among conservative industrial entrepreneurs. Such ideas would instead have been dismissed instantaneously. In short the new ascetic lifestyles totally ignoring the fire rituals – as seen among the *Vanaprasthas* and the *Parivrajaks* – had to be firmly rejected, because they undermined the power base of the Brahmins and the whole Vedic society as such.

But how does all this relate to yoga? The issue is that early-yoga, as it surfaced, seemed to crystallise in a cultural field or social milieu, where it was part of an all-consuming ascetic lifestyle. Early-yoga was synonymous with the Sramanic ascetic life style and very hostile towards Brahmin rituals. If early-yoga initially was such a comprehensive ascetic lifestyle, rejecting all Vedic laws - and it seemed to be so - then it is improbable that it grew naturally out of Brahmin asceticism, seen with cultural sociological eyes. Thus we also see in the *Dharmasutras* that the Brahmins were on their guard to protect their social position against the hereticism represented by the ascetic yoga life style. In a cultural sociological perspective it makes no sense

to claim that ascetic yoga lifestyles evolved in a cultural field which was hostile to them and which actually threatened the very existence of that cultural field.

Yoga most probably then came from another ascetic cultural field. This is also Bronkhorst's point: he identifies in historical sources a second ascetic social milieu, which was non-Vedic. It was a cultural milieu populated by new types of life-style-ascetics who utterly dismissed and scorned the Vedic rituals. Bronkhorst claims that this cultural field mainly emerged in the adjacent Magadha culture, and from here penetrated the Vedic cultural area.

The conservative Brahmins rejected yogic asceticism (the ascetic lifestyle), as we have seen in the insert above. It is then surprising that it was actually the Brahmin texts which were the first to give the new ascetic practices and lifestyles an umbrella name – 'yoga'. Why? To answer this question in a context of cultural sociology, we have to investigate what forced a dominant group to change and adapt ascetic lifestyles. This radical change in cultural practice cannot just be a sign of ideas being under linear, independent intellectual development. Rather, other social groups somehow put the Brahmins under pressure and imposing change upon them. When we return later to the Sramanas and the Kshatriyas (the warrior nobles), we will find an answer that I believe will draw all this together.

*First, we need to investigate the discourse of meditation – the second parameter or element of early-yoga. Here we need to investigate, once more, whether meditation was conceived by the Brahmins or rather by other groups, as this also is highly contested. When we have clarified this, we can finally in a separate chapter turn to the Sramanas where (1) meditation, (2) asceticism and (3) the liberation of the soul merged and trace how proto-yoga surfaced among them.*

*The insert below may be skipped as it deals mainly with Brahmin meditation and it is - once more - unlikely that the discussed Brahmin styles of meditation played a role in yogic meditation, as the insert shows.*

## 4. The genealogy of the Brahmin meditation discourse

### Insert: Brahmin meditation

*If the reader is not interested in the genealogy of meditation, the following insert may be skipped. As we have seen, the reason for this detailed discussion of*

*why yoga could possibly not have been developed by the Brahmins, is to deconstruct a central ideological tenet in the yoga discourse, namely, that the meditative element of yoga is an inherent linear outgrowth of the Vedas and Brahmin religio-cultural practices.*

### **Was there meditation before yoga?**

If we want to investigate the origin of meditation or contemplation, we need to have some proto-definitions of what we understand by it. However, there are many schools of meditation with different ideas about what constitutes ‘meditation’. Further, one can wonder what are the differences in a range of similar notions like ‘contemplation’, ‘absorption’, ‘trance’, ‘one-pointedness’, ‘concentrated focus’? At what point does ‘pondering’ become ‘contemplating’ or even ‘meditating’? If we do not clarify this, the risk is that one investigator will conclude that there was a practice of meditation before yoga, while another reader, examining this very same practice, will conclude that this practice was not ‘meditation’ - but was actually a ‘ritual’.

For our discussion of meditation, I suggest that we initially define it as ‘stilling the mind’ – a process of bringing processes of cognition (thoughts, memories, feelings) to a halt. The meditator’s attention is often but not always redrawn from the output entering the senses and is re-directed towards experiences inside the body-mind system. It is a process of slowing down the activity of the mind as much as possible. So ‘still mind’ is defined as the opposite of a ‘processing mind’, a mind of cognition. Still mind is comparable to dreamless sleep, while ‘cognition’ (normal state of waking consciousness) is comparable to the associative flow of dreams. ‘Still mind’ is in modern terminology an ASC having various measurable effects on the body mind system. This prototype-definition of meditation is chosen because it seems similar to the kind of meditation found among some Sramana groups, who might have influenced what became early yogic meditation. It is, however, a definition making it difficult to distinguish between dreamless sleep and deep absorption, as many meditators can confirm.

Everybody agrees that at the time when early-yoga and Buddhism emerged, there was such a thing as ‘meditation’ – but the question is, what was there before Buddha? Indologists like J. Gonda in *The Vision of the Vedic Poets* (1963) and E. Crangle in *The Origin and Development of Early Indian Contemplative Practices* (1994) have looked at the oldest Vedas to find practices which could be the forerunners of the kind of meditation we find within early-yoga and Buddhism. Their aim was to demonstrate that meditation was not only practised among the Sramanas (as most scholars agree) but also among the Brahmins. This conclusion is confirmed by the Buddhist expert Wynne, who argues that Buddha actually learned an early Brahmin meditation method, called ‘the sphere of nothingness’ or ‘the sphere of neither perception nor non-perception’ (Wynne 2007). Hence let us investigate

whether meditation originated among the Brahmins.

Crangle suggests that there are three notions – *dhih*, *upasana* and *dhyana* – mentioned in the Vedic text tradition, which are candidates for early forms of contemplation practices. I will follow the investigations of Gonda and Crangle into those three forms of “contemplation” to clarify our understanding of ‘meditation’ and how it might in fact divert from that of the Brahmins.

### The *dhi(h)* of the Rishi

It is for instance suggested by Gonda that the *visions* of the Vedic Rishis could be the roots of yogic meditation. The Rishi were – according to tradition - the authors of critical parts of the early Vedas. Through their innate capability – their charisma or artistic-spiritual skills – they were able to have a vision (*dhi*) and express it in lyrical ways. This would become the Vedic hymns. *Dhih* – as an act - means something like ‘religious thought, prayer, devotion’. It is a spontaneous and intuitive skill of seeing hidden connections, the origins of things and the secrets of divine power. *Dhih* is the seer’s holy words transporting the gods to the ritual. So *dhih* seems to be a rhetorical act – a creative and visual outburst of visions achieved by certain means – probably drugs.

The question is, however, whether we would agree that the Rishi - chanting and rambling poetic (but almost incomprehensible) hymns to the gods – was contemplation and/or meditation? If, yes, does that not make any prayer, quiet or ecstatic, found in so many religious traditions, into an early forerunner of meditative yoga? It seems to me that the Rishis put their minds into trance by means of monotonic repetitive numbing techniques or by using drugs, while the still-mind-meditation works with sensory deprivation - two almost opposite approaches.

In summary, if we define meditation with its contemporary meaning as ‘stilling the mind’, then the practice of *dhih* seems to be rather different. Some of the visionary Rishis appear to be originally marginalised groups who used drugs to enhance their social status and ended up becoming celebrated Vedic visionaries.

### The *upasana* ritual under change

While I find it very doubtful that the practice of *dhih* is still-mind-meditative, several Indologists suggest that the practices of *upasana* and *dhyana* could be early Brahmin candidates for meditation. Slightly before the notion of yoga appeared in the middle *Upanishads*, a new notion appeared in the earlier texts of the *Brahmanas* and the *Aranyakas* (both are Brahmin theological text-collections explaining Vedic ritual and ideas). This practice was called *upasana* and is translated as “worship, reverence” or even “worship-meditation”. *Upasana* was also mentioned extensively later on in the *Upanishads* – especially in the early *Upanishads* before yoga was mentioned.

*Upasana* is a practice related to the sacrifice. Instead of sacrificing something physical, like butter, some Brahmins commenced visualising the sacrifice material – so the sacrifice to them became a symbolic act. The Brahmins chose, in other words, some holy material and visualised it in reverence. This became *upasana* – visualised reverence. It translates as “sitting/being near a object at hand”. It became an act of approaching an object by means of devotion. So the Brahmins often chose holy symbols and ideas – like the mantra *om*, *brahman* or *prana* – as objects of their focussed worship. By ongoing contemplation of *brahman*, or by endlessly silently chanting *om*, the Brahmin worshipper would gain more and more knowledge and insight into *brahman* – the underlying principle of everything.

*Upasana* became over time increasingly internalised. As the ritual developed, the sacrifice gradually changed its focus to the internal world of body and mind. In the end, *upasana* became, to some Brahmins, a practice totally replacing the sacrifice – the sacrifice had become an internalised practice.

The classical authority on Indian philosophy S.N. Dasgupta termed *upasana* “substitution-meditation”, and, it seems that here, on the eve of the birth of yoga, we finally have some practice – in relation to the Vedic ritual – which has this meditative quality of being a focussed internalising act. It is a practice, which further reminds us of yoga as a ritual practice as it required prior purification and calm mind of the practitioner. This has also led scholars to conclude that yoga meditation could have developed out of Brahmin institutions in the sense of being a ritual of self-sacrifice.

### ***Upasana - meditation or ritual***

*Upasana* – ‘worship-meditation’ – can be classified as falling somewhere between analysis, worship and meditation. It seems to me that *upasana* has a distinct analytical and cognitive dimension, namely that of gaining knowledge of *brahman*. That aspect could certainly bring to mind Buddhist *insight meditation* appearing about the same time. So here Crangle identifies a point of cross-fertilisation between Brahmin and Buddhist discourses: the importance of thinking, analysing and pondering in relation to inward focussing. Both the Brahmin, performing *upasana*, and the Buddhist, performing *insight meditation*, internalise and ponder on their own doctrinal symbols: the Brahmin, performing *upasana*, ponders on notions like ‘*brahman*’ and ‘*OM*’, while the Buddhist broods over notions like ‘impermanence’ and ‘non-self’. So one could also argue that *upasana* was a form of ‘insight meditation’.

If on the other hand we understand yogic meditation strictly as mortified ‘still-mind’ – which would be a typical modern way of interpretation - then *upasana* practice seems different from yogic meditation. *Upasana* has strong elements of cognitive analysis and/or can be practised as silent chanting, which we do not find in a mortified mind. Both elements of *upasana* require discursive cognition, which

contradicts a modern understanding of meditation (i.e. as yogic ‘still-mind’). Thus seen in this way it is not related to yogic meditation.

There is a third possible interpretation, where yoga is seen in a different context. Here yoga-meditation is still about trance and calming the mind, but as an integral part of a chanting ritual. The general term is *japa* or *pranava* – murmuring and chanting holy words and sounds. The ritual will start as voiced chanting of for example *OM*, which becomes more and more silent until nothing is heard and the ritual becomes an internal process. The Brahmin now moves into still-mind-meditation. At the very end of the process, there is total stillness and silence. As *OM* is the verbal sound representation of *brahman*, then *brahman* being “soundless sound-vibrations” will emerge in the silent mind (Pflueger 1998). The yogi, accordingly, makes ‘union with *brahman*’ – or it is often said there is some kind of ‘*brahman* realisation’. Consequently, we often hear yoga discussed as *nada-yoga* – “sound yoga”. Seen in this third way yogic meditation is a refinement of Brahmin *upasana* rituals – an act of ‘coming near *brahman*’.

So many interpretations are possible. It cannot be ruled out that the yogic meditation of still mind was an outgrowth of *upasana* practices - yoga, as *upasana* version 2.0. So we face a problem of interpretation, which is made worse by the fact that it is not possible to obtain from the texts a precise understanding of how you specifically practise *upasana*: is it a cluster of techniques, is it analytical introspection, is it silent recitation? Does it put you in a trance by monotonic numbing of mind? How did it actually work at that time? What kind of ASC did it generate?

### ***Dhyana* and element meditation**

After discussing in the insert above various Brahmin meditative practices, we will now take a brief look at the practice of *dhyana*. It is often translated as “meditation” and, like the yoga sign, pops up in the *Upanishads*.

In the later *Upanishads*, *dhyana* is listed as one of several yoga technologies, so here we have a meditation style explicitly linked to the yoga sign. However, *dhyana* is already mentioned in some of the early *Upanishads preceding* yoga, indicating that there was *dhyana* before there was yoga. *Dhyai* – its root form - means “to think of”. In the early pre- Buddhist and pre-yoga *Upanishads* it is not clear what *dhyana* is about. In the *Kausitaki Upanishad* it seems to be about “thoughts in relation to consciousness”, according to Crangle. But what does that imply? Is *dhyana* already the meditation it would become later on, or is it rather about concentrated thinking?<sup>139</sup>

It is first in the post-Buddhist *Mundaka Upanishad* that *dhyana* is translated as and used in the meaning of meditation. Buddhism was from day one strongly associated with meditation so the *Mundaka Upanishad* could have picked up *dhyana* meditation from here. This implies that we admit the possibility that *dhyana* meaning “meditation” comes from a practice *outside* the Brahmin tradition – from Sramana groups like the Buddhists and the Jains. This is confirmed by the fact that within the Buddhist discourse, the sign *dhyana* had a central role

from the very beginning and was about meditative absorption. It was called ‘*jhana*’ and seen to consist of a hierarchy of stages of increasing absorption. The Jains also used *dhyana* meditation as a part of their asceticism. So when *dhyana* finally signified ‘still-mind meditation’ in the *Upanishads* it could at that point of time easily be an import.

This leaves the question still open: was there *dhyana* meditation before Buddhism, Jainism and early-yoga? By looking at Buddhist sources we might have an answer. They use the term ‘*jhana*’ instead of the Sanskrit ‘*dhyana*’. In some sources we hear that Buddha remembered how as a child he had practised *jhana* meditation, which he described as tranquil and blissful. Based on *jhana*, Buddha developed his own style of meditation. So according to some Buddhist discourse there seems to have been a pre-Buddhist and maybe pre-yoga practice of *dhyana* meditation. It seems to be a gentle style far away from the strenuous and disciplined way in which meditation often is described, according to Bronkhorst (1986).

However, there are other Buddhist sources telling an entirely different story. They claim that two Brahmin teachers actually taught Buddha meditation. This issue has been investigated intensively by A. Wynne in *The Origin of Buddhist Meditation* (2007). Wynne concludes that these sources provide a historically correct account. There is textual evidence, according to Wynne, showing that the Brahmins, prior to Buddha, had developed a style of meditation similar to the way in which *dhyana* meditation is described in Buddhist sources. Some scholars then counter argue that the Brahmins actually learned this meditation from the Jains, as it has all the hallmarks of their ‘mortified mind’ meditation. Against that Wynne argues that this Brahmin meditation was genuinely theirs, because this meditation style was a kind of ‘element meditation’ closely related to Brahmin cosmology. ‘Element meditation’ follows a process of mentally reversing the evolution of cosmos, as described by the Brahmin cosmology. In this way the meditator, layer after layer - element after element - moves back to the element of origin, *brahman*.

Element meditation is a style of meditation where the meditator in his imagination focusses on the fundamental elements of Brahmin cosmos like earth, wind, water, fire and space. By following these, the meditator returns to *brahman* to the ‘sphere of nothingness’ or the ‘sphere of neither perception nor non-perception’. Most modern readers would probably recognise this as ‘meditation’. Wynne here supports the view that *dhyana* meditation could logically have developed naturally out of Brahmin institutions and cosmology.

### New Axial Age groups and their wisdom discourses

It can convincingly be argued based on close reading of the texts that various forms of meditation like *upasana*, *dhyana* and element meditation could have evolved out of Brahmin institutions. These new techniques seem to have in common that in one way or another they all generate some form of ASC. It is not quite clear exactly what exact kind of trance-like mind states were generated, but many of them seem different and new compared to the older experiences generated by *tapas* rituals and austerities. We can also observe how the written Brahmin discourse ascribes use- and symbolic value to these trance experiences or ASC. Basically the use-value seems to be about ‘getting closer to *brahman*’.

*Brahman* - a new religio-philosophical notion evolving slowly - was a principle simultaneously inherent in (immanent) and beyond (transcendent) reality. ‘Getting closer’ seems to mean experiencing and understanding this abstract principle in new direct ways. This was the purpose (or use-value), that the Brahmins associated with the ASC generated by their new meditative techniques. The symbolic significance was that this meditative ‘closeness’ placed the Brahmin – who often monopolised the right to conduct many types of rituals - in the high status situation of being the only one capable of knowing the underlying reality. This act of giving such significance to the power of thinking and abstract knowledge signifies the surfacing of wisdom discourses.

In the two other Axial Age civilisations of Greece and China similar *ontological* ([Wikipedia link](#)) reflections about the fundamentals of reality occurred among intellectuals. Greek abstract nature philosophy had already been under way since the six century BC promoted by philosophers like Thales, Parmenides, Heraclitus, Anaximander and Anaximenes (Seaford 2004, Bellah 2011). In China similar abstract nature philosophy was beginning to emerge among itinerant intellectuals who would later become the Taoists. The newly emergent upper classes of Greece and China speculated whether there were some common principles behind the multitude of reality and gods. It seemed to them that behind or beyond the observable world we experience (the immanent world) there seemed to be a transcendent and not observable world. They began to reflect on the nature and significance of this transcendent world (Dalfert 2012). Slowly the Axial Age intellectuals reduced the number of basic elements and number of gods. Elements like fire, earth, water and air often ended up being reduced to a single one – the One (McEvilley 2002, Seaford 2004). Gods – previously very similar to superhumans - were replaced by abstract principles like *yin* and *yang*. What seemed specific to the Indian Brahmin speculations was the notion of ‘getting closer’ to the One. This Indian discourse on the One was not about rational explanations and investigations – like some of the Greeks<sup>[140](#)</sup> - but took a new direction by connecting the One with new meditative techniques, which the Brahmins framed as an extension of their existing rituals.<sup>[141](#)</sup>

### Why change if you are in power?

Sociologically the pre-Axial Brahmins had been a dominant group representing and protecting the old Vedic society. This makes it difficult to explain why they alone would voluntarily develop controversial new ideas and practices: why should they now begin to undermine their power and status by introducing new rituals and religio-philosophical discourses? We have to consider the significant risk the Brahmins ran if they started to change their carefully prescribed rituals and practices. The rituals had enormous symbolic meaning for the community. They kept order in society, maintained the gods, kept evil demons at bay, protected the harvest, secured fertility and happiness. You do not just start to play about with practices, which have such an impact. It could have caused fear and panic in the local community and the “liberal” Brahmin would most probably have been replaced. So the Brahmins would have been very conservative and like their communities very reluctant to change practices that were meant to keep total anarchy at bay.

Following this line of argument we need to ask, what forced the Brahmins to change their rituals – to introduce “meditation”/ new rituals – and incorporate new ideas about the One into their existing discourses? Who and what were the new emerging social strata and institutions, which introduced the new and forced the Brahmins to adapt and change? Were the Brahmins “inspired” by other groups, who threatened the Brahmins’ power by employing for instance “meditative” techniques? Instead of responding to an intellectual urge to innovate, did the Brahmins respond to competing or dominating social groups invading their cultural field?

Based on such conflict sociological questions, we have to look for conflicts, competitors and social change initiating Brahmin institutional and discourse change. This sociological view does not deny that the Brahmins among themselves could have developed new discourses like meditation, internal sacrifices, the abstract One and yoga<sup>142</sup>. It only says that some external forces – social change and competition – must have triggered this evolution. It would not have happened on its own. Enter the Sramanas and the Kshatriyas.

*With these reflections we are now ready to look at the third defining parameter of the emerging yoga discourses. With the discourse of liberation we move into a new way of thinking – an episteme – which would become typical of the emerging Axial Age civilisations. New codes and habitus emerge with the arrival of civilisations and they now start to clash and/or merge with preceding structures. These are exactly the processes we observe among the Sramanas. We will see how especially among the Jains dramatic innovations are taking place reflecting their epoch and their specific social position. We will also see how existing habitus and codes discussed in this chapter made the Jains and other Sramanas new discourses and practices understandable and acceptable to the surrounding society.*

# **Chapter 4**

# The social and cultural conditions of proto-yoga

## Key Concepts

<u>Kshatriyas</u>	<u>Ritual suicide</u>
<u>Sramana groups</u>	<u>Still-mind meditation</u>
<u>Immovable Self</u>	<u>Sramana as intellectuals</u>
<u>Karma</u>	<u>Samsara</u>
<u>Path of mortification</u>	<u>Metaphysics of release</u>

*Our investigations have revealed that before yoga was actually mentioned for the first time in the texts of the Brahmins, similar discourses and practices were developed and practised in other groups. I have chosen to call these initial discourses from which the yoga sign emerged proto-yoga.*

*Proto-yoga practices and discourses originated and spread among Northern Indian forest wanderers - the Sramanas – who often lived an ascetic life, especially among the Jains. However, at the time of Buddha, proto-yoga was adopted by some of the dominant castes of Brahmins and Kshatriyas (warrior nobles). It was members of the Brahmin caste who reluctantly became the authors of yoga, as they were the first to write about it. But it was probably the Kshatriyas who gave yoga its name. The three social groups – the Sramanas (the inventors), the Kshatriyas (the users) and the Brahmins (the authors) – and the conflicts between them are shown to condition the rise of the yoga discourse.*

*The Sramanas did not use the word ‘yoga’ for their diverse and competing practices. Proto-yoga discourses tended to be a configuration of three underlying principles/discourses, namely (1) meditative (2) ascetic lifestyles and technologies aiming for (3) the liberation of the soul. This configuration also became the cornerstone of the yoga discourse in the Upanishads <sup>143</sup>. The new discourse - galvanised and formatted by the signs of karma and moksha (release) - ignited a new cultural field of specialist among the Sramanas. These notions evolved and were intertwined in the process of these specialists turning an Archaic cultural institution of suicide into a profession.*

*Many readers mainly interested in contemporary yoga forms might find proto-yoga a weird, alien and distant culture. They might struggle to see any similarities with the yoga*

they have experienced. Such readers could skip this chapter and jump to the chapter on early-yoga, which deals directly with the first yoga text known. However the reader should be warned – even early-yoga is a culture entirely different from contemporary yoga.

## 1. The genealogy of the liberation discourse

### The Sramanas and Kshatriyas – their social background

We shall now have a look at the groups where (1) meditative (2) ascetic practices leading to (3) liberation of the soul – my proto-definition of yoga – emerged as a cohesive cluster. These points were the hallmarks of the Sramanas.

In Buddhist texts documenting the period 500-400 BCE and later, we can read about ascetic forest wanderers renouncing village and town based life. These new groups were often called *Paribbjajaka* (in Sanskrit: *Parivrajaka*, meaning ‘houseless’) or *Sramanas* (“strivers”).<sup>144</sup> The Sramanas, as for instance Buddha and the Jain Mahavira, came from the central Gangetic plain, the Magadha cultural area which was an advanced Iron Age society. This region was also influenced by Vedic culture but not dominated by it in the way we see in the areas of orthodox Brahmin-Vedic cultures of Northwest India (five Punjab rivers, early parts of Ganges). The Magadha area was much further advanced in its civilisation and empire building process than the Vedic heartland. Agriculture, productive cultivation of rice and the use of iron, Archaic state building, increased specialisation and division of labour and urbanisation made the former pastoral life cattle raising uncommon.

As we have seen, politically the area was divided into 16 kingdoms and 16 republic confederations (*Gana-sanghas*) all combatting each other. A group of noble warriors – the Kshatriyas - politically dominated these societies. The Sramanas were closely linked to the Kshatriyas in many ways. Many of their leaders came from the Kshatriya strata and many Kshatriyas in old age joined the Sramanas in the forests. The Kshatriyas have been characterised as follows, highlighting them as invading foreign warrior clans, a notion well known from many instances of early European history and elsewhere:

The rise of this class can probably be compared with the Norman conquest of England, as the growth of a royal caste following the subjugation of a nation by foreigners. The Kshatriyas included not only the members of the royal houses and their kinsmen and nobles but also royal military vassals and feudal chiefs corresponding practically to the barons of early English history (Chatterji 2007, p. 410)

With the advent of the Axial Age civilisation, the Kshatriyas were caught up in lasting conflict between their emerging petty states ending with the establishment of the Mauryan Empire a couple of hundred years later.<sup>145</sup> This was the general process of the Axial Age civilisation, which simultaneously revolutionised Mediterranean countries and China. The

Axial Age civilisation was the flowering of noble warrior clans like the Kshatriyas, who built up centralised Empires based on military conquest and slavery. Already at the time of Buddha the large kingdoms of Kosala and Magadha dominated and threatened the so-called *Khattiya* – the confederations of “aristocratic” landowners – to which Buddha belonged<sup>146</sup>. Many small noblemen and monarchs lost out to invading and victorious princes. We are talking about a period of significant structural change in the underlying eco-material and political conditions: republican confederations in retreat, contending kingdoms in a process of monopolisation, the establishment of trans-regional ruling aristocratic warrior clans. In this context two social groups became central to the genealogy of yoga: the Sramanas and the Kshatriyas.

It was in such turbulent times – as it was in the other Axial Age societies - that new strong groups of Sramanas (i.e. itinerant intellectuals) evolved. There were many different kinds – some sources mention up to sixty different sects or groups. The culture of leaving the village to roam the forest was not new to Northern India. This way of living had since long been known to ascetic forest wanderers, as several scholars claim (Chakravarti 1996, Dutt 1924, 1996 ed. and Rhys Davis 1908, 2004 ed.). It was an ancient way of living echoing what I have called Shamanism. In other words we are talking about the '[peripheral Shamans](#)' : Shamans socially displaced at the edge of society from where they now exerted their symbolic power. Under these extraordinary social changes and perpetual wars, there might have been a revival of this cultural field. By “emulating” or entering the ancient cultural field of the Shaman the individual exiled Kshatriya solved his social crisis. In this way he stepped into a cultural field, which imbued him with respect and status.

Thus an old cultural field was revived at this point in history by the new types of outcasts originating in the ruling strata losing their power by the advent of larger regional kingdoms.<sup>147</sup> They compensated their loss of political and economical capital by replacing it with cultural capital. Accordingly we see that founding leaders like Buddha and the Jain reformer Mahavira came from the Kshatriyas – the noble warrior class who were often highly educated (Chatterji 2007, Graeber 2011). These elites in social retreat, just copied the lifestyle of ascetic mendicants.

Out of this process of re-positioning emerged new Sramaṇa groups of highly sophisticated people, representing the intellectual and cultural elite of society, enjoying gathering together; discussing and exchanging advanced and often critical intellectual ideas. These groups were not only “religious” oriented sects; many of them were rather perceived as physicians, social reformers and teachers of nature, a new kind of intellectual specialist who reflected the increased division of labour that takes place in any process of civilisation.

From Buddhist texts, it is clear that a majority of the monks were recruited from upper echelons of society (Benavides 2000, Chakravarti 1996). A large proportion were even converted Brahmins. So the Sramanas were closely related to the transforming situation of the upper classes – especially the hegemonic aristocratic warrior class. Hence we also see that groups like the Buddhist and the Jains simulated and mirrored the organisation forms of the Kshatriyas. The uniformed and institutionalised life of the monks shared many expressions and traits with the political organisations of the Kshatriyas republics and their military lifestyles (Obeskeyere 2002). However, as modern readers we should not be tempted to associate the

Kshatriyas with what we normally understand by ‘warriors’. We should rather think of them as the ruling Greek and later Roman aristocratic families who produced thinkers like Plato and Seneca.

In summary, as the whole Sramana movement has many hallmarks of intellectualism, education and urbanisation common to the advent of the Axial Age civilisation, I have concluded that it was clearly an elitist upper strata movement.<sup>148</sup> In that respect they can be compared to similar intellectual groups appearing in China and Greece at the same time with whom they shared many themes and ideas (Graeber 2011, McEvilly 2002, Bellah 2011).

### The various groups and their new discourses

Let us look at some examples of these Sramana groups. There were the *Lokayats* described as philosophical rationalists (opposing traditionalism). They saw human life as determined by physical laws and they rejected meta-physical speculation. They were similar to the philosophical materialists of *Carvakas*, who maintained that after death we dissolve into our four natural elements: earth, fire, water and wind. There was no life after death, they claimed.

The *Ajivikas* by contrast maintained that there was life after death and it was pre-determined by an impersonal cosmic principle unchangeable by humans.<sup>149</sup> Then there were the *Jains*, who claimed that we had an immovable soul, which could be liberated through living a special life and through mortification techniques.

Finally, there were the *Buddhists* in close discussion with most of these groups, claiming that they knew how to reach a state called *nirvana*. The Buddhists like some of the other groups tended to give new significance to wisdom and knowledge about the fundamentals of reality. As in Greece there developed in India the notion that such knowledge could lead to unprecedented “happiness”, or in India’s case: release (*moksha, nirvana*).

In this way emerging Axial Age wisdom discourses – constructing knowledge as the new highway to happiness and metaphysical benefits – merged with existing ascetic discourses among especially the Sramanas. This mixture and clash of the old discourses (asceticism) with the new discourses (wisdom) was significant for the crystallisation of yoga practices and signs. There were two entirely different ways of generating and framing cultural capital: an Archaic method of accumulating semi-divinity versus and Axial Age method of accumulating knowledge. However, with the sign ‘*moksha*’ (release) they managed to bring these discourse tensions together under a single fragile theoretical hat.

Reviewing the various Sramana groups it is striking that one group is never mentioned in either Sramanic nor Brahmin text sources – the yogis. So in this period - contrary to most popular writings on yoga - there are no historical indications of a social group labelled yogis – neither among the Sramanas nor among the Brahmins. I will return to this in the chapter on early-yoga.

### The Sramana – a high status “sophist”, ascetic and physician

Many of the groups mentioned were not only philosophical and theoretical by inclination, but were also involved in a range of practical issues. Many of them practised medicine; they were physicians working with herbs, ointments, and dressings.<sup>150</sup> Others worked closely with kings and royal courts as advisors and administrators and some specialised in astrology.

Later, about 300 BCE – as the region finally was consolidated into the Mauryan Empire – the Greeks sent Megasthenes as ambassador to the court of the new king Bimbisara. Megasthenes was impressed by the wealth and power of the new Empire. The Greek historian Strabo (64 BCE – 21 CE) in his *Geography* quoted some of Megasthenes' observations of the Sramanas.

“And with regard to the Garmanes [i.e. Sramanas], [Megasthenes] says that some, the most esteemed are called Hylobii [i.e. the forest dwellers], who live in the forest, [existing] on leaves and wild fruits, [wearing] clothings of tree bark, without [indulging in] sexual intercourse and wine. [He says that] they associate with the kings who, through messengers, inquire about the cause [of things]; and who, through those [forest dwellers], serve and petition the divinity”.

We have here the impression of the Sramana – an ascetic and high status person consulted even by kings who sought advice on religious and intellectual matters. A person rich in cultural capital, but very poor in economic capital.

Some Sramanas were even physicians, as we hear from the Greek writer Strabo:

“ [Megasthenes says that] the physicians come second in [so far as] honor; and [that they are] philosophers, as it were, concerning mankind frugal, but not living off the land, who sustain themselves with rice and barley groats, all of which [he says] the one who is begged and who welcome them in hospitality, supplies to them”.

In other words, the Sramanas live not only off the forest but also from alms earned as physicians. Strabo explains that the physicians prescribe drugs and ointment. He then leaves a final impression of the Sramanas: their mortification techniques, their skills in prayer and spells and their skills in dealing with the dead.

“And [he says that] both the latter [the physicians] and the former [the forest dweller] practice endurance, both actively and inactively, so they can continue being fixed in one posture the whole day; and there are others who are prophetic, skilled in the use of incantations, and skilled in the words and customs associated with the ‘departed’, and who go begging through both villages and cities;..”<sup>151</sup>

### The Sramana and Kshatriya discourses on the liberation of the immovable self

The early forms of these groups – the “proto-Sramanas” (i.e. Sramanas before Buddha and the Jain reformer/founder Mahavira) - originated around 600-500 BCE with the advent of the Axial Age civilisation. Many of them were atheists and they employed strict forms of austerity that would often lead to their death. Their asceticism had an almost suicidal character. It is significant that the purpose of their ascetic living was radically different from the Brahmin semi-renouncers who later followed them. Many of the Sramanas and Kshatriyas of whom we hear around 400 BCE sought release (*moksha*) from an eternal cycle of rebirth (*samsara*). After their death, they claimed, they would not be reborn. They were then ‘released’ from re-incarnations. Over the following pages we will investigate the institutional context in which this new discourse evolved. First I want to give an outline description of this new Axial Age discourse of “the liberation of the soul” (as we often call it today) and the social groups to which it belonged.

Belief in re-birth is seen in many historical and anthropological societies in many parts of

the world and it was widely shared in Vedic and pre-Vedic India (Obeyesekere 2007). From some of the first *Upanishads* surfacing around 600 BCE we can see that influential Kshatriya sages taught the Brahmins radical new ways of thinking about re-birth. In pre Axial Age societies (and many non-complex societies) re-birth was perceived as an *automatic* running cosmic process. Often it was seen as a natural cycle of a deceased ancestor returning to the tribe. However the Kshatriyas claimed that the individual through his *own efforts* could influence the route and conditions of afterlife and the following re-birth.

Often we see the *Upanishads* expressing solely Brahmin views as they were written and maintained by Brahmins. However we need perhaps to reconsider that perception and try to see some Brahmin texts as expressing a collection of views reflecting conflicting social groups. Some Brahmin clans chose for various reasons – or were maybe even “forced” by conditions to – to write down the new teachings emerging in the Axial Age civilisation. Often they would just give the new ideas a Brahmin twist so it was acceptable to them. Under all circumstances many of the *Upanishads* clearly state that many of the sages and teachers of the texts are kings and noble warriors (Kshatriyas) and their students are explicitly Brahmins (Obeyesekere 2002, Chatterji 2007). This dominance of Kshatriyas is very clear in relation to the new re-birth ideas discussed in the earliest *Upanishads*. In fact a warrior noble in the *Brhadaranyaka Upahishad* positively makes us aware of this reversal of roles and asks:

“Isn’t it a reversal of the norm for Brahmin to become the pupil of a Kshatriya?” (Brhad. Ups. 2.1.15).

The *Chandogya Upanishad* confirms that this new knowledge is introduced by the Kshatriyas to the Brahmins as a king says:

Guatama, let me tell you this knowledge has never reached the Brahmins. As a result in all the worlds governments has belonged exclusively to Kshatriya (Chan. Ups. 5.2.7)

It is clear from these early *Upanishads* that a new *discourse of re-incarnation (samsara)* had gained general acceptance among many of the Kshatriyas. At about the same time or maybe a century later many Sramanic groups were also preoccupied with similar thoughts. The communal Vedic rituals, praying for victories and health for the community, were not seen as relevant by Sramanas and many Kshatriyas. Actually Brahmin ritualism was often directly scorned and ridiculed (Bronkhorst 2006, Gombrich 2009, Chakravarti 1996). Instead it was the individual, not the community, who moved to the centre of concern. The discussion was now engaged with his or her ‘release’ from re-birth. Or rather, it was the inner ‘self’ or ‘soul’, which was to be released or ‘liberated’ from reincarnation. The individual body only provided a transient container for an eternal soul. The body changed but the soul did not, according to this new discourse. In many ways this notion of ‘soul’ shared many of the characteristics of Axial Age discourses of transcendence and ontology: discourses about an eternal transcendent (beyond the observable) entity forming the ontological substance of, in this case, a human being.

It was generally assumed that we have an immovable inner core, a real self, separate from human body and mind. It was a notion of an ‘inner immovable self’, detached from the body and mind activities. Body and mind were in constant change – but not the immovable soul. The soul never died but indefinitely returned and was re-incarnated in new body-mind systems. In the *Upanishads* the immovable soul generally emerged under the name *atman*. In

Samkhya philosophy (a true Axial Age ontological discourse), this non-moving soul was called *purusha* and the restless body-mind system was seen to be a part of *prakriti*. Finally, it was claimed by many Sramanas and Kshatriyas that the liberation of this immovable self from eternal re-births could only be achieved by self-effort.<sup>152</sup> This move to self-efforts signified a decisive shift in outlook.

So among the Sramanas and Kshatriyas from the very early days there were two central discourses, later crystallised as central themes within many yoga forms: (1) an ascetic lifestyle (based on pre-Axial/ Archaic societies and discourses) and (2) the quest for liberation of the detached inner self (the ‘immovable soul’) from re-birth (based on Axial Age societies and discourse). Let me illustrate the last point in a different way.

Sramanic asceticism and goals of liberation were further tied into strict rules of how to live. We could call this a *philosophical lifestyle* (Hadot 1995), as it was a life interwoven and ruled by *ethics*. Among Greek and Chinese intellectuals it was similarly argued that living a life of wisdom and ethics would lead to happiness. As we shall soon see the aspiration of ethical living in India also became critical for the release of the soul. This quest grew out of the new notion of *karma* (‘action’). *Karma* was tightly intertwined with the notion of *samsara* (re-birth): through ethical living – own efforts (i.e. own actions) - the *individual* could influence future re-births (Obeyesekere 2007, Gombrich 2009). This kind of thinking carries all the hallmark of Axial Age based wisdom discourses: individualism and transcendent ontological entities both being connected with ethics (Bellah 2011).

It seems that these different groups of proto-Sramanas developed a relatively shared platform of ethics. Later Buddhist, Jain and Samkhya yoga texts are very similar in their ethical prescriptions of the correct lifestyle preparing the ground for final liberation. These were prescriptions like non-harming, truthfulness, non-stealing, celibacy, non-greediness, correct view, correct intention, and correct mindfulness. In the much later *Yoga Sutra*, for instance, such ethical rules were grouped into two: *yama* and *niyama*. The novice Sramana would commence living according to such rules and as his body-mind-complex was slowly purified, calmed and achieved insight, he was then finally seen to be able to engage with the challenge of gaining true liberation (Sarbacker 2008). This line of thought became central to the Jains, but we will see it appear over and over again in liberation and salvation discourses throughout Indian history.

*We have now given an overview of the new Axial Age discourses – connecting wisdom (transcendental insights), happiness, lifestyle and ethics - emerging among the Kshatriyas and Sramanas. We will now investigate the cultural field from which such new discourses grew out. In such a context we will find that these discourses were tightly intertwined with new practices of stilling the mind – meditation. In fact we will see that when brought together in a cultural field, the new discourses and practices of meditation then mutually defined and gave meaning to each other. We will then see that it was such a configuration that later gave rise to the early-yoga discourse.*

## 2. Discourses of still-mind and *karma* evolving out of suicide rituals

### The ascetic mortification of the body-mind system

The Sramanic discourse on asceticism was guided by the idea that the desires of the human body-mind system, in one way or another, led the individual astray. As long as the soul was entangled in the desires of this world – conditioned by human body and mind - it could not liberate itself. This view was shared by the Kshatriyas in the *Brhadaranyaka* and *Chandogya Upanishads*. Many Sramanas drew the conclusion that human desires had to be mortified. This would become a guiding idea in the Buddhist discourse, where the final eradication of desire – *thrisna* - would lead to release and *nirvana*.

The early Jain- and Ajivika Sramanas - I call them proto-Sramanas - adhered to a very strong version of austerities, which we could call the *path of mortification*: the belief that a life in severe asceticism, ultimately ending in death, would lead to some metaphysical achievements (Bronkhorst 1993). Asceticism was for them directly linked to the soul and its liberation. Thus we read in the early Jain text *Ayaramga* :

“When a monk thinks: ”I am indeed tired of carrying around this body in these circumstances” he should gradually reduce his food: having gradually reduced his food and diminished his passions, his body being prepared, standing like a plank, his body pacified .....he should ask for grass ..... he should spread the grass; and having spread the grass, at that occasion, he should reject body, activity, and movement. The firm ones, having reached the liberation, powerful and wise, knowing all that is excellent.”

This quotation seems actually to describe an ascetic act leading to ritual suicide. Although Jain texts are of a later date some aspects like the ritual suicide reflect this early proto period. Bronkhorst (1993) recognises that the path of ascetic mortification of the body, walked by the proto-Sramanas, often actually had the sombre purpose of *ritual suicide*. Asceticism was to many of them not just a lifestyle, but literally ritualised self-mortification. They reduced eating and drinking and finally stopped breathing – a practice later on also described among the Brahmin forest hermits.

This leads to the interesting hypothesis that some of the proto-Sramanas originated among death cults preparing people to die in a proper way. They were in some way counsellors and managers of pre- and post- death experiences like the Greek Megasthenes mentioned in the earlier quotation. So the act and way of ‘proper dying’ – one of the aims of the proto-Sramanas – was contemplated in their new ascetic discourses and practices. We have to consider the possibility that some Sramanas – displaced local upper classes - found a new way of living as “consultants in proper ways of dying”. It was in this context – which I define as a cultural field – that they developed new Axial Age discourses about the release from re-birth, the immovable soul, a peaceful afterlife, the effect of an ethical life and so on.

Thus we have now seen that asceticism (one of the principles of yoga) had various specific meanings to some of the Sramanas. Their version of asceticism was defined and given meaning by rituals and discourses related to death and dying. Hence it is assumed that the new discourses linking asceticism with the release of the soul evolved out of ancient rituals of suicide. In this way we have defined a significant new and different cultural field, where professional intellectuals specialising in “the art of dying” developed new Axial Age discourses related to that cultural field. It was a field strongly conditioned by the code and habitus embodied in asceticism.

So we have established a connection between suicide rituals and the proto-yogic parameter of asceticism. Can we also link the second parameter of meditation to this context? Could Sramanic meditation practices also have emerged out of such cultural fields of death rituals? In other words could yogic meditation be seen as evolving out of new ascetic rituals of mortifying the body and mind? To answer this we need to look further into how the Sramanas constructed meditation as closely linked to liberation, the third parameter of proto-yoga. In order to do this I will follow another influential book by the Indologist J. Bronkhorst *The two Traditions of Meditation in Ancient India* (1986). We shall see here how the meaning of meditation as ‘still-mind’ perhaps emerged as a part of Sramanic ascetic suicide rituals.

### **The discourse of *karma***

It seems logical that in the ritual process of mortifying the body of a dying person, the proto-Sramanas realised that the mental processes also needed to be mortified. *Both* the body and the mind needed to be prepared for the moment of death in order to secure a correct and beneficial slide into death. How could one prepare the mind for death?

The mind was perceived as one of the human senses. Mind and senses belonged to *prakriti*, which by definition meant they were in perpetual movement. A new aim of austerity became not only to stop the movements and processes of the body but also the thoughts and feelings constantly emerging in consciousness. Meditation became a tool in relation to develop a ‘still mind’ – a specific altered state of consciousness (ASC) very similar to death. We could say that meditation for the Sramanas became a new kind of 'ascese' (an austere exertion) directed towards the mind’s death. Bronkhorst introduces the term ‘mortification of the mind’ to describe this specific kind of asceticism of the mind called meditation.

But why did the individual need to stop the ever-fluctuating mind before dying? This is where the sign *karma* enters. The *karma* sign gives meaning to why a calm mind is required before dying. So first – what does the sign mean?

Hitherto the sign *karma* in the Vedic context signified ‘ritual action’ - for instance the fire sacrifice. But here at the dawn of the Axial Age, *karma* was given new signification. As we saw in the early *Upanishads*, *karma* now became associated with notions like ‘consequences’, ‘results’, ‘causes’, ‘ethics’ and ‘intentions’. Any action – any *karma* - was seen to have *consequences* for a future situation. Hence *karma* was the notion that any movement caused further movement: an endless chain of causations and consequences. This *karma* sign was as we have seen closely linked to death and re-birth: a person’s actions in this life would have

consequences for after-life and re-birth. Thus the new *karma* sign received signification from a group of interlinked signs: especially release (*moksha*) and re-birth (*samsara*). Other important interlinked signs were ‘the soul’ (having various names like *atman*, *purusha*, *jiva*) and suffering (*dukkha*). This sign system is often called the *Doctrine of Karma*.<sup>153</sup>

It is this radical new discourse of *karma* that gave meaning to the new practice of meditation as being the ‘mortification of the mind’, according to Bronkhorst. Let us now return to the signification of the still-mind.

### The Jains bringing together *karma*, still-mind and release

The Jains strongly propagated the idea that there is an ‘immovable self’ (soul), detached from the owner’s body and mind. The law of *karma* according to the Jains however also affected the soul.<sup>154</sup> A life conducted in action in the Jain view charged the soul – the *jiva* - with *karma*: pushed ‘the immovable’ in movement. Hence, the normally immovable *jiva* was after death so loaded with “unruly inertia”, that it returned to earth (*samsara*), implying another round of suffering (*dukkha*). The *jiva* needed to be returned to its original immovable state.

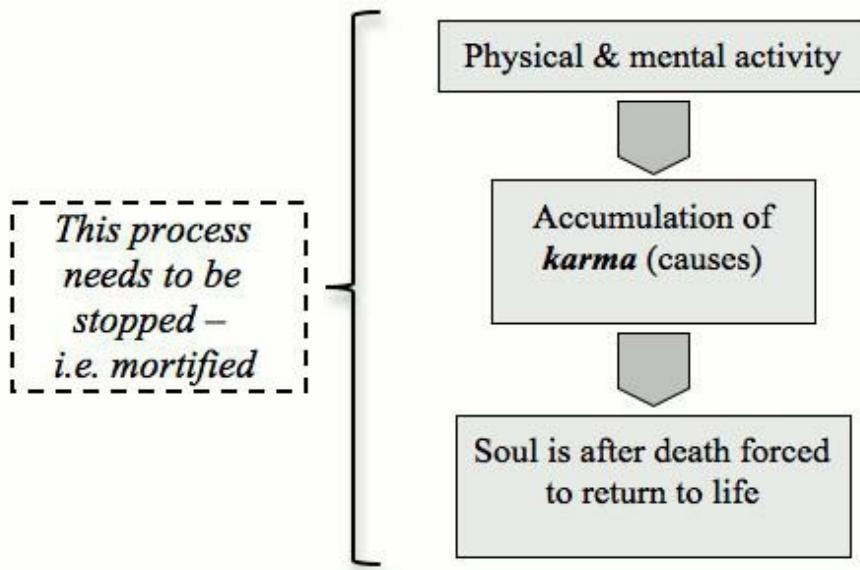
Hence *karma* had to be eradicated from the unruly body and mind in order for the *jiva* to be emptied of *karma* and hence find peace - entering the technique of asceticism and still-mind meditation.

This process of correct ritual suicide - incorporating meditation as a crucial element - is described in the Jain text *Uttarajjhayana*, which teaches:

“....he stops all activities and enters pure meditation (sukkajjhana) in which only subtle activity remains and from which one does not fall back; he first stops the activity of his mind, then of his speech and body, then he puts a stop to breathing out and breathing in. .... Being in pure meditation in which activity has been cut off and from which there is no return, simultaneously destroys the four parts of karma ...”.

So according to Jain logic, by stopping all physical and mental activity (which stops the accumulation of *karma* in the soul), a *jiva* could opt out of the eternal circle of *samsara*.<sup>155</sup> By the technique of holding both the body and mind motionless, by slowly stopping the intake of food, by stilling the mind and by restraining the breath one would through all this inactivity slowly slide into death - and liberation. The *jiva* would not return.

## The process of karma



In summary it is within the institution of ritual suicide that asceticism, still-mind meditation and Axial Age *karma* doctrine are interwoven into a coherent discourse. Meditation, implying the stilling of mind and breath, thus became the final act of an ascetic death process. Meditation became an element of a pre-Axial Age ritual, ensuring that the immortal and immovable self (an Axial Age transcendent entity) was in absolute stillness (which was its actual nature to be) as it slid into eternity, as explained by the *Karma* doctrine.

We can further conclude that the *Karma* doctrine and its accompanying signs clearly reflect the advent of Axial Age thinking – *karma* is no longer signified by Archaic discourses but by emerging Axial Age *wisdom discourses*. Here the Axial Age notion of *transcendence* (exemplified with ‘the eternal soul’) is linked with notions of individuality, ethics, lifestyle, and ontological insight.

## 3. The crystallisation of proto-yoga

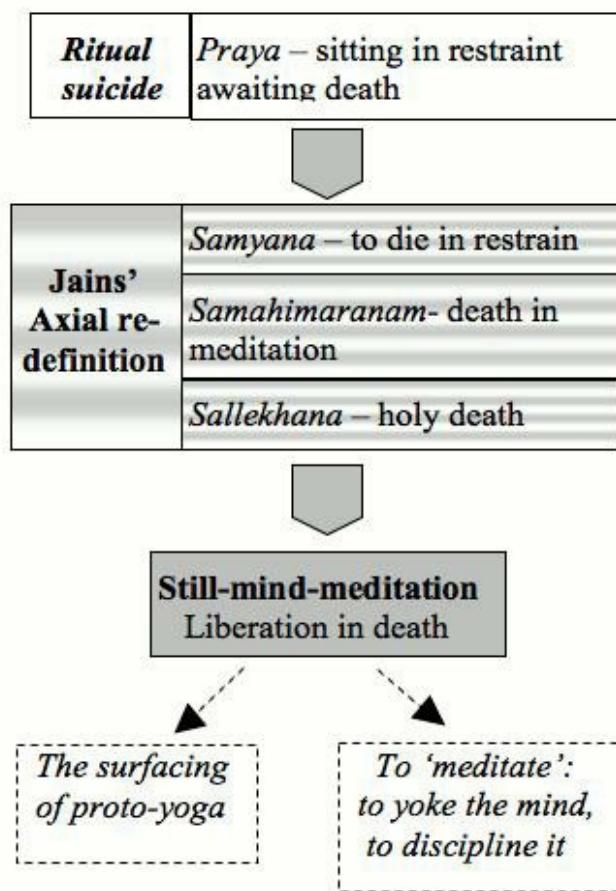
### From suicide ritual to a way of living

There already existed at the time of the Sramanas a general institution of ritual suicide in India<sup>156</sup>. Ritualised public suicide was known in the Brahmin tradition. Here it is called *praya* – ‘the sitting in restraint awaiting death’ (Baldissera 2005).

However, some Jains brought radical new ideas to this institution and turned it into a cultural field providing them with cultural capital. Their goal was to die in restraint (*samyana*) or find death in meditation (*samahimaranam*) early in life. The Jains talked about a ‘holy

death' (*sallekhana*), where, under the supervision of a teacher, one gradually fasted to death. It was seen as the 'proper thinning out' of both passions and body. Such a guided and managed ritual suicide was a public act. The prerequisites for doing it were traditionally terminal illness, famine, age or not being able to keep vows. We could call it 'a quick way out', where there were no other options. It can be explained as a way of saving your honour and to show courage – both central values in most pre-modern societies, according to the scholar Baldissera (2005). However, influenced by the emerging Axial *episteme* (new "way of thinking") the Jains charged archaic rituals with new meaning and content and wanted to terminate their life *before* it was deemed necessary by circumstances.

### ***From Archaic ritual to Axial liberation***



So many of the proto-Sramanas, especially the Jains, consisted of groups living on the edges of society, helping people to die (Samuel 2008). They could be specialists in securing people an honourable slide into the after-life. This expertise was their cultural capital enabling them to transact with society. It was probably in this cultural field that proto-Sramanas developed and refined their practices and doctrines of *karma* and the liberation of the soul.

### **The cultural field of the Jains and proto-yoga**

The Jains seemed to have developed those practices to the extent that even *young* monks would cause their own death through ritual suicide - and this change is clearly significant.

Their discourse led them to believe that their new practices would arrest *karma* and secures them an eternal place in afterlife. For that the Jain monk did not need to wait for old age and physical decline – the liberation of the soul was within reach now with the new technologies.

It was at this point that the proto-Sramana became a Sramana as he turned a ritual undergoing change into a philosophical based way of living. The aim of his life was to prepare for his own death. The more labour he invested in this aim, the more he accumulated [symbolic capital](#). The adept who through a laborious process had prepared his body and mind for death simultaneously became a living legend – a superhuman loaded with Axial Age wisdom; a high ranking ethical person with no worldly interests; a living but almost dead totem radiating eminent symbols; a screen for projections guided and orientated by the [code and habitus](#) embodied in asceticism.

### **Asceticism, meditation and liberation together: *proto-yoga***

With this we have sketched the context and dynamic of the crystallisation of early-yoga practices and ideas before they even had a collective name. Emerging yoga or rather *proto-yoga defined as pre-Axial ascetic practices and discourses combined with Axial Age wisdom discourses about abstract transcendent ontological entities, insight, individuality, happiness and ethical living.*

In summary we have, finally, all the elements of my proto-type definition of yoga coming together to form a *coherent sign system*. This happened among the early Sramanas – especially the Jains - as they turned an existing institution of ritual death into a cultural field. Here, within this [cultural field](#), asceticism, meditation (stilling the mind) and liberation (of the immovable soul) were developed and brought together by a new species of specialists – the Sramanas. Here a cluster of signs defined and gave meaning to each other within an overall sign system. Implicit semiotic code and habitus enabled (death) specialists in the field to accumulate symbolic capital.

### **The many styles of meditation**

Meditation, informed and orientated by the Axial Age *karma* discourse, seems to take a central place in proto-yoga, especially seen in the context of the cultural field of assisting the dying. However meditation, in the early Sramana discourse, had many names, significations and applications. It could for instance also mean ‘pondering over’, which seems to be very different, if not opposite, from ‘stopping the mind’. Meditation could also be a question of ‘sensory withdrawal’. Further, meditation was sometimes described as a process, consisting of different *degrees* of ‘absorption’ and/or ‘concentration’. The Jains developed four stages and the Brahmins developed similar [‘element meditation’](#). All this indicates that the technique (the referent) and the signification of meditation were a broad discourse field. Based on that we should not jump to the conclusion that meditation for the Sramanas was *only* connected to death ritual and their preparation.

Still-mind-meditation was, in summary, emerging out of various cross-fertilising ascetic

disciplines, rituals, fields, milieus and institutions – Sramanic, Kshatriya and Brahmin [157](#). Slowly meditation in its various forms moved to the centre of various ascetic techniques and milieus. This happened also in the *Upanishads*. In some pre-yoga Upanishads – *Chandogya* and *Prasna Upanishad* – we see ascetic meditative practices mentioned such as fixing of the senses, suppressing breath, controlling movements (Jacobsen 2005, Bronkhorst 1996).

### Where did the name ‘yoga’ come from?

The name ‘yoga’, charged and orientated within the sign system of still mind, *karma*, the soul and its liberation, suddenly appeared around the time of Buddha, in the *Upanishads*. It was this very *specific context of signs* which turned a word derived from the yoking of oxen and horses into something entirely different: a discipline for release.

At the time the yoga sign was coined, the Brahmins spurred by Sramanic competition, had probably already developed meditative techniques. But these home grown meditative techniques – like [upasana](#) and ‘element meditation’ - received their *significance from Brahmin sign systems – not from signs like moksha and karma*. However that changed after a while. As the yoga sign finally appeared in the Brahmin texts, it was primarily charged with and enveloped in the *Sramanic and Kshatriya sign systems* that we have just investigated.

Where did the yoga word – the semiotic signifier - come from? The texts of the Buddhists and Jains did not use the word *yoga* to signify ascetic meditation and liberation. They employed a *range* of signifiers – for instance *dhyana*. They did not have a collective signifier for their practices. The Buddhist would talk about Buddha’s *dharma* – his teaching. “Yoga” for them was to ‘live according to the *dharma*’. The *yoga* signifier was probably not used among the major Sramana groups.

The yoga word would more probably have surfaced in a social milieu where the word played a prominent role. The *yoga* signifier was probably coined as ascetic-meditative techniques entered the *Upanishad* milieu of the Brahmins and Kshatriyas. S. Cohen (2008) observes that the word ‘*yoga*’ in the *Upanishads* emerged as part of a metaphor of a chariot yoking wild horses (a metaphor for the human senses). *Yoga* was signified as ‘disciplining’. Hence it might be from this chariot metaphor of *disciplining and controlling* (i.e. yoking) that the word *yoga* was derived, congruent with the practices of ‘Sramanic still-mind mortification’.

And who was the driver and master of the chariot? Who was renowned and acknowledged for their skills of taming the wild horses of the chariot? The noble warrior, the Kshatriya.

Hence I have suggested that we call the Sramanic practice of body-mind self-mortification, geared for the release of the immovable self, *proto-yoga*, and that we give the highly educated elite Kshatriya the honour coining the technical term ‘*yoga*’.

### The disagreement within the Sramanic discourse – the various liberation schools

In summary, the three *combined* defining discourses of proto-yoga – (1) ascetic lifestyle,

(2) meditation, (3) liberation of immovable self - can be found among the proto-Sramanas and the Kshatriyas. Here, especially among the proto-Sramanas, the three discourses interacted and *mutually defined each other*. Two of the discourses - asceticism and meditation - were in various degrees and shades also found among the Brahmins, but there it was initially related to the sacrifice. What was lacking among the Brahmins was the third and significant new discourse of liberation, expressed in the Axial Age doctrine of *karma – the release (moksha) of the ‘immoveable self’ (jiva, atman) from rebirth (samsara) through one’s own disciplinary efforts (yoga)*. The Brahmins – embodying the old - did not develop this kind of discourse. Their Archaic Vedic worldview was not easy to amalgamate with the new Axial Age signs and [episteme](#) .<sup>158</sup> Accordingly the ascending Kshatriya sage delivered the *karma* doctrine to the Brahmins.

Among the Sramanas and Kshatriyas, there was no agreement on metaphysical issues, associated with ascetic-meditative practices. The Jains – guided by Archaic asceticism - maintained that by mortifying all external activity – the activities of body and mind – through austerities or ritual suicide, the immovable self would be liberated. Others, closely reflecting the new Axial Age wisdom discourse and episteme, claimed that by pondering and contemplating – that is, meditating – on the nature of the immovable self, the adept obtained insight into the soul and would become liberated.

Still others – like the Kshatriyas in the *Upanishads* - argued that it was all a question of knowledge of ontological categories like the One. So they linked Vedic god signs with Axial Age wisdom discourses. Wisdom discourses moved centre stage. Knowledge – [Gnosis](#) – became the corner stone of [Samkhya](#) philosophy. Here effort should be focussed on an intellectual and meditative based understanding of the nature of ‘all moving and change-able things’ (*prakriti*) and the ‘immoveable self’ (*purusha*). It was critical to understand the implications of the three fundamental principles called the *gunas*, as they generated change in *prakriti* (i.e. also in body and mind/ thinking). By realising this, the *knowing* subject would lose his attachment to the *gunas* and the changing world of *prakriti*, in which the body and the mind was utterly entangled. The soul of the knower was then liberated.

So such *pure Axial Age knowledge discourse* often dismissed the path of meditative-asceticism as superfluous liberation efforts. Such knowledge discourses would over time develop into the highly influential Samkhya philosophy, which became an intrinsic part of many yoga systems. In this way many yoga systems through history were impaired and charged by inherent philosophical tensions between pre-Axial Age ascetic-meditative discourses and Axial Age wisdom based discourses.

Finally, the Buddhist – epitomising Axial Age thinking - was against everybody in claiming there was no immoveable self (Bronkhorst 2006, Gombrich 2009). As we shall see in the next chapter, all these discussions travelled into the Brahmin texts, as they slowly adopted the Sramanic discourse of the immoveable self, its *karma* and liberation.

*We have now in many respects completed the investigation of the three principles configuring and preceding the emerging yoga discourse. It remains to investigate the*

cultural conditions, which legitimised and made possible the struggle between various social groups and cultural specialists. We are looking for the invisible magnetic forces underlying an energy field. To capture this idea of implicit but powerful structural forces I have used technical notions like code (from semiotics) and habitus (from cultural sociology). We could also call it a power discourse. In our case it would be a power discourse of semi-divinity.

This power discourse of semi-divinity opens up another but very central aspect of yoga: the symbolic meaning. Yoga's ability to generate symbolic capital. Discussing this aspect of the yoga discourse, I believe we excavate a significant underlying driver of yoga, which came to influence the form and content of most pre-modern yoga cultures. In other words we now ask the question: what made proto-yoga and early-yoga possible and then turned it into a powerful cultural factor in society? This is the subject of the following contemplation.

### Summary

When we trace the genealogy of a notion and a discourse, like yoga, back in time it is common that the further back we get the more the word transforms its meaning and becomes cloudy and unclear, until it entirely disappears. This also happened in the case of the yoga sign. However by applying a proto-definition (a working definition) of yoga, as it emerged, I believe we can trace three principles, which as they came together constructed proto-yoga-forms. As the (proto-yoga)-practices emerged among the early-Sramanas (the 'proto-yogis' who seem primarily to be found among the Jains), these groups might or might not have had a word for their discourse and practice of ascetic-meditative self-mortification leading to release. So as we don't know if these practices were called 'yoga', I have termed them *proto-yoga*.

The earliest forms of proto-yoga surfaced as ascetic self-mortification was combined with emerging Axial Age discourses on *karma* and *moksha*. The Sramanas turned this into a profession and a cultural field. This social stratum developed a range of new ascetic meditative practices forming a tight part of an Axial Age ethical lifestyle. This cultural field probably evolved out of suicide rituals – the institution of proper dying.

# 4<sup>th</sup> Contemplation – Power discourses coding yoga and liberation

## Key Concepts

<u>Power discourse</u>	<u>Technologies of the Self</u>
<u>Super-natural powers</u>	<u>Semi-divine <i>tapas</i> being</u>
<u>Cultural &amp; symbolic capital</u>	<u>Code as cultural grammar</u>
<u>Spirit management</u>	<u>Habitus as mental habits</u>

*Yoga in this study is categorised as a sub-cultural system that we often find within the overall cultural field of liberation. In most of pre-modern India the yoga sign, the yoga adepts and the professional identities associated with liberation enjoyed high status. Yoga and liberation discourse enabled adepts and sages to accumulate symbolic capital. In other words a social stratum was coded and perceived as significantly different and social superior. In fact this frequently left these virtuosi among the top social ranks of pre-modern Indian societies.*

*It seems that despite the surrounding society changed dramatically these esteemed adepts tended to maintain much of their high status. Their high status was however not left unchallenged throughout history. Often incumbents challenged their superior ranking and initiated reconfigurations of the entire field. Thus the criteria for superiority might change but superiority as such prevailed. The symbolic capital as such persisted but it steadily underwent changing configurations.*

*Thus on a very abstract level there seemed to persist some taken-for-granted assumptions about social difference and power. This contemplation is investigating what made high social ranking possible and lasting. To do this introduces categories like habitus and semiotic code.*

*Readers not interested in such cultural sociological investigations may skip this contemplation on semiotic codes and power discourses enabling the yogic virtuoso to accumulate symbolic capital. However it should be borne in mind that the concepts of this chapter play a significant role in this book.*

# 1. Symbolic capital, difference and super-natural capabilities

## The competition for status among “experts”

The travelling Sramanas from the Magadha cultural area moved into [Vedic](#) core areas and challenged the high status Brahmin ritualist. What we then witness was a status competition between professional holy men. In that conflict everybody copied, adapted and changed discourses. Often it was the loser who copied the strategy of the winner – as in modern day soccer competition and business life. From their respective texts it is abundantly evident that the Brahmins and the Sramanas were merciless in intellectually combatting each other in order to capture the hearts and mind of people. They were competing about *cultural and symbolic capital*, which they often exchanged for political and economical capital with the rest of society. Their competition had significant implications for the form and content of the yoga discourse.

## Cultural and symbolic capital

We need to investigate what made this status competition possible? Why were the Sramanas – the proto-yogis – entering the Vedic societies seen to be on equal footing with the previous highly recognised Brahmin ritual specialists? I have already mentioned a range of factors, which enabled the Sramanas to generate *cultural capital*: they were healers, councillors, intellectual teachers, death specialists, and physicians - and often they came from the upper strata of society. So they would have been welcomed for their *knowledge skills* and services alone. Today we would categorise them as intellectual labourers and professionals – like present day lawyers, doctors and consultants. In India, with increased division of labour, this evolving social stratum of knowledge specialists found an economic living in defining, creating and distributing *knowledge* and knowledge-based skills. Knowledge and know-how became more and more central to society. Knowledge was the resource – the capital - of the intellectuals and the process of civilisation turned it into a profession. Knowledge as an economical resource is hence defined as *cultural capital*.<sup>[159](#)</sup>

A significant development was that among the Sramanas there evolved new practices and discourses – new *knowledge skills* – which enabled them to accumulate a new and slightly different type of capital: *symbolic capital*. An example of the new knowledge skills was proto-yoga. Proto-yoga discourse placed the Sramanas as direct competitors to the Brahmins who were very rich in symbolic capital.

There is no clear-cut distinction between cultural and symbolic capital. They overlap and flow into each other. Symbolic capital is often directly associated with social ranking and differentiation. The fact that we *perceive* somebody (a celebrity for instance) as something ‘special’ is utterly a cultural and contextual thing. Take a celebrity from one culture and place the figure in another culture where the person is unknown and there is no ‘celebrity’ anymore. Gone is the social difference and prestige. So where cultural capital is related to knowledge, symbolic capital is related to perception, fantasies, imaginations, wishful thinking, and dreams. You could say symbolic capital is about associations and ‘perceptions without reality content’ – pure mental constructions. What do I mean?

Symbolic capital is about creating social difference by *associating* a given sign with another already established and powerful sign: A ‘car’ is *linked* to ‘success’; a ‘company name’ is *linked* to ‘quality’; a ‘saint’ is *linked* to ‘god’; a ‘soldier’ to ‘hero’. So symbolic capital links phenomena (signs) to recognised cultural and social *intangibles* – it is about associating something with airy signs (like: *success, good, hero, elegant, famous*), which really has no physical referent, but is only culturally agreed and understood. It is about associations to something which only exists in our intersubjective culturally defined imagination and perception. Hence symbolic capital is often mentioned in connection with religion and meta-physics.

With this understanding of symbolic capital I would now like to discuss some examples of how the Sramanas and yogic masters became recognised as Brahmin competitors.

### The management of spirit-deities

I believe that a major reason for the recognition and success of the Sramanas was their ability to interact with existing popular religion. This aspect has been investigated by DeCaroli (2004) in relation to the Buddhists. In India people believed in and worshipped local spirit-deities. Each region and locality had a rich world of ghosts, semi-gods, demons, and ancestor spirits which influenced all aspects of daily life. Religion was not so much about salvation and transcendence as about negotiating and managing the influence that spirit-deities had on daily life. These deities often lived and connected with a locality: a tree, a mountain, a funeral site, a field, or an opening in the forest. Endless rituals were developed in order to worship or influence this world. Ancestors who were forgotten might take revenge causing disease and failing harvest, and so they had to be appeased. Other spirits had an insatiable appetite for human flesh because in their previous human life they had committed terrible sins. All strata of society, high as well as low, lived in the shadow and in chronic anxiety of the spirit-deities. Human success and failure were directly linked to this world.

We have seen how the Shaman was defined in relation to this all-important world. He was the mediator to the spiritual world and was able to establish crucial contact with it. It is clear especially from Buddhist sources that they continued – or re-configured - this cultural field of the Shaman. We can see that there were some more or less unspoken cultural assumptions – a code - saying that *certain specialists* were able to communicate with the otherworld, a taken-as-given belief system which the Buddhists also shared and within which

they navigated as specialists.

Hence Buddhist scriptures are full of stories about spirits, ghost and demons. They are an integral part of Buddhist cosmology, says the Buddhist expert DeCaroli (2004). Even the story of Buddha's awakening emerged in a drama where spirit-deities played a significant role.

To demonstrate their power and to become associated with the otherworld, many Buddhist monasteries were built on sites known to be occupied by fearsome demons. This direct linkage and association meant for the local population that the monks became true masters of the spiritual world. Spirits were, like humans, full of hate, greed, emotions and anxieties. Buddhist texts give countless narratives of how spirits were converted to Buddhism and relieved from their suffering just as living ordinary people were.

What in the eyes of the population entitled the monks to be associated with 'masters of spirits'? Through their ascetic and ethical discipline, Buddhist monks had built up courage, wisdom and ethics to withstand the frightening deities, so they knew how to handle and appease them, according to DeCaroli (2004). Thus the Buddhist *dharma* – the "Buddhist yoga" – tapped into underlying belief systems, code and habitus, claiming that if a person performs certain disciplines, then he can manage spirits. A symbolic link is established: 'the monk' (a sign with a physical referent) is associated with 'spirit management' (a sign with no physical referent). This resource – this perceived knowhow skill – accumulates cultural and symbolic capital.

The success of the proto-yogis - and among them especially the Buddhists - should probably be seen in relation to this. They offered new institutions, skills, discourses and rituals to handle the metaphysical world. They offered the soul safe passage into the after life of spirit-deities. If for some reason the soul became reincarnated as a bad spirit, haunting its living relatives, the proto-yogis could even intervene and help the soul out of its terrible predicament. The Jains could even remove the soul not only from the spiritual world but also stop it from returning to another round of suffering.

Thus for the locals the proto-yogis offered real and definite knowledge skill – that is *cultural* capital. However for us moderns *who do not share the same underlying code and habitus* the proto-yogis accumulated *symbolic* capital.

We can see from this example that the proto-yogis – i.e. the Sramanas - were given meaning by previous institutions, discourses, codes and habitus. Their ethics, their discipline, their determination, their stamina, their meditation, their wisdom linked into this. Their high status was a direct function of being grounded in older cultural institutions and habitus.

I believe that this is an important answer to the question of why people listened to the Sramanas. Their symbolic capital allowed them to challenge existing Vedic rituals and practises. If, on the other hand, a chieftain, an aristocratic warrior or a rich merchant had stood up and said that he believed the Brahmin rituals were a waste of time and resources, the audience might have been very sceptical about these "non-experts" challenging the Brahmin expertise. In contemporary terms such criticism must have been like a layman denying that modern science works!

The Brahmins would have had many good arguments for not listening to the dangerous (!)

non-sense of the new critics: “*Could these ritual non-experts communicate with spirits and gods, could they see hidden connections, could they protect the harvest, could they secure the fertility of the lineage, could they keep demons away?*” But then the proto-yogi would have stood up and claimed that, “yes, he could indeed see hidden connections and master the demons. Yes, he was an expert on equal if not better terms than the Brahmins”.

### The underlying common power discourse

We now come to the crux of the matter in our discussions of symbolic capital. We realised above that as moderns we do not share the Archaic taken-for-granted-belief-system about ancestor spirits and their management by extraordinary humans. Such a taken-for-granted belief system guiding us in our interaction and coding of the world, is called *habitus*. Habitus is a central notion because we often associate and link new signs and phenomena – like the yoga sign – to an already existing habitus. The *habitus* – assumptions and cultural unconscious mental habits – we have revealed above I also call ‘the power discourse of super-natural powers and semi-divinity’. Residing within habitus we often find power discourses. Let us explore the difference between these two notions.

We have seen it was a common belief that people who practised certain technologies - like the Sramanas and the Brahmins did - built up *super-natural capabilities*. This general and shared assumption, conferred on both groups high status, that is social influence and symbolic power. People listened to these two high status groups and naturally followed their advice and requested their ritual interventions as a function of this inbuilt power discourse.

Such an underlying and general shared belief system (habitus) I define as a *power discourse*, when it creates *social differences* – high status identities (which is the same as *symbolic capital*) - between groups and individuals. Thus sometimes habitus – unconscious mental habits – are implicit power discourses. When we associate and link incoming new signs and phenomena with this established power discourse, they become powerful symbols. By linking into an already existing power discourse new forms of symbolic capital can emerge – in our case encoded into the yoga sign.

In general, a power discourse gives people a shared and taken-as-given belief system of symbols. It generates common and shared projections in a population with the result that certain practices and groups become special, valuable or frightening. This is what symbolic capital *builds upon*, it makes symbolic capital possible. Hence symbolic capital presumes and is enabled by power discourses.

So in the following section I will outline the *power discourse of semi-divinity / super-natural powers*, as it creates the symbolic conditions of the power of yoga. By looking into this discourse, we even have reasons for why the individual might have taken up yoga (despite the reasons he himself gives). Further we certainly have a reason why society accepted yoga practice and why it could spread instead of being dismissed as a farce.

### Examples of super-natural capabilities

First, some examples, mainly related to asceticism, of what I mean by ‘semi-divinity’ or ‘super-natural powers’. The ancient texts are so rich in examples of such semi-divinity that it can be argued that an important ideological function of these texts was to create and re-enforce the symbolic power basis for a range of social groups.

In the Vedas we encounter a range of verses expressing the power discourse of super-natural capabilities like for instance these three related verses from *Rigveda* describing the power of the *Muni* or the *Kesin* (*Kesin* means “long haired”):

“Long hair holds fire, holds the drug, holds sky and earth. Long hair reveals everything, so that everyone can see the sun. Long hair declares the light.

These ascetics, swathed in wind, put dirty red rags on. When gods enter them, they ride with the rush of wind.

He sails through the air, looking down on all shapes below. The ascetic is friend to this god and that god, devoted to what is well done”

There is a rich abundance of such examples from Vedic texts assuring the reader about the qualities of acquiring magical power<sup>160</sup>. This empowerment would also include health, strength, beauty, mind power and other desirable human features: transforming humans into super humans.

Here is another example from *Apastamba Dharmasutra* describing the supernatural power of the ascetics: “Now they realize their wishes merely by visualizing them; for instance the desire to procure rain, to bestow children, second-sight, to move quick as thought, and other desires of this description.”

So even before yoga was conceived there was in Northern India a shared belief system that ascetics roaming the forests – Shaman-like groups – possessed supernatural powers. This would become a continuing theme throughout history.

The great Epic *Mahabharata*, which was begun in the period under discussion, is one of the richest sources of examples of the supernatural powers of ascetics - and yoga. Here ascetic renouncers conquer kings and even gods, and yoga is from then on in the Epic closely linked to super-natural powers. In the *Mahabharata* yoga is in fact often synonymous with ‘supernatural skills’:

“When his self-magnifying self and the magnificent [universe] have fused into one another, a yogi may enter [into] women, men and the assemblies of Gandharvas, the quarters of the sky, the host of Yaksas, the mountains and the dragons, and the clouds together with the forests and all the rivers, and the terrible oceans and all the mountain peaks, and the ancestors and serpents and all the divinities,.....” MBh. 12.289.58

But it was not only ascetics who were admired and feared; Brahmins were also ascribed magical power. The legal expert Manu, probably writing between 200BC and 200AD, warned rulers in no uncertain terms what they could expect if they anger a Brahmin. Manu described supernatural power as: “mastery over the gross elements earth, air, ether, water and fire and of the I-faculty.” This also applies to the yoga-follower: “The Yoga-follower, having attained power, can create many thousand selves, and may roam the earth in these guises”. While the traditional ascetic is interested in achieving supernatural power, we are assured by Manu that this is not the case for the yogi: “He who having passed beyond the supernatural powers of Yoga, leaves them behind, is released”.

Supernatural powers had many names, the most often used being *siddhi*. But words like *bala*, *aisvarya*, *vibhuti* and *prabhava* are also used (Jacobsen 2012 Malinar 2012b). The fascination and dread seen in the great Epics for the ascetic wanderers of the forests became an ongoing theme in India’s narrative and folklore (White 2009). These identities occupied central roles in numerous medieval tales, romances and farces. We hear how they could turn

princes into serpents; how they could appropriate the bodies of others; how they could envision past, present and future; read peoples' minds; how Pasupata yogis revived dead bodies and took possession of them; how yogis could pierce the sun and gain immortality; make women fertile, replicate themselves at will etc.<sup>161</sup> The power they acquired through their practice sometimes surpassed even that of the gods, so in order to re-gain their power even the gods needed to practise.

It is in these narratives made for courts and the wider population that the notion of *Jogi* evolves. However, he is never described as sitting in the lotus position practising meditation and breath restraint (i.e. the technical meaning of yoga), but he is described in his symbolic significance: an evil wizard, a sinister sorcerer, a power hungry magician (White 2009). This is what yoga is – according to popular narratives - for the general population of India.

Listen for instance to what Siva reveals in one of the *Puranas*:

“.... through the creative power of yoga, I will then become a [new] self through yoga. [This I will do in] the body of a chaste brahmin student, to the wonder of the world. Seeing a dead body left unprotected on a cremation ground I will enter [into it] through the supernatural power of yoga for the welfare of brahmins ....”<sup>162</sup>

So, in the wider population throughout most of India's history, the men claiming through their special skills to be semi-divine are not known and identified by their meditation, but by their supernatural powers.

This imagination continued to thrive. As the Muslims and later the British took over India they quickly realised that there were groups of people who were seen to have magic powers. The English John Marshal, for instance, reports shortly before 1700AD:

“It is reported by these Moores and Hindus that upon the Hills by Casmeere and also by Neopoll ... there are people [who] live to 4 and 500 years of age. They can hold their breath and ly as it were dead for some years, all which time their bodies are kept warme with oyles, & ca. They can fly, and change souls with each other or in any besat. They can tranforme their bodies into what shapes they please and make them so plyable that [they] then can draw them thorow a little hole, ....”<sup>163</sup>

A Muslim report from 1695 by Sujan Rai Bhandhari dwells on the same features of the ‘jogis’ as he calls them:

“They spend their time day and night in recalling their God to memory, and, by holding in their breath for a longtime, live for hundreds of years; by reason of their strict austerities (riyadat, i.e. yoga), their earthly garment (i.e. their body) is so light, that they can fly in the air and float on the water, and by power of their actions, they can cause their souls to flee away whenever they please, assume whatever form they like, enter the body of another person, and tell the news of a hidden world; ....”<sup>164</sup>

In summary throughout most of India's history there is strong evidence for a lasting subscription to the possibility of supernatural powers. It is assumed that virtuosi who expose themselves to austerities, like Brahmin *tapas*, fasting, life in solitude, meditation and yoga, are transformed into semi-divine beings with supernatural powers. Let us now investigate what conditioned – what made possible – super-natural capabilities.

### Emergence of semi-divine identities

When the spirits talked through the mouths of the Vedic ecstastics, and when these Vedic Rishis saw visions, it was *not* free invention. Their visions were based on actual mental experiences. These experiences were a part of a trance – an Altered State of Consciousness - that was produced by specific ASC generating techniques. Various cultures would give

various meanings to such trance experiences. For instance was the mind and body of the Shaman in Stone and Bronze Age cultures signified as being *possessed* by spirits talking through him. Thus the Shaman and his body-mind system was signified as a *relatively passive medium*. His altered state of mind was a ‘mean of communication’, a passive transmitter. This of course made the Shaman a high status person, but he was still a human being. When he healed the sick he only communicated with spirits and ancestors. It was not the Shaman who made people sick or healthy – this was the work of the otherworld.

However in India a significant re-construction of the identity of the trance-induced person was under way. We have already seen this among the Brahmins, who claimed that by practising tapas – austerities – the Brahmin himself became *tapasised*: charged with divine energy. As the gods were conceived as pure *tapas* this implied that the *tapas* discourse created a hierarchical universe of energies: there were ordinary humans with no or little *tapas* and there were gods embodying *tapas*. In between there now appeared a new social identity. It was a kind of *semi-divine tapas being*. A social identity charged with *tapas* – half human, half god. The more “*tapas labour*” the adept performed, the more *tapas* / capital he possessed. Logically *tapas* then also transformed his social position and lifted him up to new status in society – the semi-divine stratum.

The *tapas* discourse indicates that asceticism and the significance of a trance-induced mind in India was undergoing significant change. There was an escalation of the symbolic powers. The ascetic adept was not only a medium but was also in possession of some of the powers of the divine world. Metaphorically, a ‘conducting wire’ was being replaced by a ‘battery’ or ‘capacitor’ (energy reservoir). The specialist in creating a trance-induced mind now became associated with the powers and identities of divine beings. The specialist turned into a new ontological and social entity – the semi-divine *being* charged with divine *tapas*, divine powers.

This is what the ancient texts communicate to us. They tell us about masters who due to their trance induced body-mind system could display extraordinary performances. Their means could be drugs, ecstatic techniques like dance and song, performance of certain rituals, austerities, social isolation and so on. There was an underlying implicit *code* giving meaning and power to all this – linking these people to divinities. It is this implicit semiotic code – a cultural grammar – that we are trying to isolate and identify. And we can now see that the code is closely related to power. Hence it is often called a power discourse.

It was this code which gave the emerging proto-yoga practices and discourses social and cultural energy. In particular the Sramanas compiled a combination of old and new trance-inducing techniques and enveloped them in new emerging Axial Age sign systems. Soon proto-yoga became successful and was sucked into the power centre of society.

### **The assumptions coding the semi-divinity power discourse**

Semi-divinity is of course attractive, because, in the sociological terminology of Max Weber ([Wikipedia link](#)) , it signifies high status. The high status person is seen, according to Weber, to have some *non-material resource*, which is not easy to obtain. We recall that high

status is about *perceived differences*. Status is a truly relational concept as it is solely based on shared symbolic meaning – an image, which we all (belonging to the same culture) are projecting upon a group or a practice. When a person is recognised as having high status, it entails social benefits like respect, recognition, admiration, authority and therefore social power. Both Weber and especially Bourdieu have shown how this power – this symbolic capital – can be exchanged with the rest of society.

It is this enabling (or making possible) of high status that I - following the French social philosopher M. Foucault ([Wikipedia link](#)) - I call a ‘discourse of power’. *Discourses of power are (often unstated and) shared assumptions (knowledge), which, by implication, rank people in a hierarchy of knowledge/ability.*

In summary, the ascetic *lifestyles* emerging around 400 BCE could come into existence, as there was already an established discourse of power. We could also call it code or habitus. I will call this discourse ‘semi-divine’. It rests on following code or ontological assumptions:

*1. Reality consists of a hierarchical continuum of power with humans at the bottom and gods and demons at the top.*

This assumption clearly differs from our contemporary Western assumption where we believe there is a dichotomy between god and humans. In the West no human can in any degree have divine power, there is no overlapping grey area. However this is what the Indian semi-divine discourse contradicts: the claim of the existence of a continuous overlapping grey area.

*2. It is possible for humans to ascend the continuum of the divine power hierarchy. This makes them semi-divine and they thereby achieve supernatural powers.*

This assumption means that there is a *range of routes* to semi-divinity. Some of them are what Foucault calls *Technologies of the Self*. Some of these technologies can be further specified as technologies of consciousness, generating ASC.

### Different technologies of the Self

In relation to this study there were around 400 BC at the dawn of the Axial Age three models of how to become semi-divine. As I have said Foucault would call them *Technologies of the Self*, as they all aimed at fundamental transformation of the individual. Below, I have delineated the three models, but it should be borne in mind that they are only models, abstractions of reality. In reality this means that many of the high status groups employed different combinations of the models. The models are more thought of as landmarks, allowing us to discuss how far a given group or practice was from a given landmark.

*1. The technology/discourse of [asceticism](#)* - technologies of self-inflicted pain. They could originate in Shamanism and were in Vedic India understood to generate *tapas* – transformative heat. Today many scholars agree that austerities have a

common denominator of generating ASC. Each culture gives a different meaning to self-inflicted pain. In Vedic India when a person was heated up by ascetic self-denial, he was charged with divinity. [165](#)

2. *The technology/discourse of ritual action* – strict observance of the laws and rituals of the gods. There was for instance the institution of *vrata* – living according to some declared vows. Divine blessings would fall upon a person who vowed to observe rituals. So by performing a range of sacrifices, by living in accordance to vows, by performing mantra recitation (*svadhyaya*) and ritual worship like *upasana* the adept would discharge human pollution and become semi-divine. After death there was secured an eternal life among the Gods. We have seen in our discussion of the Brahmin *tapas* discourse how the Brahmin rituals were increasingly transformed into ascetic technologies; the ritual technology was a descending power discourse while the ascetic discourse was ascending.

3. *The technology/discourse of wisdom (Gnosis)* – radical insight into issues about god/ the depth of reality. Such insights would enable the adept to become released from rebirth. This path reflecting an Axial Age *episteme* has so far only been mentioned briefly in relation to *Samkhya* philosophy. It seemed to have had a breakthrough especially among the Buddhists. The wisdom of Buddha initially turned him into an indescribable/ semi-divine being; later he was elevated into a god or god-principle. In the *Upanishads* we see a similar technology of the Self emerge among the Brahmins.

Proto-yoga dismissed the ritual action as a technology of the Self. Instead proto-yoga in various ways successfully merged the technologies of asceticism and wisdom.

This investigation into the technologies and power discourse of semi-divinity finalises the discussion of the factors conditioning the possibility and success of the high status proto-yogis and their proto-yoga technologies. We have seen that proto-yoga Technology of the Self offered the individual release from rebirth. But this use-value was perhaps not the main reason for the spread of proto-yoga into the wider society and its power centre. What in this respect was perhaps more significant was that proto-yoga transformed the *adept into a totem* – a social symbol. He became in the eyes of the general population a semi-divine identity. This high status person empowered with super-natural capabilities became a person the population could transact assets with. He became a professional holy specialist rich in cultural and symbolic capital.

### **Professional holy men and their symbolic capital**

An important aspect of the power discourses discussed above is that they provided the conditions for an institutional framework for exchanging for instance goods with super-natural capabilities. The discourses provided a professional class of ‘holy people’ with an economic

foundation. In the sociological terms of Bourdieu this means the creation of a cultural field.

Hence the supernatural powers mastered by these groups became their *symbolic capital*. The symbolic capital enabled the professional holy men to receive economical goods and political power from the surrounding population.<sup>166</sup> The Brahmin ritual masters had hitherto prospered because they were seen as intermediaries between humans and gods. What the Sramanas and the yogic virtuosi brought to the table was for instance their ability to assist the soul after death and manage ancestor spirits. But there were many other ways to skin a cat. The Buddhists developed for instance a clever institution where economic donations from the public were exchanged for the merits – the symbolic capital – that the monks had accumulated due to their practice.<sup>167</sup>

The aspect of supernatural powers can be followed clearly in the yoga discourse as it evolved out of Sramanic proto-yoga discourses. In the *Mahabharata* supernatural powers became a central issue and in the *Yoga Sutra* it took up one of four chapters. In such texts the yoga sign became firmly associated with super-natural powers and gained respect in the wider population. Yoga had become an authoritative totem and throughout Indian history we see countless examples of how emerging discourses linked themselves with yoga in order to be associated with its authority. I assume that much of yoga's longevity is due to its symbolic value.

### Summary

The Sramanas enjoyed high status, but it was an ambivalent respect swinging between fear and admiration. There might be many reasons for why the Sramanas were held in respect, but it is my hypothesis that there was an underlying and general power discourse – a cultural taken-for-granted habitus - into which the Sramanas stepped.

The early Sramanas entered and further developed a power discourse of semi-divinity and super-natural powers. This power discourse could initially have originated in the discourse of *tapas* or in the culture of Shamanism. The discourse had profound consequences for the symbolic meaning of first proto-yoga and then the yoga discourse as it emerged. Yoga became a totem, a sign highly charged with symbolic value. The symbolic value not only influenced the adaptation of yoga in wider circles of society but it often strongly shaped the very purpose of yoga: we often find that the symbolic-value of yoga became its use-value, the reason for practising yoga.

In a few concluding words about pre-modern yoga forms, one can say that their *transformative meaning* for the individual was about the release of the soul and their *symbolic meaning* was the acquisition of a social identity, power and symbolic capital. The symbolic meaning enabled species of holy professional men to prosper in a cultural field. They survived by transacting their symbolic capital, often envisioned as super-natural capabilities, with the surrounding society and its institutions.

# 5<sup>th</sup> Contemplation – Liberation as a cultural field and an ideal type

## Key Concepts

<u>Meditative Absorption</u>	<u>Rational discourse platform</u>
<u>Gnostic Comprehension</u>	<u>Mystic-metaphysical platform</u>
<u>Mystical Realisation</u>	<u>Physical discourse platform</u>
<u>Cultural field</u>	<u>Ideal types</u>
<u>Nirvana</u>	<u>Triangle of liberation</u>

*There is a wide range of use-values attached to yoga practice. Most of them are promises of fundamental changes to the adept. These transformations can be of all kinds: existential, metaphysical, physical, ontological, epistemological, intellectual, political and religious. Most often in its early centuries the transforming power of yoga was defined as ‘release’ - moksha. Within the karma discourse – of which early yoga discourse was a part - the concept of ‘release’ was defined in relation to karma and samsara. Thus the significant transformation early yoga promised the individual was the arrest of karma and the end of re-birth. The moksha sign contained so much potential symbolic power that it in my view came to define an embryonic cultural field enabling its specialists an economical foundation and to enjoy high social ranking.*

*The sign ‘moksha’ is often in Western discourse labelled ‘liberation’ – liberation from the suffering of infinite numbers of re-births. The issue with ‘moksha’ or ‘liberation’ is that the sign at closer inspection is very confusing and contradictory. This is due to the very diverse sign systems defining and orientating the liberation sign. Sometimes it is entirely disconnected from karma and samsara, especially in the West where these signs are not accepted.*

*Basically the moksha discourses in pre-modern India can be grouped into two: ascetic-meditative discourses and wisdom discourses each defining liberation and the path to liberation in opposing ways.*

*The aim of this contemplation chapter is to clarify the tensions within the liberation sign by using a method from sociology called ‘ideal types’. This should facilitate the discussions in this book regarding the use-value of yoga - its technical transforming powers. As this is one of the contemplation chapters , it may be skipped by the reader not interested in this level of details.*

If at the time of Buddha we could have asked the individual yoga adept what is the purpose of practising yoga, we would probably have had different answers depending of the respondents' position in society. Some Kshatriyas would have pointed to the benefits of the supernatural powers of yoga, either in this life or in the otherworld. Some conservative Brahmins would have pointed to yoga's capacity to restore or accumulate caste purity – its ability to create and legitimise social difference. Finally specialists within the embryonic cultural field of *moksha* (liberation) – and here we find a great variety of social groups – would all have pointed at yoga's ability to release their soul from re-birth.

What do we mean by a cultural field like *the field of liberation*? Liberation is a cultural field as are for instance sport, linguistics, law, medicine, art, philosophy and literature. Within a cultural field there are professional specialist who struggle among themselves about who can define the categories of the field: its subjects, themes, truth, value, boundaries, methods, and priorities. Through their discourses and interaction with the surrounding society these specialists have enforced – through a power discourse - acceptance as the experts of the field and recognition as the people who can define and further develop the knowledge of the field. The knowledge of the field becomes a resource , which they accumulate and control. It becomes *cultural capital*, which they as professionals can exchange with society.

Within the cultural field of liberation in pre-modern India we find constantly that there is strong competition about who can occupy and define this field. Initially Jains and Buddhists dominated it, but soon groups like Kshatriyas and Brahmins – who came up with the umbrella sign 'yoga' - were moving in. Each group in the field tried to enforce its sign systems and ways of categorisation. Within each group specialists further competed with each other about the right to define liberation, its signification and its paths. There was no agreement, no established and generally accepted rules, methods, truths, signs and so on. However there were at this point two dominant polarities within the field of liberation mirroring two different and opposing discourses, historical epochs and their inherent power discourses ('[codes](#)' ). So despite all the disputes we can define two conflicting underlying power discourses or codes making liberation possible. They are the subject of this contemplation.

### **De-construction the discourse of liberation**

The Sramanic sign *moksha* literally means "letting go". But what does that actually mean? It is, according to semiotics, the function of a surrounding system of signs to clarify such matters. *Moksha* has its meaning from being linked to other signs – to discourses. As soon as

we start to look into these surrounding signs systems - discourses – we realise that, as they each employ different signs, they hence also have different understandings of *moksha*. In fact we realise that mostly they do not even use the sign *moksha*, but replace it with signs, which fit better into the existing overall sign system. Hence we see *moksha* being replaced with signs like *nirvana*, *mukti*, *brahman realisation*, *isolating purusha*, *awakening*, *samadhi*, in the West often called either ‘enlightenment’ or ‘liberation’. The more we look into the surrounding signs, the more we wonder if we actually are talking about the same signification.

If we compare the various discourses, we can see that for the individual the sign of liberation promised in very vague terms ‘the end of existential suffering’; a ‘self’ or ‘soul’ enjoying ‘eternal bliss’ and ‘lasting happiness’. Sometimes other ineffable benefits were indicated. Overall it was a promise of significant *transformation* of existence – a subjective transformation beyond any imagination of this world. Each discourse framed and described this event in various and often conflicting ways. So the use-value was basically about some sort of significant transformation.

Transformation implies difference. Hence the liberated adept changed. He was said to be transformed into something that was highly culturally valued. In other words through this association – or link – to something positive, “the liberator” was turned into a symbol. He was now a *different* person from the rest of society – a high ranking person. So the sign of liberation created and legitimised rank and difference – symbolic value. In summary the discourses of liberation constructed a new impressive social identity: a ‘liberated one’ often called a ‘living liberated’ (*jivan-mukti*); a super-human; a Buddha; a semi-divine guru; a saint of endless wisdom and compassion; and a mystical sage. In other words a nebulous figure beyond human comprehension.

Interestingly enough we can also see that the more fascinating and ambiguous the liberated one became, the more his symbolic value increased: i.e. the stronger was his capacity as a screen for symbolic projections. Let us now look at the specific tensions within liberation.

### The tension inherent in liberation as it surfaced

First: does liberation take place in this life or in after life? In its initial meaning among the Jains, *moksha* was an event *after death*. We see that especially in the Jain discourse, where at the end of life *karma* is brought to a halt through the mortification of body and mind. The soul, relieved of Karmic energy, is now able to rest in death. However especially under Buddhism and in general under wisdom discourses, *moksha* became something which can be *obtained in life*. Hence Buddha was the ‘awakened one’ - a *living* liberated being. It is clear that this is a significant different identity, although both the ‘awakened one’ and the (dead) ‘released soul’ shared the fact that they both were free of *karma*. As we read the *Upanishads*, we become confused as to whether the liberation they describe is happening in this life or in death.

Related to this issue is the problem of whether liberation is a question of meditative absorption or of intellectual understanding. This issue is a reflection of an underlying clash of discourses. On one hand there are ascetic meditative discourses where liberation is a function

of absorption. On the other hand there are wisdom discourses where liberation is a function of intellectual cognition – a flash of comprehensive understanding. Often these signs – ‘absorption’ versus ‘cognition’ - were mixed together generating much confusion.

In order to distinguish between the two types of liberation, I suggest, using a Weberian methodology, that we introduce the sociological notion of ‘ideal types’ ([Wikipedia link](#)) – abstract and clearly defined concepts we can use to measure reality. Ideal types are like landmarks in nature – fixed, clear and visible points of orientation. Thus one ideal type of liberation would be ‘*Meditative Absorption*’ and the other type ‘*Gnostic Comprehension*’ (“gnostic”: *based on knowledge*). The first is typically found in ascetic-meditative discourses, while the second is found in wisdom discourses. They represent conflicting codes of how we should categorise, initiate and understand significant individual change: through austerities or wisdom.

These two ideal types then become ‘pure types’ in relation to which we can compare actual liberation signs. For instance, we could compare Samkhya liberation with proto-Jain liberation. Hence we could say that Samkhya liberation is closer to ‘Gnostic Comprehension’ than proto-Jainism is – realising that both schools have elements of ‘Gnostic Comprehension’ in their notion of liberation.

Following this methodology, I would suggest that we understand *Meditative Absorption* as the effort of excluding the mind from any input, bringing it to absolute stillness, a state of mind where there is no cognition or perception. Some texts, for instance, describe this as ‘a state of nothingness and a state of neither perception nor non-perception’. As nothing happens in this [Altered State of Consciousness](#) (ASC), most people today would conclude that it had no liberating force. It is instead a step *preceding* liberation. This could mean that liberation happens as the meditator dies in deep absorption, and the soul is *then* able to rest in after life. This notion of liberation seems to have grown out of Bronze and Early Iron Age ascetic-meditative discourses.

Throughout history many people have believed that the event of liberation could also mean that the meditator, *after returning to consciousness* from total absorption, is able to contemplate liberating insight. But this is a significant change undermining the whole idea of this ascetic-meditative discourse. If we follow this extended view of liberation, we make liberation into an *intellectual* event. Such a view confirms that Meditative Absorption on its own does not produce liberation. It only functions to calm and purify the mind enabling the adept *afterwards* to make the final intellectual cognition. So to subscribe stringently to the view that liberation happens while in Meditative Absorption seems to imply that liberation is logically an after-death event (Wynne 2007).

Liberation as an *intellectual effort* brings us to the other notion: *Gnostic Comprehension*, which implies a ‘conceptual realisation or intellectual understanding of fundamental issues of reality’. It is often described as similar to the understanding of a joke: a sudden insight where everything comes together and brings spontaneous laughter. So here mind and consciousness are fully switched on; a total and extraordinary clarity bereft of any delusions. This Gnostic insight is liberating – and it can happen in this life. Sometimes it is said to happen gradually as one learns, or sometimes it is said to happen with an unexpected sudden snap. This type of

liberation is typically constructed by Axial Age wisdom discourses giving priority to abstract thinking and knowledge.

### Liberation as a mystical event

However, as we shall see again and again in this book, the two notions merged over time into what I suggest we call *Mystical Realisation*. It is also often called *Absorbed Realisation* as this type of liberation often happens in deep meditation. Here we have both ‘still mind’ and ‘comprehension’ at the same time! While the mind is in a state of stillness, a fundamental ‘realisation’, ‘union’ or ‘identification’ occurs, said to be of a ‘liberating character’.

This is a significantly different interpretation of liberation compared to the two previous ideal types of liberation. Its adherents – sometimes called mystics - do not present ‘realisation’ as an interpretation of an experience’, but as ‘becoming truth’. By this they mean that the liberated person has become *identical with the fundamental essence of being*. Philosophically we have to classify this as a new kind of *ontological* event (*ontology* is the philosophy of the fundamentals of reality). It is a state where all dualities – like subject/object, life/death, mind/matter - resolve and become synthesised. It is often labelled ‘pure experience’ even if it is ‘beyond experience’ - whatever this might be.

It is a mystical state beyond words, which is hence difficult to investigate and relate to. However, in our analysis of the *Upanishads*, we will see that the Brahmins seemed to pull their understanding of liberation in this direction, creating further confusion. Watching this conception of liberation – Mystical Realisation – through sociological lenses, it is clear that it is a notion, which under all circumstances imbues the adept with extreme significance, symbolic power and difference. He is transformed into a new not just social but *ontological* entity. The Brahmin adept has turned himself into something unimaginable, which neither he nor we can talk about. He has merged with some underlying non-dual principle beyond words.

### The triangle of *moksha*

The fused and highly loaded notion of *Mystic Realisation* has led to much confusion and sectarian strife. We are presented with an ASC in which there is ‘absolute stillness’ and at the same time there is ‘realisation’ happening. Westerners steeped in the tradition of philosophy since Kant would of course say, that this is impossible and it is a contradiction: when the mind is switched off there cannot be any cognitive processing or memorising taking place and therefore no progress towards liberation or recollection that liberation actually took place<sup>168</sup>.

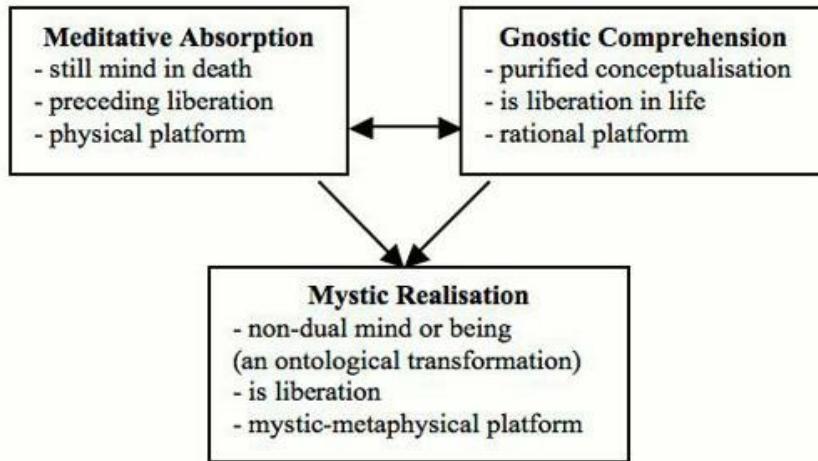
In order to capture this issue we could add the adjective ‘metaphysical’ to Mystic Realisation and the adjective ‘rational’ to Gnostic Comprehensive. Hence Gnostic liberation takes place on a *rational discourse platform* allowing words and rational debate. Absorbed liberation is beyond words and beyond this physical world. It is a *mystic-metaphysical platform* and seems, from a rational platform, to be out of reach of rational debate.

Following this discussion we also need an adjective for the third liberation type - meditative liberation - and I suggest ‘physical’. This is a *physical discourse platform* where

the body and mind are brought to physical stillness. In semiotic terms the three platforms are three conflicting codes framing how to approach and categorise liberation.

These three ideal types of liberation, give us a triangle, as shown. Keeping that triangle of liberation in mind, we will see in the following complex discussions how the different ascetic-wisdom discourses position themselves in relation to this. So the notions are thought of as helpful *pedagogical tools* to facilitate understanding.

### *The triangle of liberation*



### *Nirvana placed on the ideal type map*

Based on this we could now map for instance Buddhist liberation – *nirvana* – familiar to most people. As Buddha after his liberation still living and preached, he should clearly *not* be located close to the *Meditative Absorption* corner. Many Buddhist texts confirm that Buddha dismissed the notion that meditation in itself could lead to liberation. Meditation was rather a tool to clarify and sharpen the mind. Having meditated for a long time, Buddha contemplated his own cognitive and perceptual apparatus. He was investigating his own filtering of reality. By doing this, he found the key: “Delight / craving is the root of suffering”. Understanding that – i.e. through the technique of ‘mindfulness’ - the problem of craving disappeared.

So the mindful meditating Buddha, in these texts, should not be placed purely in the corner of Gnostic Comprehension. He is between Meditation and Gnosticism – the middle way. But as we read other Buddhist texts, the liberated person – the ‘awakened one’ - seems to move slightly towards the mysticism corner. Here the living ‘awakened one’ is beyond understanding and conceptual classification. He is as indefinable as an extinguished flame. As a flame has been cut off from its fuel supply (wood) so has the ‘awakened one’ been cut off from his (cravings). They are both ‘blown out’ – which is the meaning of the word ‘*nirvana*’. This does not mean, however, that he or the flame has disappeared. Instead it means that they have returned to the ‘underlying essence’ of reality (Wynne 2009). This essence, often called ‘emptiness’, is an ontological phenomenon beyond conceptualisation – it cannot be grasped.

Hence in this version of Buddhism, the final liberating contemplation seems to climax in a non-intellectual and existential ‘mental jump’. Thus we need to place this version of Buddhist

liberation in the middle of the triangle if not in the corner of Mystic Realisation.

# **Chapter 5**

# Early-yoga – Brahmin mysticism and purity

## Key Concepts

<u>One-ness</u>	<u>Purifying yoga</u>
<u>Upanishads</u>	<u>Samatha / Vipassana</u> meditation
<u>Axial Age Episteme</u>	<u>Four jhanas</u>
<u>Tarka &amp; Turya</u>	<u>Ethical lifestyle</u>
<u>Jains and yoga</u>	<u>Cultural field of liberation</u>
<u>Non-duality</u>	<u>Siddhis and yoga</u>
<u>Dharma-sutra yoga</u>	<u>Brahmin element meditation</u>
<u>Yogi amateurs</u>	<u>First yoga sympathisers</u>

We mainly obtain our initial knowledge about yoga mainly from Brahmin scriptures called the Upanishads closely followed by the Dharma-sutras and the Mahabharata<sup>169</sup>. I have chosen to call it early-yoga. Early-yoga took numerous forms and emerged in close interaction with various Buddhist schools. This chapter focuses on the Upanishads and the Dharma-sutras. The Mahabharata is primarily discussed in the following chapter on Theistic yoga as central parts of it were under the influence of monotheism. Early yoga probably emerged primarily among the Kshatriyas – the ruling warrior classes – in a mixed milieu of householders and ascetic vagrants.

My aim in presenting these first yoga texts, as found in the Upanishads and the Dharmasutras, is to give first of all a critical and general – but I hope not too controversial – overview of the technical meaning of yoga, as it appeared as a discourse of liberation. As a part of this, it is my aim to show how proto-yoga notions entered an Upanishad sign system and became reconfigured by a dissimilar sign world of Brahmin mysticism. This ongoing historical adaptation, re-contextualising, re-orientation or hybridisation of the yoga discourse is a central theme of this book.

As the reader will soon see, the texts reveal very little to a modern yoga student about the precise use-value of yoga – i.e. what is yoga exactly in a technical sense? In order to fill out the gaps we investigate sister discourses to early-yoga – the Buddhist and the Jains. In other words we are seeing yoga discourse as a part of a wider cultural field of liberation. This context of sister discourses, cultural institutions, power discourses, symbolic capital, and competition between specialists – all within a defining cultural field of liberation –

enable us to develop a more precise vision of the early-yoga discourse.

The glaring lack of detailed technical clarification will become a tendency of almost all the yoga texts we encounter through India's pre-modern history. The lack of clear and comprehensive explanations has led many to conclude that there was an accompanying oral tradition, which was the *real* yoga tradition: the practical transmission from the guru to his yoga student. Hence this chapter discusses the possibility of a parallel practical oral based line of transmission. This discussion is probably of great interest to many yoga popularisers, who claim it is the oral yoga tradition, the real and only yoga tradition.

It is in this context of trying to understand the purpose of the yoga texts that we start to investigate the social symbolic meaning of yoga, central to this book.<sup>170</sup> Early yoga forms soon became enveloped by Brahmin mysticism and caste ideology and claims of supernatural powers. All this contributed to the construction of a yogic adept – the mystical sage, the liberated meditative adept - loaded with symbolic capital.

Some readers might find parts of this chapter very intensive and complex as I analyse the texts. However central themes and issues in the yoga discourse originated at this point of time. These would come to dominate not only the yoga discourses, but most of the Ways of Liberation since then. Crucial here is the notion of 'liberation' and it is recommended that the previous chapter "4<sup>th</sup> Consideration – Liberation as a sociological ideal type" is read before this chapter.

## 1. The process of turning proto-yoga into early-yoga

### The Sramanas and the Axial Age episteme

We have seen how the discourses of proto-yoga – like for instance the *karma doctrine* – seem to be a part of an emerging Axial Age civilisation and its new *episteme* – a new way of thinking. All the signs clustering round the liberation discourses point forward in time, rather than back to the Vedic culture. Yes, the new signs are conditioned – made possible – by Archaic codes and ways of thinking, but simultaneously they are very cumbersome to give meaning within Vedic sign systems, values and priorities. There is a *conceptual rupture*.

The Axial Age *karma* discourse evolved among the Sramanas and Kshatriyas (Obeyesekere 2002). Their ascendancy was also directly a function of the dawn of the Axial Age. The new Axial Age *episteme* ([Wikipedia link](#)) came to its fullest expression among the Buddhists, who in addition to the Jains made a significant contribution to the development of the core aspects of the yoga discourse. It was especially among the Buddhists that Axial Age ways of thinking like *rationalism, universalism and ethical living* crystallised into a new religio-philosophy.

In relation to liberation discourses and practices – central to the emerging yoga sign - the Buddhist muted the ascetic elements of such discourses. Instead they emphasised the Axial Age aspect of wisdom discourses. The Buddhists – closely associating the sign *karma* with *gnosis* (*knowledge*) ([Wikipedia link](#)) - in this way represented true Axial Age wisdom discourses surfacing in the midst of ascetic-meditative milieus.

Thus the Sramanas - unlike the Brahmins - had no issues with the evolution of new Axial Age episteme. In fact they were a central part of that process. They embodied the new thinking – the new episteme. The Brahmins however struggled with the new. On their side they embodied Archaic ideas and practices that they needed to maintain and defend. Let us initially give an overview of how and why the Brahmins adapted the new – in our case proto-yoga. We will follow how and why proto-yoga, through its import to the old centre of society, became yoga.

### Evolving Axial Age discourses among the Brahmins

In the texts authored by the Brahmins they began to reflect over, adapt to and re-configure the new signs that reflect the emerging Axial Age episteme. The Axial Age signs of *karma*, *the true nature of immovable self* and *its liberation* were investigated again and again first in the *Upanishads* and then in the *Mahabharata*.

‘Liberating knowledge’ of ‘the true self’ - leading to ‘end of re-birth’ - was re-formulated as ‘reaching *brahman*’ in the *Chandogya Upanishad*. The immovable self was called *atman*. In later *Upanishads*, we see how the *karma* doctrine slowly merged with Brahmin notions. *Atman* – a new sign - became identified with *brahman* – a re-constructed Vedic sign. This linking was a part of Axial Age episteme, because *knowing* (i.e. wisdom – or *Gnosticism* - was critical) this connection led to release and end of re-birth.

The introduction of the *karma* and liberation discourse was not a minor intellectual incident. It reflected a major shift in the thinking, perception, values and priorities of the Axial Age. The implication in this shift was for instance that the all-crucial old sacrifices lost their symbolic signification and power. Some Brahmins tried to adapt to this by framing the new practices and discourses of liberation, as they were only a continuation of their existing discourses: meditation and release were presented and framed as a new ritual of self-sacrifice (Heestermann 1964).<sup>[171](#)</sup>

So why did some Brahmins then change, if it was such a painful and risky process? In short they – or at least some of them - *had* to adapt and change their ideas or move significantly down the social ranking ladder. The era of *Vedic Early Iron Age* (and its Archaic state form) was coming to an end with its simple kingdoms, low social stratification, complex ritual cycles, pastoralism, village life, and kinship organisation. The Brahmins found themselves in the midst of 300 years of heavy urbanisation, growth of trade, social stratification, territorial state power, large scale warfare, monetisation, slavery, strong population growth, agriculture – all culminating in the emergence of a single empire ruling Northern India: first the Nandas, then the Mauryas (Erdosy 1995, 1995b, Graeber 2011).

My general hypothesis is that the conservative Brahmins struggled to adapt to the new

social matrix of the Axial Age civilisation, where aristocratic warrior clans were on a meteoric rise and new intellectual groups like the Sramanas evolved. The Brahmins fought a losing battle for the maintenance of the status quo. As a consequence many of them withdrew from society and lived off the land, which they often controlled. They gave up *public* communal sacrifice and focussed on *private* rites of transition. Only relatively few Brahmin clans in this period changed and adapted to the new general Axial Age ideational system (*episteme*). They became the co-authors of the *Upanishads* where first *karma* and later the yoga sign emerged.

### ***Kshatriyas and the spread of the proto-yoga discourse***

We do not only encounter Brahmin lecturers in the *Upanishads* but also Kshatriya teachers. The Kshatriyas – the noble warrior classes - introduced the Brahmins to *karma*. Perhaps it was even the Kshatriyas who created the sign. So they found the new sign inspirational and thought that the Brahmins should know about it. Why? Because, as we can see today, the sign was loaded with ideology and power. Let me explain.

*Karma* explains social success and failure as a function of past lives. It is evident that *karma* implies that an individual's present social position is a direct result of this person's behaviour in previous lives. This sign in a single sentence explains and legitimises social difference. If you are poor, it is your own fault. Behave, and you will have a better chance in next life. Such a doctrine was clearly to the benefit of the two ruling groups who competed for dominance – the Kshatriya and the Brahmins. So the *karma* sign – interpreted in this narrow way – could easily have emerged among the ruling groups as North India became increasingly stratified.

Thus the *karma* doctrine was from the very beginning interlinked with the emerging institution of castes (*varna*) (Chatterji 2007, Bandyopadhyaya 2008 ). *Karma* explained and legitimised the caste society, which was crystallising. Those who followed the rules governing their caste would be reborn under good conditions, but those who did not would be reborn as the lowest of the low, those who were powerful and those who were poor reaped what they had sown. According to *Chandogya Upanishad*:

“Now, people whose behaviour is pleasant can expect to enter a pleasant womb, like that of the Brahmin, the Kshatriya and Vashiya class. But people of foul behaviour can expect to enter a foul womb, like that of a dog, a pig, or an outcaste woman.” ( 5.10.7)

The *karma* discourse among the Kshatriyas and Brahmins became a strong ideological tool controlling the masses by convincing them to accept and reproduce social differences and conditions. Expressed in the terms of *Cultural Studies* ([Wikipedia link](#)) the *karma* sign was *hegemonic* ([Wikipedia link](#)) : it made those in a subordinate and marginal social position accept and understand their situation as natural and given.

However the *karma* discourse was at the same time a double-edged sword. Its accompanying Axial Age rationalism, universalism and ethical outlook were in direct conflict with the Indian caste society, with its ritual foundation, its tribalism and its differentiation of living beings (Gombrich 2009, Obeyesekere 2002). When the *karma* sign was given meaning in an Axial Age *episteme*, it did not fit well into the emerging class society. This side of the edge of the *karma* sword was exploited by especially by the Buddhists. They attacked the

caste society and they often reached out towards the masses by promoting Axial Age compassion, equality and universalism.

Proto-yoga discourse – where *karma* was also central - was to a large extent Buddhist and Jain discourse. Hence proto-yoga was informed by the Axial Age episteme of universalism, rationalism and ethics. However, as this yoga entered the *Upanishad* genre around the time of Buddha, the ethical aspect especially was left at the door. The ethical aspect of course had to be silenced in these texts, as it challenged the two hegemonic castes. How could their powerful position, their repression of lower castes, their accumulated symbolic capital be united with demands of universalism and ethical living? The ethical aspects could especially create problems for the Kshatriyas as *karma* for instance saw violence – central to a warrior life – as having very negative karmic effects.

In the middle of this period where the *Upanishads* surfaced, the huge epic *Mahabharata* began its centuries long period of gestation. Here yoga was widely discussed in relation to the ruling aristocratic warrior classes - the Kshatriyas. From the *Mahabharata* we get the clear impression that the sign systems accompanying yoga – like *karma*, *samsara*, meditation, *moksha*, the immovable self - were quite well-known among the ruling elites. Later on we shall see how this grand Epic further incorporated yoga and *karma* into the Brahmins' and Kshatriyas' ideology and hegemonic dominance.

### The educated Kshatriya of the Axial Ages

So which of these two dominating castes lead and drove the adaption and development of yoga and *karma*? The answer seems to be that even if some of the scribal class of Brahmins wrote the texts, then many of the new controversial ideas emerging were introduced by the increasingly dominant Kshatriyas (Chatterji 2007, Obeyesekere 2002). As neither of the two social hegemonic groups of descending Brahmins and ascending Kshatriyas could rule society on their own, they were forced reluctantly to deal with each other socially, politically and ideologically. So this would have been a factor in explaining why heretic discourses like yoga found their way into the writings of some Brahmin clans: it was forced upon them by necessity, by the quest to stay in power, by their dominant political partner caste. Based on this I assume that the strata who voluntarily and out of interest – the first amateurs ("lovers of") – took up new practices and ideas and later called them yoga, were mainly the Kshatriyas.

Later we shall reflect on why the Kshatriyas became interested in yoga – assuming of course they did so. Here we have to recall that the Axial Age Kshatriyas should not be seen narrowly as a belligerent and militant group. They were a highly – and many of them the highest – educated class, educated in a wide range of subjects not normally connected to a warrior: the *Vedas*, phonetics, etymology, grammar, prosody, literature, chemistry, astronomy, mathematics, the Epics, divination, demonology, performance of sacrifice, music, dance, and chess. They were actively engaged in philosophy and often involved in religious change. The kings in particular (but not the Brahmins) were often seen to have superior knowledge. Kings were even mentioned as teachers of the *Vedas* (Chatterji 2007). If we think of a better documented Axial Age society like the aristocratic clans ruling Greece and Rome – who gave

birth to numerous historically renowned thinkers - we get a good picture of how the ruling Indian aristocratic classes might have looked.

This understanding of the Kshatriyas as intellectual and cultural contributors - exemplified by their yoga discourse - indicates that this is a separate stratum which does *not* turn yoga into a profession. This is not a professional driven [cultural field of yoga](#). The Kshatriyas are primarily an aristocratic, warrior upper-class and then secondly they pursue their cultural, religious and intellectual interests. This is hence a separate yoga milieu driven by different conflicts and themes than that of the yoga professionals. These are the yoga sympathisers of the upper-classes.

*We have now finalised this overview of proto-yoga's journey into the world of the hitherto two dominant social groups, who were in the process of reconstructing themselves as castes. I have indicated that yoga became an essential ideological part of this – its symbolic powers had strong attraction too. Yoga was not just a question of the liberation of the soul from release. We will now investigate the yoga that emerged in this period in the texts of the dominant two social groups.*

## 2. The *Upanishad* yoga discourse

### The *Upanishads* – the postulates of ‘hidden interconnections’

The word ‘*upanishad*’ means “true correspondence, connection”, or “mysterious equivalence”, according to J. C. Ruff (Ruff 2012). They are often translated as meaning ‘secret teachings’, which is true so far as the texts were indeed conceived for the elites. The ‘Classical *Upanishads*’ investigated in this chapter slowly took shape over an 800 year period - between 500 BC and 300 AD. [172](#) They were often orally transmitted. Through later history more *Upanishads* appeared. We shall later return to the so-called [Yoga-Upanishads](#), which appeared first between the ninth and thirteen century and finally a last batch between 1500 and 1750.

As a genre, according to Ruff, the *Upanishads* are best understood by their efforts to perceive ‘hidden connections’ implied by their name: *Upanishads*). The specific connections of interest were those between Brahmin religio-philosophical notions and different levels of reality. To achieve this insight or realisation the Brahmins employed a variety of often trance-inducing methods, which changed throughout history. This could be visualisation, reciting mantras, doing [tapas](#), performing [upasana](#) rituals, being mindful, chanting, focussing on objects, concentrating, reflecting, studying old scriptures. A new method introduced to the genre around 400 BC was yoga.

By applying such methods, the *Upanishad* teachers claimed, they could perceive the

‘hidden connections’ of reality. Behind reality as it appeared to most of us, the skilful masters claimed there existed a deeper ‘networked reality’. This transcendent reality was a world of inter-connections. So what appeared to the untrained observer to be a fragmented and changing reality was an illusion. Behind it was an interconnected world, a single unified reality. This kind of thinking - investigating the *transcendent* (the non-observable) - is typically Axial Age *episteme* (way of reflecting).

The connections which the adepts claimed they had discovered through their methods were expressed in analogies and metaphors. The connections were presented as symbolic associations. However there was more to this, which made a significant difference. When the Upanishad sage had made these discoveries (like sign A was connected to B which was a symbol of C), he would *himself* become linked to these connections (a sign D added to A, B and C). Thus to know the hidden connection had amazing results. Through his discovery, the hidden connection between the sage and the underlying universe (between D and A,B,C) would be ‘real-ised’. It would be activated. So because his acquired knowledge also had a hidden connection to underlying reality, his discovery would mean that the sage would become what he had discovered (Ruff 2012).

Among the Axial Age thinkers in other civilisations this last element seems alien: all Axial intellectuals agreed that insight (and many agreed this was a *mystical* insight) into the transcendent had huge implications for individual happiness, but none of them except the Indians thought they would *become* this transcendent abstraction.

### **The *Upanishads* as power discourses and ideology**

In this chapter we shall see how proto-yoga - orientated by a mixture of ascetic-meditative discourses and revolutionary Axial Age *episteme* - became re-contextualised within an often incommensurable Brahmin mystical sign system. Sometimes these radical new *Upanishad* wisdom discourses overtly dismissed the old Vedic signs, but sometimes there were also conscious efforts to re-configure and re-orientate the new yoga sign; it appeared to correspond with the old.

This re-orientation and twisting of signs will become clear later on as we compare early-yoga with its sister discourse Buddhism. We will see how aspects of Axial Age wisdom discourses like universalism, ethical living and rationalism central to Buddhism and the new *karma* doctrine disappeared from *Upanishad* yoga (Gombrich 2009, Obeyesekere 2002). Why? Because, as I said earlier, this kind of outlook contradicted the power basis of the *Upanishad* teachers – the hegemonic castes of Brahmins and Kshatriyas. In other words the caste ideology, which implicitly coded the *Upanishads*, prohibited or excluded many aspects of proto-yoga and instead manoeuvred it in the direction of *elite mysticism*.

The *Upanishad* genre rests on a fundamental Axial Age religio-philosophical postulate that the world behind its appearance is connected. In this way the texts represent typical Axial Age wisdom discourses: behind the *immanent* (observable) there is the *transcendent* (unobservable). Behind multiplicity there is One-ness, sometimes called ‘non-duality’. This ‘One-ness behind and inside multiplicity’ was a radical new concept, but the authors managed to link the One to their old sign systems by naming it ‘*brahman*’. Having connected the new entity

with old discourses the teaching set out to substantiate this claim of the One.

Enter yoga as a trance inducing method to realise the One: (1) through various trance techniques the One could not only be *verified*, but (2) a *mystical fusion* would take place, where the immanent (the observable world) would merge with the transcendent (the non-observable world). Yogic trance here signified something entirely different. In other words the ‘Upanishadic trance’ – signified and constructed through the lenses of non-duality / the One – was seen as a tool which could prove that the revisionist Brahmin ideas about One-ness was true. Through the application of these new and old methods of trance – one of them was yoga - the *Upanishad* adepts claimed that they were able to generate ‘mystical experiences of interconnectedness’ (non-duality). Yoga was their proof. But modern social psychology tells us that such proceedings and methods tend to become self-fulfilling procedures: in the trance you will easily come to experience what you expected to experience.

The *Upanishads* are in modern terms ‘theological’ texts, texts setting out to explore, legitimise and expand the believer’s notions and assumptions. The texts were not only teachings but also *ideological devices* trying to convince the world of social differences. Yoga was a tool for this. It provided evidence that the sages had actually experienced the One, of which they spoke. Yoga was their way of proving this. However more than this – and this is significant – the text claimed that the adept had himself changed dramatically during his process of experiencing the One: by knowing the One, he had ‘become the One’ – whatever that now signified.

The texts were in this way framed as not just ‘intellectual reports’. They were also about securing the author or teacher a unique social position and status – symbolic capital. They turned him into a powerful metaphysical being – a *transcendent* god-like principle (who simultaneously – defying all logic – was also *immanent*): a person with ‘superior knowledge’ of hidden connections was almost impossible to challenge intellectually unless you adapted his methods. Thus in a cultural sociological view, the texts were embodied [power discourses](#) : those privileged beings , who understood the teachings, had high status and power. In summary the *Upanishads* were, in many respects, examples of an Axial Age wisdom power discourse, even if some of the texts also praised and prioritised rituals and austerities rooted in Archaic social formations.

### **The construction of the *Upanishad* canon**

Many of the *Upanishads* are clusters of text fragments compiled over generations, if not centuries. Numerous teachers generated them often at the centre of small communities gathering around the philosopher to learn. Some of the teachers were named in the *Upanishads*, but none of them reached the fame of the two contemporary Kshatriyas Buddha and Mahavira (the last being the founder of Jainism). Soon after the intellectual originator died, many of the teachings – and there were hundreds of them (first oral traditions, then later written down) - would have either totally vanished, or only been continued in a very fragmented form. Other teachings would have been picked up by later generations and incorporated in new “revised” teachings and so on<sup>173</sup>. Thus there was no comprehensive *Upanishad* teaching but an arena or discourse

of fragmented and contradictory philosophies.

An important point is that many of the *Upanishad* teachings often just comprising very short essays or tiny collections of verses, were strongly rejected by the majority of the Brahmins. Conservative Brahmins argued that Brahmins were professional ritualists, and should stay away from the abstract speculations and their teaching (Collins 1998). So how does it happen that the *Upanishads* are seen today as part of original *Brahmin* teaching? The answer is that, maybe, they were originally not!

The historical fact is that it was many hundred years later – with the [Vedantic revolution](#) of Sankara and his contemporaries - that the Brahmins agreed that 1) the *Upanishads* were an integral part of, and a finalisation of the Vedic canon, and 2) that the philosophy of *Upanishads* actually was a clarification of ideas already present in the *Vedas*. The Vedantic intellectuals at that point in history - around 700 AD - selected about eleven from the large pool of teachings, and identified them as *the Upanishads* – i.e. canon<sup>174</sup>.

In other words the Brahmin Vedantic intellectuals, invented a tradition more than a thousand years after the event. They further claimed that there was textual continuity and consistency across that declared tradition. They did it by adapting selected *Upanishad* texts, which actually often questioned, criticised or ridiculed the very same Vedic teaching and rituals of which they became a part. So the claim of continuity of [cultural memory](#) was a fabrication.<sup>175</sup> Why did they do so? Because the sign ‘tradition’ imbued them and their new discourses with ancient roots and authority. It was an ideological move.

As discussed earlier the *Upanishads* – and especially where they indicated epistemic rupture with Vedic outlooks – should rather be seen as a mixture of the discourses of the ruling classes. Often the *Upanishads* state that Kshatriya sages taught the new ideas. Most probably it was dissident Brahmin clans who wrote down the new heretical ideas. In other words they signified ideological conflicts between the various hegemonic social strata.

### Who were the first Yogis – the *Kshatriyas*?

The *Upanishads* which introduced yoga and Samkhya concepts seem to come from regions of India where the Sramana groups emerged. These *Upanishads* all belonged to the so-called *Yajur-veda* Brahmin branch or transmission line.<sup>176</sup> It is probable that this specific branch of Brahmins were in close interaction with the Sramanas and urbanised Kshatriyas and maybe because of this adopted some of their discourses.<sup>177</sup> Additionally, they were located in a geographical area, which seems further down the process of civilisation and state building. This socialising process could also have moved them in a more “revisionist” (accepting the new) direction than the typical arch conservative village-based Brahmins of other areas.

The heretic Brahmins briefly mentioning and naming the new yoga practices never identified themselves as yogis. The notion ‘jogi’ first gained common use about 1500 years later (White 2009). Hence they seem not so thrilled and taken up by yoga. There are many other indications that the Brahmins in general do not seem to have fully embraced yoga in this early period. Many of their texts hardly mention yoga. This prompts us to look for other social groups as the agents for bringing the yoga discourse into the *Upanishads*. We recall how the

Kshatriyas put the revolutionary *karma* discourse forward to the Brahmins. Maybe the Kshatriyas did the same with yoga. In other words the *Yajur-veda* Brahmin branch were exposed to an intensive debate with their fellow power-sharing Kshatriyas, who on their side were influenced by the strong Sramana movement in that area.

The *Upanishads* were often composed as dialogues between a sage and a novice. However as we saw earlier the sage was in many cases not a Brahmin. Instead the Brahmins were often portrayed as perplexed and misled. The expert in the teachings was often a *Kshatriya* – frequently in the form of a king. Hence we hear about Kshatriya sages like Janaka, Asvapati, Pravahana and Ajatasatru. This could of course only signify a narrative twist, but I find it signifies a real process. Why?

The Kshatriyas were, as mentioned earlier, a highly educated class who were perceived as possessing ‘superior knowledge’ and were able to teach the *Vedas* (Chatterji 2007). It was two Kshatriyas who founded the two revolutionary new religio-philosophies of Buddhism and Jainism: Buddha and Mahavira. And we can see for certain that the Buddha was highly educated and was even well versed in the *Vedas* and Brahmin philosophy (Gombrich 2009). Thus it is not unlikely that similar Kshatriya sages could have engaged the Brahmins with new yoga ideas.

In our investigations of the *Mahabharata* we shall see there were many reasons for the Kshatriyas to take up yoga and become the first *yoga sympathisers*<sup>178</sup>. It seems that they – initially as *yoga amateurs* and later as professional teachers - appreciated and shared many of the ideas and practices of the full-time *professional* Buddhists and the Jains. However there seem to have been elements of Buddhism and Jainism that many of them could not accept. Hence some of them did not join their monastic dominated milieus and instead chose to stay “independent”. Maybe they started up their own liberation discourses – cleansed of unacceptable Buddhist and Jain ideas. As a result of this disagreement, the “*Upanishad Brahmins*” – maybe reluctantly, maybe inspired – became incorporated in the Kshatriyas’ engagement with and adoption of the new discourse: hence the discussions in the *Upanishads*, where we encounter some of these Kshatriya teachers or sages discussing the new signs.

Maybe the Kshatriya yoga sympathisers – fighting from chariots pulled by several horses – accordingly gave the new practice the name ‘yoga’: as they yoked and disciplined their warhorses, so did their new practice yoke their senses. For these first yoga sympathisers, yoga might for instance have been a preparation for fighting and the imminent risk of violent death that always awaited the warrior. Or yoga, as the calming of the mind and the self before battle? In case of death, the warrior would with a calm mind pass into eternity. Is this the beginning of yoga – the amateur yoga of the cultivated aristocratic warrior?

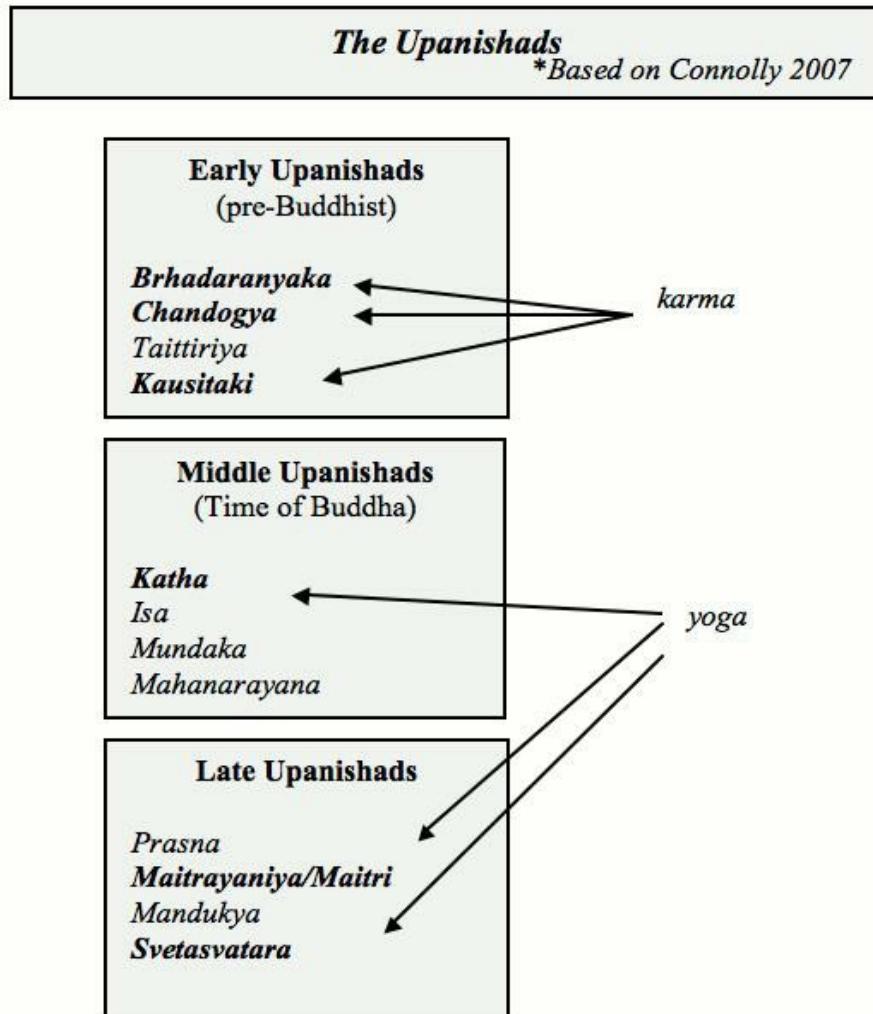
### **The origin of yoga in the *Upanishads***

There is no systematic and comprehensive yoga doctrine outlined in the *Upanishads*. There are only a few fragments on yoga, and yoga was not the main subject of the texts. Rather the *Upanishads* were occupied by intellectual and theological discussions. They were not reports derived from “*yogis sitting in deep meditation conceiving their wisdom*”, as we so

often hear in popular histories of yoga.

Further we do not know whether a given text mentioning yoga had been compiled over generations, or if some original yoga text fragment had been “massaged” by later editors in order to conform with later theological assumptions. We should bear in mind that the *Upanishads* are collective works compiled over generations according to fluctuating ideological and intellectual purposes.<sup>179</sup> Below is a map of the *Upanishads* with indications of where to find the texts mentioning yoga and the related *karma* discourse.

According to the American Sanskrit scholar S. Cohen *Text and Authority in the Older Upanishads* (2008), the two first *Upanishads* mentioning yoga – the *Katha* and the *Svetasvatara* - both emerged from the same Brahmin recitation branch called the *Black Yajur-veda* (priestly manuals for performing rituals of sacrifice). This tradition belonged geographically to the area where the Sramanas emerged. It was very critical of the old *Rig-veda* tradition (verses and songs in praise of the gods)<sup>180</sup>. The last of the *Upanishads* to discuss yoga – the *Maitri*, which also is a text exposed to significant editorial changes through time – also had a very strong influence on the *Mahabharata*.<sup>181</sup>



So the *Katha Upanishad* of the *Yajur-Vedas* was the very first *Upanishad* to mention yoga. On the one hand, the *Katha Upanishad* is in itself a compilation of many different

sources. On the other hand, the *Katha* was copied substantially by later *Upanishads* like the *Mandukya* and the *Svetasvatara*. The *Mahabharata* and the *Bhagavad-Gita* also borrowed heavily from the *Katha*. Hence the *Katha* is a central *Upanishad* – not only in relation to yoga. Cohen argues that even the god Krishna, from the *Gita*, could actually be a direct replacement of the teacher Yama figuring in the *Katha*.

### ***Katha: The disciplining of the mind and the senses***

It is not until the end of the *Katha Upanishad* that yoga is defined as a system of ascetic-meditative practices. Here yoga is characterised as the fixing of the senses:

“When the five instruments of knowledge stand still together with the mind (manas), and when the intellect (buddhi) does not move, that is called the highest stage. This, the firm holding back of the senses, is what is called yoga”. VI. 10-11

This description of yoga reminds us very much of the ascetic-meditative self-mortification practised by the Sramanas. In this version Yoga is about stilling the mind and the thoughts, by controlling and disciplining the input from the senses. As this definition appears together with discussions of immortality and the realisation of *brahman*, it is clear that Sramanic discourse of ascetic self-mortification gains recognition in the Upanishad milieu.

As the *Katha*, earlier on, uses the metaphor of a ‘chariot’ – disciplining and channelling the power of horses – the reader realises that yoga is similar about controlling the senses and mind. The body-mind system is namely seen as a chariot:

“Know the self as a rider in a chariot, and the body as simply the chariot, know the intellect as the charioteer, and the mind as simply the reins. The senses they say are the horses.” III.3

So it could be from this metaphor of ‘yoking horses’ that the yoga notion derives (Cohen 2008). What needs to be harnessed is an integrated cluster consisting of mind, intellect and senses – often just called the ‘senses’. Thus by gaining control and discipline of this whole “chariot complex” – i.e. by ‘yoking’ - the meditator obtains understanding or discernment. This is seen in following statement, which confirms the metaphor:

“But he who has discernment, with an ever controlled mind, his senses are subdued, like the good horses of a charioteer.” (III.6)

The two following verses then explain the implication of the Yogis ‘discernment’: he, who does not control his senses (i.e. does not meditate and understand), enters into rebirth, but he who does, “reaches indeed that place, from whence he is not born again” III.8.

These verses once more express a vision of liberation very similar to those of the Sramanas’: rebirth is arrested through the mortification of the body mind system. At first glance it seems that yogic liberation is informed by a *karma* discourse. However the *Katha* here seems to add a new dimension of ‘understanding’ to release.

This is confirmed from other passages. In the chapter preceding the verses discussing yoga, the *Katha* describes a mental process, where one passes to still subtler mind stages until *purusha* or *atman* is ‘realised’. A similar description is also found later on, claiming that beyond the senses there is mind and beyond that there is the self (VI.7). This seems to be a description of a meditative process that the adept is going through. But is this meditative process similar to yogic still mind? It could also be a separate older meditation system or ritual not related to yogic meditation. So we are not explicitly told that yoga is about realising

*atman*, but the context might indicate so.

Nevertheless it is clear that overall the goal in the *Katha* is to ‘realise *atman*’. This is what ‘understanding’ seems to be about, but it is not clear what this ‘*atman*-realisation’ exactly signifies. But the reader then wonders what has ‘understanding’ to do with yogic still-mind – do they not exclude each other? Does the *Katha* adhere to a model of liberation as [Gnostic Comprehension](#) or as [Meditative Absorption](#)? Several interpretations seem possible. Here follow some.

As the yoga chariot metaphor is so congruent to Sramana thinking, it seems probable that the *Katha* agrees with the Sramanas that liberation happens not in this life but in death *after* the process of self-mortification. The suspicion that the *Katha* is talking about real physical and mental self-mortification is confirmed as the mention of death occurs several times. For instance it is said: “I shall tell ..... what happens to the Self, after reaching Death” (V.6).

The overall target is however clear in the *Katha*. The goal is for the adept to ‘realise’ that his ‘true self’ – *atman* – is ‘eternal and unchanging’. With this notion, it appears that it is the [‘immovable self’](#) of the Sramanic discourse, which is being alluded to. The *Katha* informs the adept that if he realises that the soul is ‘unmovable and unborn’, then he will be released from the cycle of re-birth. This claim, to modern eyes, seems to support the interpretation, that ‘realisation’ must signify a *cognitive process* – an act of ‘understanding the soul’. But how does this concept of liberation as Gnostic realisation – presumably happening while the adept is alive as there is cognition involved - harmonise with yoga as a process of mortifying the mind and enabling release after death? There is clearly a contradiction here. The *Katha* might subscribe to a third model of liberation.

In order to grasp the signification of ‘realisation’ we could instead turn to the non-dual ontology, which we know often gives meaning to Brahmin signs. The Brahmins at this time developed the philosophy that things, even if they seemed different (being dual), were actually one (being non-dual). The second claim in their philosophy was that realising this one-ness in all things would have the implication that the knowing consciousness would also become one with this one-ness.

Hence, if we perceive the *Katha* through such non-dual lenses then ‘realisation’ signifies an ontological deletion of duality: consciousness as it realises non-duality becomes this non-duality. This realisation-as-an-ontological-transformation-of-consciousness is accomplished by yogic mortifying meditation. As it seems that the *Katha* connects yoga meditation with death we can assume that this realisation must happen in death. So it seems that as the meditator slides into death, his soul in death realises that it is eternal and by doing so, it becomes eternal and does not return.

But such a line of argument is hard to accept for a modern reader, who often does not share the notion of a ‘soul’. Firstly we are asked to accept the notion of a soul which is ‘alive’ (?) after physical death. Secondly we are asked to believe that after death - in a state of still mind - there must take place some kind of ‘discernment’ – which by the way is not normal ‘cognitive processing’ as we usually understand it. How can a mind brought to absolute stillness by meditation and death perform any ‘discernments’ or ‘realisations’?

Only by sharing the assumptions and claims of the Upanishad sage are we able to

comprehend his discourse of ‘realisation’ - However, by adopting the sage’s assumptions, we assume that what we initially set out to clarify. And so is the sage. The *Katha* only produces claims and postulates and very little rational argumentation to justify those.

So the goal of yoga in the *Katha* is a slippery and confusing mystic notion of ‘realisation’, which seems impossible to nail down. What is clear however, is that overall in the *Katha*, yoga as technology signifies *self-mortification*: the conglomerate of mind and senses has been harnessed and brought to stillness. This leads a modern reader to conclude that ascetic-meditative techniques play some blurred role in ‘realisation of the self and *brahman*’, which is further linked to the *karma* discourse of ‘release of birth’. This impression is confirmed as the *Upanishad* ends with the following words:

“Then after Naciketas received this body of knowledge, and the entire set of yogic rules taught by death. He attained Brahman; he became free from ageing and death, so will others who know this teaching about the self.” VI. 18

So this verse seems to assure us that when Brahmin doctrines - revealing hidden non-dual connections – are combined with yoga practice then the adept is released from cycles of rebirth, as he becomes *brahman*. But we are still left to wonder, reading this last verse, if this *brahman* realisation happens in death or in life. If it happens when the adept is alive, then the *Katha* is in line with the *karma* discourse in earlier *Upanishads* like the *Brhadaranyaka*: release is caused by Gnostic insight. Otherwise the *Katha* is introducing yoga in relation to a new model of liberation – release as [Mystical Realisation](#).

The *Katha Upanishad* is seen by many scholars to be pre-Buddhist. Hence this new meditative technique of yoking the mind-senses system suddenly introduced in some Brahmin clans’ discourse could be an import of early Sramana and Kshatriya practices. But otherwise there are no philosophical elaborations in *Katha* on the yoga sign; no doctrine is described, just some statements describing the significance of yogic trance.

### ***Svetasvatara: theistic yoga – the origin of Saivite yoga?***

The next and final two *Upanishads* discussing yoga are both post-Buddhist. Some scholars believe that the *Svetasvatara Upanishad* is contemporary with Buddhism, others place it 600 years later. If 600 years passed – and this does seem to be the correct number - before there was a second mention of yoga in the *Upanishads*, then perhaps this gives us an indication that this new trance-inducing technology did not occupy the Brahmins much.

Nevertheless, in these two later *Upanishads* the influence of Buddhism is possible and this is certainly obvious in the last of them - the *Maitri Upanishad*.

The *Svetasvatara Upanishad* introduces an omnipotent god who takes centre stage. So here for the first time we move yoga into a *monotheistic discourse* ([Wikipedia link](#)) (Flood 1996)<sup>182</sup>. The central idea is that the creator god and the god who delivers salvation is one and the same. This *Upanishad* is like the *Katha* using a range of signs later to become part of Samkhya philosophy.

When discussing yoga technologies, the *Svetasvatara* focusses on *bodily practices* – suppressing breath and controlling movements.

<sup>182</sup>“This is If a wise man hold his body with erect parts (chest, neck, and head) even – and turn his senses with the mind

toward the heart, ..." II.8

"Having here suppressed his breath and having brought his movements under control, when his breath has been diminished, he should take breath through his nose. Being careful, the wise one should restrain his mind like that chariot yoked with vicious horses." II.9

This description is very much in line with the *Katha* even using the same metaphor, although the two techniques are now distinguishable: mind/sense control (*pratyahara*) followed by breath retention (*pranayama*), both aimed at restraining or mortifying the mind.

The goal of this practice seems in many respects also similar to that of the *Katha*. It is to 'know' and 'understand' the self and hence realise the underlying ontological reality. Some verses indicate that this ontological transformation deletes dualities ends cycles of rebirth and happens in death.

The description of the underlying principle seems however to have changed slightly. Often the text describes a union with god. Several times it is said that 'to know god' means 'release of re-birth':

"When one has known God all the fetters fall off; by eradication of the blemishes, birth and death come to an end" I.9.

The god mentioned is *Rudra* and *Siva*. In many places the non-dual *brahman* principle has changed signification and seems to receive its meaning from a monotheistic discourse: *brahman* has become a universal god. We also see that this monotheistic discourse is contextualised clearly within an *Upanishad* philosophy, where 'knowing' is an 'act of becoming'. Hence by knowing god, the adept 'becomes god', which is repeated several times.

So what role does yoga play in this new environment of a monotheistic discourse? This can be answered by investigating exactly how the Brahmin 'gets to know god'? There is no doubt that meditation – *dhyana* - is an important part of this. The *Svetasvatara* often uses this meditative concept central to Buddhism (they call it *Jnana*). *Dhyana* is crucial as it leads to 'insight in god':

"Those who follow the discipline of meditation (*dhyana*) have seen God, the self, the power and all hidden by their own qualities." I.3.

This is confirmed a few verses later:

"By meditating on him, by striving towards him, and further, in the end by becoming the same reality as him, all illusions disappear". I.10.

So meditation – if we are right in assuming that *dhyana* here means 'meditation', as we imagine 'meditation' today - seems to be a technique allowing the meditator to 'look through the delusive phenomenal world to see god behind' – to see, to know and to become the 'hidden connection'.

But what is the relationship between yoga and *dhyana*? Yoga is often equated to meditation and so is *dhyana*. But do the two names indicate two different meditation methods to still the mind? Or are yoga and *dhyana* more or less identical? Maybe yoga here consists only of the two techniques mentioned earlier – *pratyahara* and *pranayama* – and *dhyana* is then added to those two? As there is no further description of yoga in this *Upanishad* we cannot decide.

A further possibility could be that yoga was perceived as a 'ritual-meditative' practices preceding *dhyana*. Is it possible that yoga is perceived as an improved *upasana* technology – the Brahmin ritualistic-meditative worship, where the sacrificer is chanting himself into meditative trance? There is a verse relating meditation, and implicitly yoga, to mantra

chanting:

"When one makes one's own body the bottom slab and the syllable OM the upper drill, by twirling it constantly through meditation one would see God, just as one would see the hidden thing" I.14

Maybe yoga is conceived as a cluster of techniques like *pranayama* (suppressing breath), *pratyahara* (mortification of the senses), *upasana* (meditative chanting) and *dhyana* (meditation) – all together being a new and advanced form of *upasana*? In other words a merger of Sramanic and Brahmin technologies within an *Upanishad* sign system? It is all speculation, as the *Svetasvatara* does not clarify its notions. The *Svetasvatara* is occupied instead in listing and linking metaphors, symbols, dogmas, and allegories as it celebrates their significance.

A new theme of yoga is introduced here that came to occupy many yoga texts: the impressive almost supernatural body improvements attributed to yoga. Hence this *Upanishad* presents yoga as a discipline with a fine range of side effects. So when the body is disciplined:

"...that man, obtaining a body tempered by the fire of yoga, will no longer experience sickness, old age, or suffering. Lightness, health, the absence of greed, a bright complexion, a pleasant voice, a sweet smell, and very little faeces and urine – that, they say, is the first working of yogic practice." II.12-13.

The remarkable qualities listed here do not quite qualify to be called *supernatural*. Neither the *Svetasvatara* nor either of the other two Upanishads discussing yoga connects yoga directly with *siddhi* – supernatural powers. I will return to this later.<sup>183</sup>

Overall we can only conclude that this *Upanishad* weaves together meditative asceticism and Gnostic mysticism with a monotheistic discourse. Liberation seems to be similar to that of the *Katha*: it signifies an ontological transformation. However a new element in certain passages seems to have been introduced. It is the notion of 'salvation', meaning 'release through the grace of god'. In *Katha* liberation was clearly a release based on *self-effort*, but now god suddenly also plays a role. Thus one of the final verses claims:

"By the power of his austerities and by the grace of God, the wise Svetasvatara first came to know Brahman ..." VI.21

Many scholars have demonstrated that the god mentioned in the *Svetasvatara* is Siva.<sup>184</sup> This raises the interesting possibility that we have evidence of a very early Saivite yoga tradition, which has left little historical evidence, and therefore tends to be overlooked? In the subsequent historical eras there is rich evidence of a range of Saivite ascetic groups and communities, some of them connected to yoga. They worshipped Siva as the *god of asceticism* at the same time as he was worshipped as the warrior god of destruction. As we reach the Tantric era, there is rich documentation of a wide range of Saivite yoga forms, from which we can deduce that they could express a Siva yoga discourse: *Saivite yoga*.

### ***Maitri: Post-Buddhist yoga***

Finally the *Maitri Upanishad*, which is historically the last to discuss yoga. Here it is about finding 'communion' with *atman/brahman* within. This *Upanishad* also employs Samkhya notions, combining them with *Upanishad Vedanta* philosophy. However, as we shall see later, it also bears many parallels with Buddhism. We should notice that this *Upanishad*, as we know it today, is probably a merging of at least three earlier versions each compiled over hundred of years<sup>185</sup>. Hence again we should not expect a consistent yoga treaty, but a

textual tradition where different sectarian views are expressed, added and changed again and again for mainly religio-political reasons.

In the *Maitri*, almost at the end of it, we find by far the most comprehensive discussion of yoga among the *Upanishads*. Just before yoga is defined and introduced, the *Maitri* informs us that infinite *brahman* is the eternal unitary soul. Those who know this, go to that unity. This is traditional *Upanishad* non-dual discourse. Yoga is then introduced in relation to achieving that unity. In other words yoga is once more enveloped by non-dual discourse. Yoga is – for the first time - defined as a six step *meditative method*. According to the *Maitri*:

“The precept for affecting this (unity) is this: restraint of the breath (Pranayama), withdrawal of the senses (Pratyahara), meditation (Dhyana), concentration (Dharana), thinking (Tarka), absorption (Samadhi). Such are said to be the six-fold of yoga”. VI.18

Now we have a clear indication of yoga as a *cluster of technologies*. Most probably the list indicates a *sequence* though which the meditator moves leading to deeper and deeper absorption<sup>186</sup>. Many later passages confirm the impression that yoga is about suppressing the breath, the senses and the mind. The following verse introduces a central Brahmin notion as it tells us that the aim of those restraining efforts is to activate *turya* (the 4 condition). *Turya* is a condition of mind similar to deep sleep: no memory, no cognition, and absolute darkness of consciousness.

So the yoga described here seems at first glance to be in line with the ‘still mind’ of the Sramanas. This is confirmed by many other verses, which are also about stilling the mind and the effect of this. However one of the elements listed in the definition of yoga does not fit into this understanding. What is alien, seen from the point of view of still-mind-meditation, is the 5 yoga element - ‘thinking’ (*tarka*): how can the cognitive processes of thinking happen as the mind is brought to stillness and concentration? How come *tarka* is neither the initial step of mental preparation nor the final step of realisation in this six-limb yoga procedure? What has thinking (*tarka*) to do with stilling the mind (*turya*)?

From many other passages we can see that ‘insight’ or ‘knowledge’ has gained significant importance in the *Maitri*. Liberation is not achieved through mortification-meditation only. Three elements are required and the words used are not those that appear on the list of six yoga technologies:

“Therefore by *vidya* (knowledge), by *tapas* (heat) and by *cinta* (meditation) *Brahman* is apprehended.” IV.4

In many ways this verse is the usual *Upanishad* discourse: a range of technologies, either in combination or alone, enable ‘knowledge’ of hidden connections, which means the activation of *brahman*. The *Maitri* says here that austerities (*tapas*) and meditation (*cinta*) alone do not suffice. The adept who *only* practises austerities and meditation will not achieve liberation. More is required: to ‘apprehend *brahman*’ also requires an element of knowledge. In this case, however, ‘knowledge’ according to scholars means ‘intellectual insight into Brahmin dogmas and teaching’ – not the mystical releasing kind of ‘*brahman* knowledge’. So here ‘knowledge’ means the same as we understand it today, it is intellectual cognition. Why this change? Because the *Maitri* here expresses Buddhist discourse on ‘knowledge’. The surrounding sign system has changed.

Within Buddhism, liberation was often an act of grasping Buddha’s teaching through ‘mindfulness’ or ‘mindful contemplation’. Buddha deliberately argued that austerities and

meditation alone – also mentioned above - led the adept nowhere. Buddha's teaching – his knowledge – was also required. The *Maitri* includes and expresses this line of thought here.

Thus we see many verses in this chapter of the *Maitri* introducing further Buddhist notions and lines of argumentation, confirming that the *Maitri* employs Buddhist discourse. In the *Maitri*, liberation is no longer an event happening in death but is, as in Buddhism, an event which can happen when alive. Therefore – if we return to the *tarka* and the elements of yoga – ‘thinking’ is not the culmination of the six yoga elements, but appears towards the end as necessary background knowledge to proceed further.

However this should not lead the reader to assume a consistent (and Buddhist) view of yoga in the *Maitri*. In other places the yoga sign is linked to ritual chanting; the chanting of *Om* especially receives attention. For instance a few verses later in VI.22 *brahman* is reached by silently meditating on the sound a-u-m, which is classical *Upanishad* discourse. A few verses further on, in VI.25 *Pranayama*, *Om* recitation and meditation are brought together, and “this is designated yoga”: a yoga leading to various ‘visions of the soul’ – release. Perhaps yoga in these passages – linking the yoga sign to ritual recitations - is conceived in relation to the ritual of *upasana*- ‘worship-meditation’.

We recall that *upasana* was a peculiar mixture of activities like silent chanting, internalising, identifying with sacred objects, and *analysing*. ‘Analysing’ is a category, which presumes cognition. So thinking – *tarka* - was already a part of *upasana* practice. If these revisionist Brahmins imagined yoga as an “upgraded *upasana*”, it makes sense to include *tarka* (thinking), as one of yoga’s six technologies. So according to this interpretation of Crangle (1994), in some passages of the *Maitri*, yoga is for these Brahmins signifying a new ritual surpassing the old *upasana* <sup>187</sup>. In this way the new is pacified by associating it with the old.

In one passage there is a more detailed description of the yoga method or process. This version again seems rather different. It introduces notions of the ‘subtle body’ and ‘*mudras*’, which are both traditionally part of much later Tantric discourse. So here *pranayama*, inner silent *Om* chanting, meditation and *mudra* are combined. The result is the attainment of ultimate unity:

“There is an artery, called the Sushumnā, leading upwards, conveying the breath, piercing through the palate. Through it, by joining (yuj) the breath, the syllable Om, and the mind, one may go aloft. By causing the tip of the tongue to turn back against the palate and by binding together (sām-yojya) the senses, one may, as greatness, perceive greatness.’ Thence he goes to selflessness.” VI.22

Here and in many other places we also see that liberation is not an intellectual exercise, as in Buddhism, but a mystic-metaphysical event, typical of the *Upanishads*. Insight in many passages is not about cognition, but instead reached in a deep meditative trance. Meditation allows the subject to penetrate ‘darkness’ and ‘see the ultimate’. This is of course in direct conflict with the cognitive liberation notion of Buddhist mindfulness we find in other passages.

We see an example of this significant Brahmin mystic merging of meditation and contemplation:

“One may have a higher concentration than this. By pressing the tip of his tongue against the palate, by restraining voice, mind, and breath, one sees Brahma through contemplation (*tarka*).” VI.20

The following verse from VI.24 confirms and explains that when consciousness is

absolutely absent there is a single witness emerging or remaining. This is *atman/brahman*. Other quotes confirm this – *brahman* emerges when the mind is mortified:

“But when the mind has been dissolved,  
And there is the joy whose only witness is the self—  
That is Brahma, the immortal, the pure!  
That is the way! That indeed is the world!”

In such passages, liberation is clearly defined through *Upanishad* non-dual assumptions. The various methods facilitate the ‘realisation of the hidden connections’, which means that the knowing subject ‘becomes *brahman*’.

We are facing the incredible *Upanishad* proposition that liberation happens while meditating – it is *mystical-metaphysical insight* (non-cognitive ‘realisation’) happening during deep absorption. From the context we understand that this is made possible by previous Brahmin doctrinal training. This is the function of *tarka* (“thinking”), the 5 element of yoga: through, and because of previous insight (learning and training), the adept can see *brahman* in deep meditation. Without this training the meditator would not grasp what was going on.

In summary, from the passages above, the *Maitri* claims that, when using ascetic meditation techniques plunging the mind into the darkest of darkness, then, *despite the cognitive void*, there is insight. This is what is called today the ‘phenomenon of yoga’: a ‘yoga experience’ fascinating yoga popularisers and scholars of mysticism. In the triangle of liberation, this is labelled *Mystic Realisation*.

### The merge of the discourses of *turya* and yoga

From the discussion above we can see that the *Maitri* weaves together a range of concepts – *atman*, insight, union, liberation, and yoga – which have in common that they are all connected to a special Altered State of Consciousness (ASC) – *turya* – meaning the “the 4. Often these notions confusingly become identical in endless sequences of revealed connections: The Yogi becomes *atman*, which is *brahman*, which is *turya*, which is union, which is liberation, which is *brahman*, which is truth etc.. Let us have a closer look at *turya* as it has ‘hidden connections’ to so many central notions.

*Turya* is central because the *Maitri* connects *turya* directly with yoga. *Maitri* states that yoga techniques generate the ‘fourth condition of consciousness’ which is ‘void of conceptions’:

“The breathing spirit (prana) has put to rest objects of sense, there upon let him continue void of conceptions ..... restrain his breathing spirit in what is called *turya*”.VI.19

The verse seems to say that *pranayama* brings the mind to stillness and *turya*. But what is exactly this *turya*? The *Maitri* – like many other *Upanishads* - claims that there are three common forms of consciousness – awake, dreaming and deep sleep – known to all human beings. But there is also a fourth condition (*turya*) of consciousness – a state of consciousness very similar to deep sleep, but where the person is still awake. If we want to understand *turya* in detail, we need to look at for instance the *Mandukya Upanishad*. It gives a long list of descriptions of this ‘fourth condition’ (I quote only a few attributes):

“... as unthinkable; as indescribable; as the cessation of the visible world; as tranquil; as auspicious; as without a

second. That is the self (atman), and it is that which should be perceived.” (7)

Like *brahman*, *turya* is beyond words, but it still has some characteristics. Firstly, despite *turya* being beyond words, it seems connected to a range of positive attributes. Secondly, it is consciousness emptied of content of sensory input, thoughts, emotions and fantasies. It is consciousness devoid of conceptions. Finally, in other passages the *Maitri* claims that liberation happens in this condition of ‘pure consciousness’:

“... by suppressing the mind, one sees the brilliant self which is much more subtle than the subtle .... One becomes self-less ..... the mark of liberation (moksha)”.VI.20

This is traditional non-dual mystical rhetoric: the still mind of *turya* allows the self to emerge, leading to liberation (self-lessness) – which is *brahman*. So it is the merit of the *Maitri* to link yoga technologies with *turya*, which on its side is linked to *brahman*. Hence in a process culminating in the *Maitri*, yoga has become clearly linked to, and defined in relation to, a Brahmin discourse of consciousness: yoga creates *turya* where the underlying liberating ground can emerge.

As pointed out by Bronkhorst (1993), there seems to be a development, as yoga moved further into *Upanishad* circles. Yogic-consciousness of *turya* in the context of *Maitri* – tranquil, blissful and mystic - seems slightly different to the yogic-consciousness of the still-mind – disciplined, mortified and relentlessly eradicated – that we heard about in the *Katha*.

Further, while it was not clear if the *Katha* claimed that liberation happened *after* or *during* still-mind-meditation, the *Maitri* (in some schools’ interpretation) moves more decisively in the direction of finding liberation *during* mystical absorption.

It is clear that in the light of [Triangle of Liberation](#) that the Brahmin discourse culminating with the *Maitri* moved yoga and liberation away from its original Sramanic *Meditative Absorption* towards [Mystic Realisation](#) . Still mind becoming *turya* has now been loaded with mystical symbolism.

The aim of becoming *brahman* was already an established part of the Brahmin Vedic discourse, according to the Sanskrit scholar Kaelber (1989). In the *Maitri*, yoga had become a new form of combined meditative-wisdom practice claiming to help the adept towards the ‘realisation of *brahman*’. In other words, the imported practices of yoga had been subsumed into an existing Brahmin discourse, giving the adept “divine consciousness” through mystical insight. So this discourse is a power discourse creating a difference in power and social status as the adept becomes ontologically transformed. The Brahmin yoga adept has been constructed as sage and mystic – a totem so different that he cannot be described within language. Through his yoga labour he has accumulated mystical knowledge – symbolic resources – so significant that he escapes any human categorisation. His social ranking is above and beyond this world and society.

### 3. Oral traditions and the lack of doctrines

#### The story of the sages in deep meditation

For a modern reader the claim that realisation happens in *turya* or deep absorption raises more questions than it answers. In the *Katha* it was unclear whether this ‘understanding’ happened while alive and meditating, or in death. If it happened while meditating, how is cognition possible, when the mind is empty and still? If it happens in death, how is the soul/mind/self (?) able to think, if it is dead? Finally, regardless exactly when the cognition happened, how is it possible to recollect the liberating event, as the dead cannot talk and the still mind cannot remember? How did the sages find out?

The last question is critical, because it puts a question mark against a narrative which is endlessly repeated in modernist yoga discourse and among the Brahmins themselves. It is the narrative about the ‘wisdom of meditative sages’. The core of the narrative is the storyline that “ancient sages in deep meditation made the discoveries reported in the *Upanishads*”. This is the basic message brought to full fruition in the *Maitri*. In yoga gyms, in DVDs, and in scholarly and popular books the audience is assured that the discourse of liberation and all its related experiences are not speculative constructions, but based on experimental situations. The cluster of notions surrounding *moksha*, is, we are assured, based on experience – ‘mystical experience’ - gained during deep meditative trance. However a modern thinker has to ask how can mortified minds or dead people report their experiences, when their condition is defined as a situation where no experiencing is possible?

#### Is there a yoga doctrine in the *Upanishads*?

Many notions which would later become central to yoga, were mentioned in texts preceding the three *Upanishads* that mentioned yoga. So does that not indicate that Brahmin yoga discourse might be much older? Following structuralism<sup>188</sup> and system theory the mention of a notion should not lead to the conclusion that the doctrine – which gives the notions meaning – is in place! Even if for instance Galileo or Newton used the notion ‘atom’, this does not imply that there was an atomic theory/doctrine at that point in time. According to many historians the British chemist John Dalton “*A New System of Chemical Philosophy*” (1808), first used the notion of an ‘atom’ as a *constituent part of mutual defining notions*, so we can say we have an example of a *doctrine* of atoms. That is, we need a ‘whole’ – an interacting sign system - which defines the ‘parts’ before we can talk about a doctrine.

Even in the three *Upanishads* discussed we do not explicitly find a doctrine outlining yoga. There is no systematic reflection on the yoga notions attempting to create coherence and clarification among them. There are no discussions justifying and making credible the extraordinary claims of yoga technologies. Further, by reading the texts alone one would not know how to practise yoga. The notions are just listed and are open to almost any interpretation. The texts are clearly not there to provide technical information about yoga.

The lack of systematic reflection has led some scholars to argue that at the time of the *Upanishads* there was no yoga doctrine (Larson 1989). However, one could counter-argue that in order for the yoga sign to make sense, there must have been an *implicit* doctrine giving them meaning and significance. Following this line of thought one would then look for concepts that formed a system with yoga; concepts required to make sense of yoga. So one could argue that the teachers did not find it necessary to present the yoga doctrine itself. They just wanted to signal that they used yoga for certain purposes - the main purpose of the text was symbolic communication. So we cannot exclude the possibility that there was an implicit yoga doctrine at the time yoga appeared, just because it was not presented.<sup>189</sup>

Many yoga popularisers argue that a yoga doctrine might have been developed within a parallel oral line of transmission. However, according to this line of argument, no-one in the practical milieu found it necessary or meaningful to write this doctrine down, as all their teaching was based on hands-on training followed by dialogues. And those conceiving the *Upanishads* were not particularly interested in detailing yoga, but rather in Brahmin theological contemplations on emerging new issues. Hence we have no indications left of an oral tradition.

### **The *Mahabharata* - a wide field of yoga styles**

Some readers might wonder what the *Mahabharata* has to say about yoga since part of this enormous Epic was conceived at the same - or at a later part - of this period. The Epic is especially in the part called the *Moksha-dharma* discussing yoga, asceticism, meditation and liberation in much more detail than in the *Upanishads*. So in many ways the *Mahabharata* gives us a considerably better picture of the discussions, which probably took place within the oral and practical milieu. Many of these discussions confirmed the existence of a great variety of yoga discourses linking yoga to all kinds of sign systems or philosophies. Here *Upanishad* non-dual philosophy was often totally absent. But in the end the *Mahabharata* does not leave us with a doctrine on yoga but outlines multiple yoga forms.<sup>190</sup> Further details of yoga in the *Mahabharata* will be discussed in a later chapter.

We can conclude that the written early yoga discourse does not teach us much about the use-value of yoga. Only three of the thirteen *Upanishads* mention yoga at all. The *Mahabharata* addressed an audience – the Kshatriyas - familiar with yoga discourse. How can we see that? Because the Epic in its discussions of yoga clearly assumes pre-knowledge of yoga. Based on that we can assume that there must have been a widespread oral and practical transmission of yoga. This oral and practical milieu of teachers and amateurs – the first yoga sympathisers - was the ruling Kshatriyas and the urban elites – the audience of the *Mahabharata*.

Some Brahmin clans only reluctantly became involved in the Kshatriyas' and elites' engagement with yoga. When they did so, as in the *Upanishads*, their main concern was not to develop a yoga doctrine but rather to elaborate on theological issues that the changing society had put before them. For them yoga represented a potential threat to their symbolic capital and hence their *profession*. This was not the issue of the yoga teachers among the Kshatriyas.

### **The silence of the oral yoga tradition**

We cannot exclude the existence of a relatively extensive oral tradition, where adept teachers through dialogues systematically taught their students how to practise yoga. The *Upanishads*, with their dialogues between a teacher and an enquirer, are examples of such an oral teaching tradition. In the first centuries of their existence, the *Upanishads* were not written down but were transmitted verbally. Much later these *proto-texts* became written texts. The question is, if there existed a similar oral and practical yoga proto-text tradition, why was it never written down? And even if such an oral tradition among the Kshatriyas did not manage to produce written texts, why did other text traditions never refer to it? We will soon look into these questions.

So in this period where proto-texts became written yoga texts like the *Upanishads* and the *Mahabharata*, we see both genres clearly *assuming* a practical tradition. But we hear nothing about this practical milieu, maybe because the unorthodox Brahmin co-writers were not much interested in this practical tradition. They were rather concerned about its theological implications. Hence in the *Upanishads* they enveloped yoga in their emerging Vedanta philosophy.

When we encounter the *Yoga Sutra* of Patanjali, we experience a yoga style, which was not enveloped in Brahmin Vedanta philosophy but mainly in Samkhya and Buddhist philosophy. Maybe this style of yoga better reflected a possible oral yoga tradition among the upper classes than the Brahmins' brief theological remarks in the *Upanishads*?

*Before answering these questions it is necessary to investigate how the discourses of yoga, Jainism and Buddhism branched out from a common sub-stream and how they cross-fertilised each other in that process. This will help us to clarify many issues of the yoga discourse.*

## **4. Buddhist and Jain meditation discourses**

### **Tranquillity and insight meditation in Buddhism**

By comparing Buddhist literature with Brahmin literature (the *Mahabharata*, *Yoga Sutra* etc.) – a task pioneered by E. Senar in the beginning of the 20 century - it is generally agreed by most scholars that the similarities are more than striking<sup>191</sup>: concepts, practices, processes, goals, and arguments are often almost identical. We will hear more about this as we study the *Yoga Sutra*. Some authoritative scholars like F. Heiler and G. Oberhammer even maintain that

there is a common substratum of ‘proto-yoga’ from which yoga and Buddhism developed. Today most scholars will probably agree with L.C. Cousins (1973 & 1992) and E. Crangle (1994) that the two traditions developed in close mutual interaction – maybe even to a degree that we today project differences between them into the past, which were never there.

So in this early period around the time of Buddha, it is often impossible to distinguish where ideas emerged first – within Buddhism, among other Sramanas, among Brahmins, or maybe even among Kshatriyas. Sociologically, we are witnessing a sub-culture of competing often semi-divine specialists competing for social status and economical survival. This is what is called a *cultural field*. In order to survive in a cultural field the loser has to copy the winner or invent even more powerful new strategies to which others have to relate, as in contemporary soccer where we see winning strategies being copied or refined by other teams, forcing re-adjustments on everybody else – and so the wheel turns in a system of dynamic adaptation. To reconstruct in detail 2000 years later what actually happened in such a process is almost impossible! However, let us have a brief look at the Buddhist competitors and see if that can tell us more about the emergent yoga discourse.

Buddhist literature spends much time reporting on how Buddha tried three typical ascetic techniques, which almost killed him: 1) starvation, 2) retained breath and 3) meditating while clenching the teeth in combination with pressing the tongue against the palate (an early form of the *khechari mudra* which became central to *hatha-yoga* much later). We can see that these strenuous efforts undoubtedly belonged to the model of ascetic mortification: the body and mind were, with much struggle, slowly brought to a standstill in order to achieve liberation. But in the end Buddha realised that ascetic mortification would not bring him anything but death. Buddha as we shall see turned toward the emerging [Axial Age episteme](#) relying more on knowledge and insight than on austerities.

Buddha in other words discounted mortifying asceticism and instead engaged with a much gentler and more pleasant method of meditation - *jhana*. Buddha described in detail four levels of deeper and deeper absorption he then went through – *the four jhanas* (Sanskrit: *dhyana*). From Buddhist literature it is clear that the four *jhanas* are ‘states of consciousness radically separated from ordinary consciousness by deep inward abstraction from outer stimuli’ <sup>192</sup>.

Bronkhorst (1986) has further pointed out that the four stages were described as being filled with bliss and enjoyment and were therefore significantly different from ascetic mortification meditation, which was extremely strenuous and full of hardship. The term *samatha* – meaning “tranquillity or concentration meditation” - was therefore often used in conjunction with the four *jhanas*. I choose to see *samatha* as a gentler mutation of mortification meditation: one meditation form uses strenuous methods to arrest the mind, the other uses relaxing methods<sup>193</sup>. So both (harsh) ascetic mortification and (blissful) *samatha* meditation are subtypes of [Meditative Absorption](#) in my model of the various forms of liberation notions.

If we recall the discussion of *turya* in the *Maitri Upanishad*, a state of absorbed consciousness ascribed with very positive attributes, we can now see the strong similarities between Buddhism and the yoga of the *Maitri*. Both employed a gently enjoyable style of meditation leading to blissful states of consciousness. As in the *Maitri* some Buddhist schools

would even claim that in this deep trance they had *visionary experiences of knowledge*, not gained through rational discourse but through this trance (Obeyesekere 2012). Other schools claimed this knowledge happened after this trance in deep intellectual contemplation.

Thus Buddhist schools and scholars - exactly like the Brahmins - disagree about what is happening in *samatha* and how it compares to the very similar levels of meditative absorption described in the *Yoga Sutra*<sup>194</sup>. Some argue that reaching the fourth *jhana* leads to liberation, others that the four *jhanas* are necessary prerequisites for following (Gnostic) bare insight, others that the four *jhanas* have to be followed by further 4-5 levels of insight meditation called either *vipassana* (“insight meditation”) or *arupa* meditation (“formless meditation”)<sup>195</sup>. We recall that this was exactly the problem of interpretation that we faced with the *Maitri*. It also dithered between ascetic-meditative discourses and wisdom orientated discourses: is liberation caused by austerities (of the mind) or by fundamental insights?

### **Buddhist meditation**

	Tranquillity meditation
	4 <i>jhanas</i>
<b><i>Samatha</i></b>	Tranquillity, bliss Preparation for insight? Is it causing liberation?
	Insight meditation
	Aka Formless meditation ( <i>arupa</i> )
<b><i>Vipassana</i></b>	Subsequent to the 4 <i>jhanas</i> Impermanence, no-self, suffering Gnostic or mystic liberation?

For this study, suffice it to say that the two central Buddhist terms tranquillity (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassana*) meditation and the dialectic tension between them shows that the Buddhists with their *combined* ascetic-wisdom discourses - like those of the *Upanishad* adepts - necessarily fluctuated among the three positions of the triangle of liberation I introduced earlier.<sup>196</sup> As the Buddhist and the Yogi schools move frequently between these three positions, it is hard to tell who has influenced whom, with what and when. However, let us make a few observations.

### **Yoga and the four *jhanas/ dhyanas*** <sup>197</sup>

The question arises, did Buddha develop the four *jhanas* of *samatha* meditation or did he employ yoga techniques from renouncers or Brahmins? Some scholars (J. Bronkhorst and F. Heiler) think that the four *jhanas* are Buddha’s own techniques (based on Buddha’s childhood experiences practising the first *jhana*), which were later adopted by yoga, while others (W.L. King and A. Wynne) maintain that the four *jhanas* in reality are Brahmin yoga notions – the *four dhyanas* – adopted and expanded by Buddha.<sup>198</sup> No matter who invented the four-step

*samatha* meditation, we can see from texts like the *Yoga Sutra* that the four *dhyanas* were (or certainly became after Buddha) central to yogic meditation.

Some Buddhist schools value the four *jhanas* highly, but in the same breath they also assert that these, in themselves, will not lead to liberation! According to these schools, what happened instead in this state of consciousness – both traditions call it *samadhi* – is that the meditator is still attached to ‘self’ and other delusions. So the adept will stagnate in this condition of ‘internal tranquillity and bliss’ and never reach liberation. Many Buddhists have argued that there are such limitations to yogic ‘tranquillity-meditation’ - *samatha*.

As Buddha realised these limitations, other Buddhist schools (and King 1980) claim that he moved into the four next levels of so called *formless meditation* (*arupa*), where he finally obtained insight into the fundamentals of existence: it is *empty, impermanent and tainted by suffering*.<sup>199</sup> The insight we are discussing here is clearly a Gnostic-cognitive insight involving intellectual understanding - a true and stringent wisdom discourse. It was finally through this *insight* (*vipassana*) that liberation took place – *nirodha-samaphatti* – true insight implying *cessation of suffering* (King 1980, Wynne 2007). So some Buddhist schools representing new Axial Age abstract, rational and non-mythological thinking are firmly established on the path of wisdom.<sup>200</sup>

Wynne (2007) argues that this is probably the original Buddhist teaching: the first stages of the process are calming meditation followed by mindfulness. Through this final mindful contemplation of the mind’s own filtering process of reality, the person realises that the roots of suffering are in the mind.

Bronkhorst argues that formless meditation – especially when interpreted not in Gnostic terms but in mystical experiences of emptiness - was an import from the Brahmin adepts, who were occupied by *turya* and the empty consciousness where *atman* would emerge. Wynne agrees that when Buddhist texts claim that *nirvana* happens in deep absorption, it is probably a Brahmin import. Wynne further argues that a specifically levelled meditation technique – ‘element meditation’-, where the meditator layer by layer returns to the origin of all things, is actually an original Brahmin technique.

These alternative Buddhist accounts give us some illumination on the issues with which the Brahmins and Kshatriyas struggled regarding early yoga, meditation and liberation. They confirm that (1) *absorbed consciousness without content* reached through (2) *layered meditative immersion*, was central to some early yoga forms. The *Maitri* emerging centuries after Buddha was clearly influenced by Buddhist thinking about mindfulness. Both milieus – early-yoga and Buddhism – were, after Buddha, increasingly reliant on insight – either Gnostic (conceptual) or mystic (identity with/realisation of the One).<sup>201</sup>

### The power discourse of Mystical Realisation

We have been argued that early yoga in the *Upanishads* moved in the direction of the notion of *Mystical Realisation*. In this process various meditative techniques (some Brahmin, some Sramanic), Sramanic liberation notions, asceticism and Buddhist mindfulness philosophy

merged with *Upanishad* non-dual ontology and mysticism. This culminated in the metaphysical and ontological event of Mystical Realisation of which the *Maitri* provides a clear example.

Different meditative schools and scholars have since then endlessly discussed the implications and significance of the extraordinary yoga experience of Mystical Realisation, which came to dominate the phenomenology of yoga<sup>202</sup>.

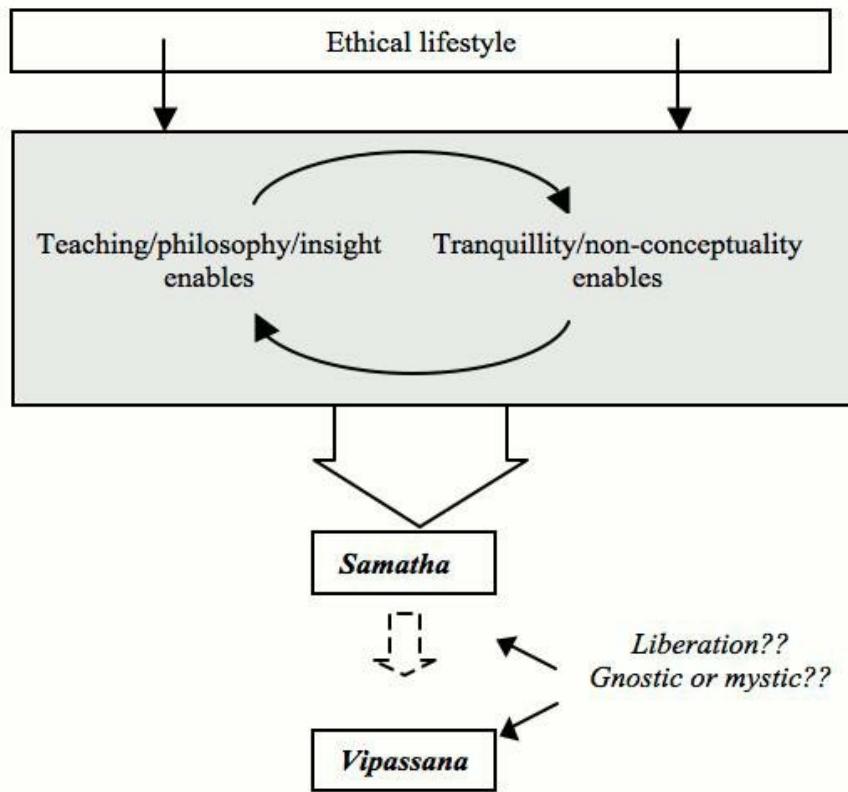
The symbolic benefit for the Brahmins was to become *brahman/atman* – a high status mystic sage. And this is one of the clear – but indirect - messages the *Upanishads* actually give their audience: beware, due to yoga the sage has become *brahman!* This power discourse was then imported by some Buddhists who accordingly turned *nirvana* into a mystical event.

### **The absence of ethical living**

What is remarkable about the early yoga discourse in the *Upanishads* is what it left out. There is a signifying absence of fundamental proto-yoga traits we find cultivated within for instance Jain and Buddhist discourses. In the figure below we see that the foundation – a necessary condition – for even embarking on the efforts of liberation is an *ethical lifestyle*.

### ***The centrality of ethics in the Axial liberation***

### The centrality of ethics in the Axial liberation



In the *karma* discourse, release from re-birth was a direct function of the actions and moral choices that an individual made in his present life. It was no longer an automatic default process. For the Jains this implied an ascetic life committed to for instance non-violence. Ethical living as defined by the Jains – and this is where they express an [Axial Age episteme](#) – was central to stop the karmic pollution of the *jiva* (“soul”). Similarly for the Buddhists, the eight-fold path to release was informed and distinguished by ethical living and thinking. It was a process of continuously building up *metta* (kindness), *karuna* (compassion), *mudita* (sympathetic joy), and *upekkha* (equanimity). The culmination of this was a part of the liberating moment (Obeyesekere 2002, Gombrich 2009).

In other words the demanding labour and effort of living an ethical life became an intrinsic and initial part of generating [symbolic capital](#) among Sramanic groups. No one could aim for liberation before the adept had built up sufficient symbolic capital through prolonged ethical self-discipline. In this way, from the early days ethics became a part of the [habitus](#) of liberation discourses. However this habitus took centuries before it came to inform the yoga discourse. One of the earliest texts incorporating ethics was the *Yoga Sutra* discussing *yama* and *Niyama* as the first limbs of a yogic life.

We can see that such an Axial Age ethic is permeated by universalism, equality and rationalism. It provides the foundation, orientation and necessary condition – a habitus – for mainly pre-Axial Age practices generating ASC. However, it is also clear that such an Axial Age ethic or habitus was not compatible with the caste society the Brahmins and Kshatriyas

were promoting. Their re-orientation and re-construction of yoga had to cut out significant parts of proto-yoga. Caste habitus was about social difference, inequality and violence – justifying and legitimising the power and social status of hegemonic cooperating social groups. This was incompatible with the habitus of ethics. Thus the orientation of the yoga discourse in the *Upanishad* milieu towards mysticism was no coincidence. By replacing the universal ethics and rationalism of proto-yoga with the elite mysticism of early yoga, the upper castes secured their hegemonic power.

### The origin of the cultural field of liberation

In summary early-yoga, around the time of Buddha, could be classified as a ‘*cluster of ascetic and meditative technologies integrated and informed by various ascetic- and wisdom doctrines and practices*’.<sup>203</sup> They all aimed for the release of the soul. They emerged in a strange mixture of cultural institutions for old peoples’ proper way of dying and ritual suicide combined with cultural fields of Shaman-like outcasts, healers, fortune-tellers, and prophets. It is hard to find a common denominator for this mixture of outcast subcultures, where at the same time highly intellectual proto-yoga discourses and techniques evolved.

*Upanishad* Brahmins and Kshatriyas called these new technologies ‘yoga’. In the Buddhist camp however this cluster of technologies and teachings did not achieve a unifying notion, but was referred to vaguely as Buddha’s *dharma* (teaching). In Buddhism we find instead a whole range of meditative concepts (four *jhanas*, *samadhi*, *nirodha*, *samatha*, *vipassana*). So within these institutions and sub-cultures at the margin of society there emerged a new substratum defined by a common discourse platform: the release or liberation of the soul.

I agree with Orientalists like F. Heiler and G. Oberhammer in saying that there was initially a *common substratum* or root of the all *Ways of Liberations*. This fluid substratum at the margins of society probably consisted of a plethora of nascent rivalling ascetic and intellectual cults. They subscribed to embryonic Axial Age wisdom discourses loaded with new signs like *karma* and *moksha*.

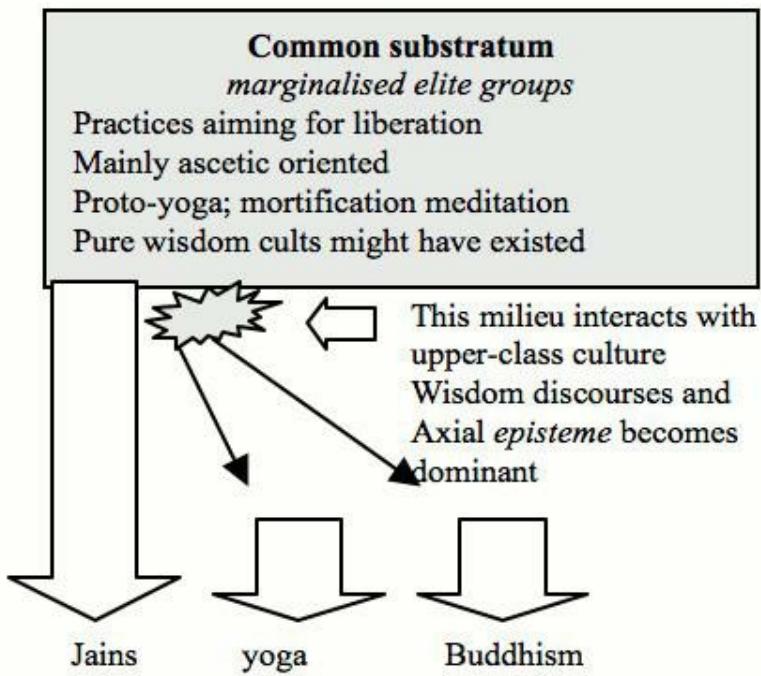
Spurred by the forces of the civilising process of the Axial Age, this energised substratum condensed into a new *cultural field*. A cultural field is an energy field – a power field as for instance a magnetic field. The specialists (the elements) within the field become charged with the energy and powers of the field. The specialists, charged by their field, accumulate cultural resources: power/capital. This capital further enables the specialists to become professionals: they transact their cultural capital with the surrounding society. I baptise this new cultural field, where yoga became a sub-system, the *cultural field of liberation*.

The cultural sub-system of yoga consisted mainly of *amateur* Kshatriyas and urban elites, who deliberately distanced themselves from some of the teachings of the main Sramanic groups of liberation professionals. Let us investigate this.

## The clash between wisdom and asceticism

As the embryonic cultural field of liberation increasingly became submerged in and orientated by Axial Age wisdom discourses (some of the discourses coming from the mainstream political and economic elites of society) the ascetic practices were often substantially muted and re-configured in this fusion. As a result of this tension-laden fusion between asceticism and wisdom discourses within the field of liberation, we see the branching out of a range of new discourses and groups driven by the dialectic tensions in the fusion. This happened at the time of Buddha, where wisdom discourses got the upper hand.

### *The origin of the cultural field of liberation*



Among certain milieus of the urban elites and the Kshatriyas there seem, to be some elements of the Sramana discourses – especially Buddhism and Jainism – which they could not accept and tolerate. It might have been the Sramana's organisational forms and it might have been their ethical system of non-violence, which caused this. Under all circumstances this upper class urban milieu developed their own discourses in parallel. In this stratum of yoga sympathisers there would have surfaced professional teachers. These Kshatriya and urban elites integrated their existing wisdom discourses with the Sramanas' ascetic meditative techniques and liberation discourses. To signal the difference from Buddhism and Jainism, they gave the new discourses their own names like for instance 'yoga'. Thus the first yoga subculture – social strata naming their practices 'yoga' – was probably not a part of the professional cultural field of liberation. Instead they consisted mainly of *yoga sympathisers* – amateurs<sup>204</sup> (French; "lover of") among the upper classes fascinated by the use- and symbolic-value of yoga.

It is almost impossible to identify who was first and who influenced whom in this process

where the combined discourse of ascetic-wisdom opened like a flower. I have decided that I will only investigate those groups *calling their combined ascetic wisdom practices ‘yoga’*. This means we now can leave Buddhism behind us (as their canon in general does not use the word ‘yoga’) and focus on groups naming their main practice ‘yoga’. This might not be a wise decision – but otherwise we would never finish.

### The negative meaning of ‘yoga’ among the Jains

But what about the Jains – probably one of the main contributors to proto-yoga - did they claim they were practising ‘yoga’? Reading their earliest texts and understanding their doctrines, the ‘yoga’ signifier was given a different meaning. The problem with the Jain movement is that from early times they lost their written tradition – their original [cultural memory](#) - and did not, like the Brahmins, develop an exact oral tradition of transmission. So the texts available are from a rather late period – maybe 3-400 AD - when they could have been strongly influenced by Buddhist and Brahmin discourses (Dundas 2002).

In one of the earliest texts systematising their teachings – the *Tattvartha Sutra* – the word ‘yoga’ is used but in a strongly negative way. Here, it meant any kind of human ‘activity’ – be it mental, verbal or physical. ‘Activity’ (yoga) was seen as *the hindrance* of liberation (Qvarnström 2003). All ‘activity’ led to the ‘influx of matter into the self’ (called *jiva*). This influx created *karma* (*‘that which carries’*), which made the self ‘vibrate’. A soul contaminated with matter was restless and eternally on the move. The Jain practice of liberation had the purpose of stopping *all* action. This implied the arrest of *karma* as the *jiva* was slowly emptied of vibrations.

The main means of achieving this was to live according to the Jain vows of asceticism – living an ascetical life. *Dhyana* – meditation – also had its role in this gradual process. It could stop the influx of matter. So *dhyana* for the early Jains was about forcing the mind from activity to inactivity. *Dhyana* could arrest the yoga – activity – of the mind. In this way *dhyana* separated the *jiva* from matter which led to its liberation. After the death of the physical body the liberated *jiva* finally attained *moksha*. Thus if we had defined yoga – which we do *not* even try to do – as “ascetic-meditative practices leading to release” then we would have reached the absurd conclusion that early “Jain yoga” actually saw ‘yoga’ as a problem – as something to mortify<sup>205</sup>.

Over time *dhyana* seems to have played a smaller and smaller role among the Jains (Dundas 2002).<sup>206</sup> Overall it seems that Jainism - as it became systematised - became strongly Gnostic and ethical. It might, like Buddhism, have started rather ascetic and meditative, but as it was rationalised and became integrated in Jain lay communities, it also became wisdom oriented. So the worship of the ‘god’ (The Supreme Self – *paramatman*) and the ‘fordmakers’ (the Jain “forefathers”) and the learning of the doctrines while living a consistent ascetic life were at the centre of a Jain life – not *dhyana*.

But then throughout history there would, as we shall see in later chapters, surface (influential?) Jain writers, who would advocate both meditation and yoga. So over time the picture of Jain in relationship to the yoga signifier is not clear-cut.<sup>207</sup>

### **The paradox – “the real yogis” did not practice ‘yoga’**

It is with reluctance that we now have to leave the Buddhists and the Jains – two of the main professional groups in the field of liberation - at the margins of this book. Both these groups managed to create organisations and institutions, which allowed them to store, and transmit their teachings – their discourse DNA – from generation to generation. This should not lead us to assume that their cultural memory – their DNA - went through no significant transformations, because it did. Their cultural memory was constantly fragmented by status competition, geographical isolation and adaptation to changes in various historical conditions. So it is within those parameters that their institutional environment allowed their various mutated cultural memories a certain continuity and stability.

For about a millennium a parallel organisational build-up did *not* happen among the Kshatriyas (amateur yogis) and Brahmins (reluctant yogis), who were involved in similar sister discourses and practices. However, they chose to call these practices ‘yoga’ in order to distinguish themselves. As we will see in the coming chapters, due to this total lack of institutional environment the yoga discourse within these two dominating castes was constantly on the edge of extinction – especially the use-value part of it. Hence in the strata of social and political power the written yoga discourse focused on social symbolic issues – not practical use-value. As we shall see in other chapters, yoga later on became enveloped in Axial Age monotheistic religions. Here the symbolic-value of the yoga discourse clearly took the upper hand and *from then on* became a significant factor in the dynamic and vitality of the written yoga discourse<sup>208</sup>.

Paradoxically, it is likely that the main groups keeping the *practical knowhow* of the ascetic-meditative techniques (sometimes called ‘yoga’ but mostly not) alive were the Jains and the Buddhists. It was because of *them* that the yoga discourse a couple of centuries after surfacing did not wither away among the hegemonic castes, as we would have expected such cultural practices to do.

Thus in many ways “the real practising yogis” were in *the long run* to be found in the Buddhist and Jain institutions. They consisted apparently only of a tiny elite among the monks who kept the practical ascetic-meditative DNA alive. But they tended not to call this DNA ‘yoga’, a notion restricted to the heretic Brahmins and the amateur Kshatriyas.<sup>209</sup>

## **5. The *Dharma-sutra* yoga discourse**

Having investigated the milieu from which early yoga branched we now return to a different Brahmin text genre, which also occasionally mentions yoga. The Brahmins developed a new textual genre – the *Dharma-sutras* – between 400 and 100 BC.<sup>210</sup> Four of these *sutras* are extant today. In these texts different Brahmins set out to discuss and define the details of religious correct ways of living, living according to the “law of the universe”. *Sutras* were prose written in a sparse style omitting all unnecessary words. They are reminiscent of present day “bullet point” presentations and headlines.

Why did the Brahmins begin to discuss the details of righteous living like: what to do during the day, marriage regulations, regulations of rites of passage, funerals, what to be eaten and not to be, how to wash yourself, and what to do if you had been (socially or religiously) polluted? One part of the answer could be the significant change that their village and clan based societies were undergoing with the advent of the Axial Age civilisation. Some Brahmins might, under the new circumstances, have changed their style of living. Another part of the answer could be that the Brahmins were under social pressure and needed to draw up lines of demarcation between themselves and others. Other but similar social groups might have given them competition.<sup>211</sup>

We recall that the Brahmins were a privileged high status group maintaining critical sacrificial procedures. The blurring of social boundaries between them and others would wipe out their social identity – their social status. Social status is an expression of difference. No difference would imply no social identity, the loss of power and privilege. Much of Brahmin social identity was embedded in a ritualised life. By complying strictly with the rules and regulations of the ritualised life the Brahmin could maintain their difference. But at the time of the *Dharma-sutras* there seems (as evidenced in the texts) to be some confusion and disagreement among the Brahmins about their norms, hence the need to discuss the critical situation and the urgency to draw up the (new) lines of demarcation.

Yoga was discussed in two of the extant *Dharma-sutras*. The first time it was mentioned in connection with the young Brahmin student:

“In this life, however, the eradications of faults depend on yoga. The learned man who uproots these faults that torments creatures attain bliss” (Apastamba-Dharmasutra 1.23.3)

Hence yoga is about ‘eradicating faults’, faults that pollute and erode social status. But what does the *sutra* mean by ‘faults’? They are exemplified as “anger, excitement, greed, lying” – and they can explicitly be eradicated with yoga.

So it seems that yoga is incorporated in a Brahmin discourse of pollution: the young ascetic Brahmin is said to improve his purity (social status) by employing the technology of yoga. The *sutra* accordingly states that if the Brahmacharin “practises yoga, Arya-like conduct, self control, benevolence then he will attain the All.” Besides the meaning of ‘to attain the All’ is unclear we see yoga framed by ethical living. This is new. As we recall ethical living was a central part of the Buddhist and Jain path to liberation but did not play much of a role in the yoga discussions of the *Upanishads*. We note that in this pure Brahmin genre (Brahmins writing for Brahmins about Brahmins), where we can assume that the discourses of the Kshatriyas played no or little role, yoga is informed by ethics. But it is not the universal ethic of the Sramanas.

Later on the *Apastamba-Dharmasutra* gives more information about yoga, but as the

Sanskrit expert Olivelle points out (1999), these parts are much later text-fragments added to the text. But even if these yoga text-interpolations belong to a later period, I will briefly mention them:

“Seated with purificatory grass in hand, he should control his breath and recite the purificatory text, the calls, the syllable OM and the daily portion of the Veda” (2.2)

So here we see that yoga is once more connected with *purification*. Purification is a typical theme in the later *Dharma-sastras*, so I will return to this aspect in [another chapter](#). Secondly yoga is described as *pranayama* combined with recitation of holy text and sounds.

The following stanza makes it clear that we speak of yoga in the sense of strenuous ascetic efforts, which have many similarities to the mortification practices of proto-yoga and the early yoga of the *Upanishads*:

“Constantly practicing yoga, he should control his breath repeatedly, generating the most extreme heat up to the very tops of his hair and nails” (2.3)

However we also notice a difference from proto-yoga and *Upanishad* yoga. The yoga described in the *Dharma-sutras* is not the meditative-in-deep-trance-yoga we faced in some of the *Upanishads*. It is not the yoga of mystical *atman* and *brahman* realisation. It is the yoga of strenuous effort aimed at maintaining social differences expressed in terms of purity. I will return to this ‘purifying yoga’ as it is typical of the much later *Dharma-sastras*.

Yoga is also discussed in the *Vasistha-Dharmasutra* in the context of penance. The *sutra* copies the yoga remarks from the *Apasamba-Dharmasutra* we discussed above. But then it adds:

“Not by severe austerity, not by daily recitation of the Veda, not even by sacrifice can a man obtain the state that one is obtaining by the practice of yoga”

By yoga one obtains knowledge. Yoga is the earmark of the Law. Yoga is the highest austerity. Therefore he should always be engaged in yoga practice” (*Vasistha-Dharmasutra* 25.5-7)

This is a different signification of the yoga sign. Yoga – even if signified as an austerity – is claimed to be much more than austerities and recitation. Yoga leads to some unique but not further detailed ‘states’ similar to ‘the One’. Yoga yields ‘knowledge’ which marks a significant difference, as only this knowledge leads to ‘the state of the One’. This reminds us of the discussions in the *Upanishads*, where it was also often claimed that knowledge in one way or another played a significant role in the process of yogic liberation. In this *sutra*, however, yoga practice does not need to be guided by Brahmin doctrines and teaching. Rather it seems that yoga practice by itself generates a kind of necessary knowledge, which other practices – like austerities and chanting - are not capable of producing. So we can conclude that the yoga sign is here ascribed high status, but we do not know if this “yoga knowledge” is informed by Gnostic intellectualism or Gnostic mystic discourses.

So there is no agreement among the four *Dharma-sutras* about the importance and use-value of yoga. What is clear to the reader however is that we get very little technical insight into yoga. But the genre points to a new aspect of symbolic meaning ascribed to yoga.

What seems significant is that one *sutra* clearly relates yoga to the clearance of pollution, yoga, in other words, is seen as a tool to construct and maintain social difference – symbolic capital. What effect does it have for the Brahmin to claim that he is ‘free of pollution’? What is the symbolic significance of being ‘pure’ – with the assumption that other people are ‘impure’

or ‘polluted’ - in Axial Age society? I will return these questions in the chapter on monotheistic yoga.

The yoga discourse of the *Dharma-sutras* seems to indicate that at this time yoga had not successfully conquered the daily life of Brahmins. This genre also seems to indicate a slow acceptance of yoga as later texts put more value and focus on yoga than early ones. Hence this genre confirms similar conclusions made about the *Upanishad* genre. It is only in the *Mahabharata* – epic stories for and about the Kshatriyas written down by the Brahmins – that yoga takes a more prominent role and is assumed to be familiar to its Kshatriya audience.

## 6. The symbolic meaning of early-yoga

### The *Upanishad* power discourse

We recall that the *Upanishads* were secret teachings revealing hidden connections, but only to higher status castes. These texts contemplated the new worldview of the One, *karma*, *samsara* and liberation in a Brahmin context. Here knowledge woven together with ascetic yoga technologies became central in what I call a combined *ascetic-wisdom discourse*. But the importance of knowledge was not new to the *Upanishads*. Already in the *Vedas* knowledge played an important role: *brahman* – knowledge or truth – holds the *sacrifice* together. The knowledge of how to perform the sacrifice was therefore critical, as it would not work if performed incorrectly. So it is evident how knowledge (Gnosticism) in the *Vedas* was already part of a power discourse benefitting the Brahmins.

According to W. Kaelber (1989) this ideology was extended in the *Upanishads*. Knowledge – *brahman* - was now not just holding the sacrifice together but the whole universe. *Brahman* was the underlying force making the universe possible. In a smart move – as we have seen - the *Upanishad* discourse, combined this non-duality with the new aspiration for liberation: when the adept realised that underlying the universe was the One - *brahman* – then through this insight there was release from desire. And release of desire was important because desire was central to *karma* and re-birth.

The *Upanishad* discourse then made a significant further move. It is maintained that conventional knowledge of *brahman* was impossible. ‘Realising *brahman*’ was not ordinary intellectual or practical knowledge. To be able to realise *brahman*, according to the *Upanishads* the distinction between the subject/ the knower and the object/the known had to disappear! So we see that this Ultimate Knowledge diminished previous knowledge – empirical, philosophical and rational – by making it into lower knowledge or deceptive knowledge.

It is central to realise that the *Upanishads* established a power discourse – a hierarchy of domination. If this discourse was accepted, society divides into two groups; those few who *really knew* and the rest, who lived in an illusion of superficial knowledge. This move establishes the *Upanishad* path of wisdom as a power discourse.

From the European classical writer Pseudo-Origen, who relies on the accounts of Megasthenes, we have clear indications of how this power discourse was acknowledged even across strong cultural barriers. The feelings of superiority among the Brahmins, their claim of monopoly of mystical knowledge and god (both being *brahman*) came across clearly below:

"Throughout life they go about naked, saying the body has been given by the Deity as a covering for the soul. They hold that god is light .... God is with them the Word, by which term they do not mean articulate speech, but the discourse of reason, whereby the hidden mysteries of knowledge are discerned by the wise. This light, however, which they call the word, and think to be god, is, they say, known only to the Brachmans themselves, because they alone have discarded vanity, which is the outermost covering of the soul. The members of this sect regard death with contemptuous indifference, and, as we have seen already, they always pronounce the name of the deity with a tone of peculiar reverence, and adore him with hymns."<sup>212</sup>

So the *Upanishad* Brahmins claimed that they knew ‘the truth’, which for them was the same as saying, they ‘knew the One’ (*brahman*) - they knew ‘knowledge/ reason/ truth’. And they spared no opportunity to demonstrate this to the public: they constantly chanted their mantras and behaved in a way, which signalled that they had discarded vanity, desire and fear of death. By doing this we can see that they needed to substantiate and legitimise their mystical insight by resorting to ascetic and ritual discourses and practices.

Hence, the *Upanishads* are not just teachings but also a discourse of difference - generating symbolic capital. They documented and claimed that those who mastered the content of their secret knowledge were indeed special beings. It was in this context that some Brahmins found it opportune to mention that they mastered yoga, because that confirmed their possession of special knowledge.

Let us look further into the conflict sociology underlying the rise of the early-yoga discourse.

### **Early-yoga and the competition for symbolic capital**

The Sramanas ideologically challenged the orthodox Brahmins in 6-500 BC. But over time this dividing line – ascetic vagrant versus Brahmin – became blurred, as some heretic Brahmin clans took up ascetic [mendicant lifestyles](#).<sup>213</sup> In the end all the groups were symbolic specialists operating in [the cultural field of liberation](#). From about 500 AD most Brahmins - after almost 1000 years – finally fully embraced ascetic living. The Brahmins from then on even tried to monopolise renouncing as their scriptures claimed that only Brahmins – the purest of all castes - could renounce (Gross 1992, Olivelle 1993 &1995). Heterodox vagrant lifestyles were assimilated into Brahmin society over hundreds of years. Slowly and reluctantly the Brahmins adapted.

We have already discussed why the [Brahmins adopted](#). We have seen in this chapter evidence for how austerities and ascetic lifestyles – to which much early yoga subscribed - increased an adept’s social status. So by adopting ascetic lifestyles and yoga liberation

discourse the Brahmins could build up symbolic capital (like increased caste purity). Many social milieus and institutions increasingly devalued Brahmin ritualism. Asceticism often became a superior alternative to ritual action in order to generate symbolic capital like caste purity.

A second reason was that the new ascetic technologies like yoga increasingly became part of discourses of supernatural powers and Gnostic mysticism. These new technologies were not only connected with the release of the soul, but also invested the adept with extra ordinary powers, like the ability to fly. To be seen to possess supernatural powers, to which yoga was progressively linked as we witness in the *Mahabharata*, meant the build up of further symbolic capital.

The emerging wisdom discourses – strongly embodied by Buddhism - further created the identity of a *living* liberated adept whose consciousness was ontologically transformed. He was a god-like phenomenon beyond comprehension. With this concept of the ‘awakened one’ – like Buddha or ‘brahman realisation’ – it seems that the liberation discourses had pushed the accumulation of symbolic capital to new heights.

I believe that competition for sacred/symbolic status – who was seen to contain most purity and supernatural power – became another factor in explaining the development and spread of the ascetic wisdom discourses of which yoga was one. This status competition – the struggle for symbolic capital - also became a factor in explaining why so many sacred groups evolved and mutated in Indian history.

This sociological theory of social status competition for symbolic capital implies that yoga initially moved into Brahmin clans mainly in urbanised regions. Why? One reason is that the Brahmins were under strong competitive pressure. The Sramanas tended to move and settle along trade routes and near towns, and such locations were increasingly dominated by hegemonic Kshatriya culture.<sup>214</sup> In this social environment of the Axial Age early-yoga slowly became included in some Brahmins discourses as these issues already occupied the elites, forcing some Brahmins to deal with these matters.

Human systems - institutions and discourses - are like nature itself *dynamically adaptive*. So in this way, many of the competing Sramanic discourses – either directly or indirectly through ruling elites - would find their way into the thoughts, practices and Sanskrit scriptures of the Brahmins, today our main source for early-yoga. But the process of discourse adaptation was certainly a two-way street as many central Brahmin ideas also found their way into Sramana discourses..

### Which social groups linked the *siddhis* with yoga?

Until now we have not heard much about the *siddhis* in the Brahmin writings in relation to yoga. Yoga was often associated with supernatural powers – flying, time-travelling, sorcery and so on. Who were the main promoters of the discourse of supernatural powers – the *siddhis*? The *siddhis* probably evolved outside the Brahmin milieu. The *siddhis* were not really a subject of the *Upanishads* as these discussed mystic realisation. The *Dharma-sutras* are also more about purity than about supernatural powers. But the *Mahabharata* was imbued

with supernatural powers. The Brahmins – a scribal class – wrote the *Mahabharata*, but the Epic had the ruling political elites as both its subject and audience. So it was probably the amateur Kshatriyas who generated the discourse of *siddhi*.

It was probably in such upper class circles - representing the emergent civilisation and state form - that many early-yoga forms were developed. The emergence of notions of supernatural powers and their association with yoga would be a natural outgrowth in this stratum. Leaders in pre-modern societies found numerous ways of linking themselves with symbols of power. Such links would strongly legitimise their political powers. Political power always needs ideological legitimisation, and linking their emergent yoga practices with supernatural powers could do this. As the Kshatriya amateur practised yoga he simultaneously established legitimisation. Finally, in the eyes of society supernatural powers were *real* powers - real weapons - which would strengthen the warrior leader in war. So for Axial Age India supernatural powers – the ability to travel in time and enter other people - had real use-value, but seen with modern eyes they are symbolic powers.

Another text giving considerable consideration to the *siddhis* was the later *Yoga Sutra*. This *sutra* was *not* conceived within Brahmin institutions but among heterodox Samkhya intellectuals probably belonging to the urbanised ruling elites under discussion. This confirms the suggestion that the strong link between yoga and *siddhi* was not originally a Brahmin invention. It came to them from other social dominant classes and institutions, the Kshatriyas but also the Sramanas.

From early Buddhist texts there was clearly a link between Buddha and a supernatural world of ancestor spirits, demons, local gods, and semi-divine beings. Through his accomplishments Buddha could master this world. These supernatural powers became one of the reasons why the Sramanic discourses found their way into the ruling elites, especially the Kshatriya warrior nobles, who became enchanted by its potential, its symbolic capital.

### **Summary 1 - the field of liberation and its three social groups**

We have followed the transformation of the proto-yoga discourse into an emergent yoga discourse. Let us take a sociological overview of yoga so far. We have identified three social groups and their accompanying institutions, which were occupied in evolving proto-yoga and early-yoga discourses. First of all there were the Sramanas. This cultural field of ascetic mendicants conceived the use- and symbolic-value of proto-yoga. Often they were specialists, assisting dying people in a ritual correct death; they could help peoples' souls not to suffer in death or return to life; they could manage spirits, heal the sick, exorcise demons and predict the future. These knowledge-skills – to a modern reader most of them seem supernatural – induced the adept with symbolic capital and provided an economical foundation.

The Sramanas were mostly recruited from the ruling classes of the emerging civilisation and empire state. Many of them were initially squeezed out by war and centralisation. Sramanic discourses quickly found their way back to the dominating ruling classes – especially the Kshatriyas who were attracted by the prospect of acquiring some of the supernatural powers associated with yoga practices. It could have been in such an upper class

milieu of yoga sympathisers that the term *yoga* was coined. *Yoga* in this milieu became closely linked to *siddhi* – an attractive proposition to a warrior.

The Sramanas and Kshatriyas were socially and culturally closely linked despite their differences. From the texts we can see that many people from the ruling elites – even kings and Brahmins - often at later stages of life joined the ascetic vagrant lifestyles of the Sramanas (Chatterji 2007). These “retiring Kshatriyas” and “elite-drop-outs” might have brought their new *yoga* ideas and practices with them. If they joined strongly organised professional groups, like the Jains and the Buddhists, they would have adopted the monks’ teachings and vocabulary (like the Buddhist *dharma*) and hence dropped the word *yoga*. But if they for various reasons rejected the lifestyles and philosophies of the monks, then they might have joined other loosely organised groups of “retired” upper classes. In such milieus they would have been able to bring their *yoga* and liberation discourses with them – like the ideas, which would later become Samkhya philosophy. Some of these milieus might even have managed to become professional groups of death consultants. The later *Yoga Sutra* might represent such fragmented strata of loosely organised urban elites and rulers.

Due to its loose structure such a mixed milieu of householders and vagrants – some professionals, some amateurs - would not have produced many lasting oral traditions (later to be turned into written texts) as did the more strongly organised monastic groups. But maybe there is one text source for this stratum? Maybe it became the unintended task of the *Mahabharata* – written by Brahmins for the royal courts and upper classes - to document the discourse developments in this mixed upper class stratum, which did not want to join the heterodox Buddhists and Jains? It is a probable hypothesis because in the *Mahabharata* we encounter numerous varieties of *yoga* and liberation discourse strongly influenced by diverse Sramanic discourses.

The last of the three groups, the Brahmins - under pressure from Sramanas and in interaction with the ruling Kshatriya classes - adapted or co-developed the *yoga* discourse reluctantly. *Yoga* became orientated with Gnostic mysticism and became included in their cultural capital. In this cultural field of ritual specialists however the *yoga* ideas spread much more slowly. The *Upanishads* and the *Dharma-sutras* reflected how liberation discourses were gradually adapted and reconstructed. However austerities – *tapas* – were also embraced and integrated in Brahmin rituals and lifestyles. In the end this made the renouncing Brahmin difficult to distinguish from the Sramana vagrant.

## **Summary 2 – *yoga*’s role in the new field of liberation**

Thus with the surfacing of the *yoga* discourse we witness a patchwork of a cultural field. This *field of liberation* – providing an economic basis for emerging intellectual symbolic specialists - overlapped with ancient institutions of suicide, retirement and communal rituals. In this field we find many groups and cultural sub-systems (sub-fields). One of the sub-systems was a crosscutting social milieu adhering to the *yoga* discourse. It had no strict definitions and boundaries and it developed no institutions within the field, as few Kshatriyas became professional yogis. Why should they – already rich in economic capital – turn their amateurism

into a profession? Hence the main engine and storage of liberation discourses and practices did not occur within the yoga discourse, but was to be found within the strong professional organisations of the Buddhist and the Jains.

The liberation field was a cultural field where its specialists were in intense social and economic competition with the Brahmin religious specialists. The Brahmins' *field of communal rituals* was under strong social pressure as its underlying power discourse faded away. We have seen how some Brahmins re-constructed their ritual discourses and tried to weave them together with the new incoming liberation discourses. One of the solutions was to symbolically link the ritual expert with the liberated adept: ritual self-sacrifice equals a liberating act. Overlapping signs like *yoga* and *tapas* – both charged with symbolic power – played a central role in this ideological exercise.

Other Brahmins found other solutions by linking *yoga* and *tapas* to emerging gnostic wisdom discourses and re-constructed divinities. This solution often rejected the ritual aspect, but still claimed to belong to the Vedic culture. It did so by continuing to employ Vedic sign systems – Brahmin rhetoric – but those signs were clearly re-defined and re-constructed.

This solution, seen in the *Upanishads*, charged *yoga* with new forms of symbolic energy: the *yoga* adept became transformed into a new mystical ontological entity. This mystic person or entity was ineffable – “not this, not that”. It was the ‘liberated sage’ who throughout history became an admirable, influential and mythical figure. It was a disinterested sage lifted above the issues of life. He was so rich in symbolic capital that he was removed and protected from rational scrutiny and critique. He was a direct competitor to the Sramanic liberated, who the Jains named the *jivan-mukti*: the living liberated.

# **Chapter 6**

# Theistic yoga – Submission and caste ideology

## Key Concepts

<u>Indian monotheism</u>	<u>Samkhya, prakriti &amp; purusha</u>
<u>Buddhi- &amp; karma-yoga</u>	<u>Mahabharata</u>
<u>Krishna's yoga</u>	<u>Six Darsanas</u>
<u>Bhakti-yoga</u>	<u>Brahmin revival</u>
<u>Ritual purifying yoga</u>	<u>Bhagavad-Gita</u>
<u>Moksha-dharma</u>	<u>Caste ideology yoga</u>
<u>Practical yoga tradition</u>	<u>Jains' - Yoga-dristi- amuccaya</u>
	<u>Vaishnavite monks' – Ysam</u>
<u>Puranas</u>	
<u>Dharma-sastras</u>	<u>Bhakti movement</u>

In this chapter we finally encounter texts with some meat on the bone with respect to understanding yoga. In the Mahabharata we find in the sub-sections of the Bhagavad Gita and The Moksha-dharma long and rather detailed discussion of yogic cultural practices. We often find the yoga sign involved in religious discussions about a single creator god: Yoga being signified by religious monotheistic signs. Hence the notion of theistic yoga, and with that notion we leave the small kingdom and the emerging civilisations and move into imperial state formations where kings become sons of god or godly representations. This – the zenith of India's Axial Age civilisation - is the cultural period of Classical- or Puranic Hinduism. Monotheism – a quintessential Axial invention - and the institution of the kingdom walk hand in hand towards dominance. Monotheism became an ideology underpinning the state. We will see how the yoga discourse becomes entangled in this dialectical process of state and civilisation formation. Today we tend to perceive notions like religion, state, culture and kingship (politics) as autonomous and distinct spheres. However in most societies – and this also applies to pre Enlightenment European societies – these notions were hardly separate (Bellah 2012). Culture – the process of civilisation – was to a large extent equivalent to religion. Religion on its side was also political. In other words religion and state flowed effortlessly into each other (Yoffee 2005). This is what we experience in the period under investigation: the rise of trans-regional kingdoms and almighty gods of theism. The yoga discourse became a good example of this melting pot of religion, state, social conflicts and culture.

In a society penetrated by what should strictly be termed cosmological-monotheism<sup>215</sup>

– the belief in a cosmic, powerful and ultimate god-principle behind a polytheistic god world – the yoga discourse slowly but surely became submerged in institutions of worship.<sup>216</sup> As a Way of Salvation yoga was often seen to enable the individual to achieve union with god - often due to the grace of god. The yoga discourse and the Brahmins became deeply enveloped in this cosmological-monotheistic discourse. In this period we find yoga discourses clearly and deliberately focussing on the symbolic meaning of yoga. The Mahabharata and the Puranas were obsessed with the magical powers of the yogi. And in the Brahmin Dharma genre – describing cosmic rules and regulations – yoga became enveloped in Brahmin caste discourse of purity.

The analysis of the Mahabharata is central to this chapter. Yoga here has various meanings and descriptions – some related to the early yoga discussed. Other parts are related to monotheism. In this period yoga has a much wider meaning than in the Upanishads. Yoga now broadly means ‘discipline’ or “spiritual practice” – any systematic and disciplined effort leading to a range of goals: caste purity, salvation or the ability to realise a universal god.

It is also in this period that Patanjali’s Yoga Sutra emerges. I have placed the Yoga Sutra in a separate chapter, as it is such a crucial text.

## 1. The surfacing of the supra-regional state and monotheism

### The struggle to become and maintain an Empire

Historically we now move into the zenith of India’s Axial Age civilisation era. After Alexander the Great’s push towards the Indus River in 327-325 BC, he left his generals to rule the conquered areas. They built up independent kingdoms, which had a major influence on Northern India. Greek historical sources hold – but they often exaggerate - that by this time there was already an impressive Northern Indian Empire facing them – the Nandas ([Wikipedia link](#)) . The Nandas could mount an army of 200,000 foot soldiers, 3,000 elephants, 2,000 war chariots and 20,000 cavalry. To equip, feed and raise an army of this size – even if exaggerated - assumes a large society with hefty material surplus and advanced organisational skills. We are clearly not dealing with the small local kingdoms of the Vedic period. The following Maurya Empire (320-200 BC) ([Wikipedia link](#)) – where this chapter begins - managed to disband tribalistic and confederative institutions and build a centralised state structure. Hence they were able to break out of the region of Northern India and stretch their Empire over most of the sub-continent. For the first time India witnessed a centralised Empire reaching beyond the boundaries of a geographical region and stretching into other distinct and

remote geographical regions. Until then Northern Indian states had been contained by natural boundaries like mountains, rivers, deserts, jungles etc. according to the German historians Kulke & Rothermund *A History of India* (2006).

After the Maurya Empire collapsed (185 BCE) Northern India and India as a whole returned to its former regional restricted political map. Politically it became a continuous situation of dynasties struggling to solve inherent structural limitations. Because of the way the subsequent kingdoms and dynasties organised themselves, they were limited in size only to regional based medium sized state forms. There were physical limits to how large were the areas they could control. Further due to inbuilt de-centrifugal institutional structures – like tribalism and local power structures - they tended to disintegrate after short periods (Kulke & Rothermund 2006, Fukuyama 2011). This resulted in permanent rivalry: wars of expansion, civil wars, divisions, mergers etc.. Northern and Southern/Central India saw fluctuations of large regional dynasties like Sunga (185-73 BC), Satavahana (50 BC-200 AD) and Kuninda (ca. 100-200 AD). It was initially with the *Gupta Empire* (300-600 AD) ([Wikipedia link](#)) – i.e. 500 years after the Maurya Empire - that a second Pan-Indian Empire arose. This chapter covers the period stretching from the beginning of Maurya to the end of the Gupta Empire including the era between the Empires. With the exit of the Gupta Empire, India's Axial Age civilisation had come to an end parallel with the contemporary collapse of another Axial Age civilisation: the Roman Empire.

### Northern India under foreign influence

A few words about the period between the Empires. The 500 years (200 BC - 300 AD) between the Maurya and the Gupta Empires was a period when Northwest India was heavily influenced by foreign cultures (Witzel 2003, Thapar 2002, Bellah 2011) especially Hellenistic and Persian warrior clans who settled as ruling upper classes. There were for instance invasions of *Greco-Bactrians* (256 BC-125BC) ([Wikipedia link](#)) and *Indo-Greek kingdoms* (180 BC-AD10) ([Wikipedia link](#)) – descendants of the warrior clans Alexander left behind him. They ruled over rich urbanised areas. The kingdoms - about 40 of them - were the outposts of Hellenistic civilisations and had a significant impact on Indian culture, art, and state organisation. Buddhism made major inroads in these kingdoms and many rulers converted. Then there were various steppe nomads from Iran and Central Asia like the *Indo-Scythians* (often called *Sakas* ([Wikipedia link](#))) sweeping over Northern India building up dynasties. They also took up Buddhism. The neighbouring Persian *Parthian Empire* ([Wikipedia link](#)) also ruled in period. They were influenced by Greek culture but also left a Persian cultural impact in India.

Furthermore the whole Indian subcontinent was around this time involved in intensive trade and contact with China (the Silk Road passed through North West India) and the Roman Empire. Around 100 AD it was discovered how ships could cross the Indian Ocean by following seasonal monsoon winds; this led to an expansion of trade and cultural exchange between Rome and Indian kingdoms –the *Kusanas* especially (50-250AD) ([Wikipedia link](#)) relied on trade (Kulke & Rothermund 2006). This 500-year period is sometimes called

### The “Golden Age of Hinduism”

From about 300-500 AD the Magadha based Gupta Empire ruled over large parts of India once more managing to break out of the Northern Indian region. Again the success was due to organisational centralism.

This era of about 800 years, beginning with the Maurya Empire (320 BC) followed by fragmented and regional limited kingdoms and dynasties and ending with the breakdown of the Gupta Empire (520 AD), is today often named the *Golden Age of Hinduism* or *Classical/Puranic Hinduism*. Trade, craft, finance and towns expanded. Axial Age culture and science blossomed. Huge “universities” attracted thousands of “students”.

Critically for this chapter, in this period many of the Indian universal gods, rites and mythologies took *final form and were written down*. The scriptures describing them had in style and content very little to do with the religio-philosophical works of the *Upanishads*. Many writings of this period are comparable with Greek mythology and the Greek warrior epics like the *Iliad*. Thus some historians describe this period as a change of worldview from *Brahmanism* to *Puranic Hinduism*. As a headline one could say that it was a period where India had a radiant culture, which was in intense exchange with other high-cultures.

### The rise of the supra-regional state and the divine king

If we take a step back and take an overall sociological look at the period from the rise of the Maurya Empire (320 BC) to the collapse of the Gupta Empire (520 AD) then it seems that – apart from the cultural and commercial contact - the most decisive feature was that supra-regional state forms evolved often exceeding significantly the size of the previous local-to-regional based Kingdoms that we saw in the late Vedic period. These state dynasties were often not really Empires but rather supra-regional state forms constantly trying to become Empires but always failing in this period between the Empires. The evolution of supra-regional state Empires – characterised by military conquest, slavery and coinage - was central to the Axial Age civilisation (Graeber 2011). In such societies “the basic principle governing social relations was not kinship but a hierarchy of social divisions that cut horizontally across societies and were unequal in power, wealth and social prestige. In these societies a tiny ruling group used coercive powers to augment its authority was sustained by agricultural surpluses and labour systematically appropriated from a much larger number of agricultural producers. Fulltime specialists (artisans, bureaucrats, soldiers, retainers) also supported and served the ruling group and the government apparatus it controlled”. (Trigger 2007, p. 44-45).

In such state forms we are no longer talking about uncomplicated Archaic two-tiered societies with local chieftains, warlords and small kings running a handful of the Vedic village communities and clans. Having broken out of their natural kinship basis since the late Vedic period, states now ruled over a large geographical region based on the king’s core area and surrounded by vassals like rings in water. The king was ‘the big king’ – the *maharaja* (*raja*=king), a three or more layered political hierarchy. Most dynasties would however not be able to control an area much bigger than 800-1000km wide. This is not surprising as an army

would be able to travel no more than about 30 km a day (Mann 1986; Kulke & Rothermund 2006). Huge expensive armies were necessary to secure power and the dynasty or Empire required administration, legislation and power sharing if local elites were to stay integrated. Not many of the dynasties between the Empires lasted for more than two to three generations. Indian society struggled to produce and maintain long lasting Empires like China and Rome.

The sovereign found himself in the new situation of ruling over different people and cultures. His people could worship different ancestors and local gods; did not share the same mores and habits; spoke different languages etc.. They had little in common to provide them with a foundation for a joint identity. It was a huge challenge to find organisational ways to keep such diverse cultures from constantly fragmenting. However a new religio-ideological discourse evolved supporting the power of the king in this process (Yoffee 2005, Trigger 2007, Bellah 2011).

Hellenistic, Chinese and Persian political culture had for some time constructed the king as a god. During this period – facilitated by the new foreign rulers - this perception finds its way into Indian politics. For instance around 100 BC the king of the Sakas acquired the Persian title of ‘Over-king of kings’ (*rajatiraja*) and the Kusanas add the title ‘Son of God’ (*devaputra*). After the Roman Emperor Trajan in 117AD had conquered the Parthians – the main enemy of the Kusanas – we see the Kusana King adopting the Roman title *Kaisara* (Kulke & Rothermund 2006). Thus the Indian king increasingly became constructed as a god, as “living *dharma*”: the king as an embodiment of the law of the universe (Michaels: 2004; Inden 1985). This process culminated over time in the notion that the realm of the king *was* the king. His prosperity was the prosperity of everybody living under his rule. This also carried the implication that as a god on earth the king's life and the court became one continuous ritual. The king soon became the builder and patron of temples of the gods, of which he was one (Thapar 2002). Often the king's court and the temple were the same. As the king became not only the centre of the universe but actually was an expression of it, everybody had to relate in one way or another to the king or risk danger! We shall see that this also became true for the cultural field of liberation and yoga, which had to adapt to this environment.

However there was another religio-political discourse under development, which also came to change significantly the lives and discourses within these cultural fields. In India the development of the strong sovereign was paralleled and supported by the development of *Indian cosmological-monotheism* ([Wikipedia link](#)) –monotheism for short. Thus the growth in the worship of universal gods like Vishnu and Siva – powerful and cosmic creator god-principles outclassed a mass of minor and local gods and deities (Colas 2005; Samuels 2008). A similar process happened in the Roman Empire where Judaic and Christian monotheism emerged. *Monotheism* ([Wikipedia link](#)) – linking transcendence, universalism, ethics, and individual salvation – is a paradigmatic example of the Axial Age *episteme*. Typical of the Axial Age Empires of Rome and India were the alliances taking place between state controlling aristocratic clans and the priests of monotheism. As the Empires finally collapsed both areas were left under the hegemony of monotheistic priesthoods (Graeber 2011).

I will investigate this and the connection to the yoga discourse further.

## **Indian Monotheism – its rise to dominance**

The powerful new universal god-principles emerging in Northern India in this period often originated in a process of amalgamating local warrior gods<sup>217</sup>. As the king expanded his kingdom and power so followed automatically the increase in the power of the god he worshipped. The god of the conquered ruler was either assigned a minor role or included in the victorious god (Kulke & Rothermund 2006). The Gupta rulers for instance worshipped *Vishnu* and thereby made him prominent in Northern India. The rise and spread of this variety of monotheism is directly related to the state breaking out of its local rootedness and becoming trans-regional. Over time four or five universal gods came to dominate – Siva (Warrior and destructor), Vishnu (Warrior and Creator), Surya (the Sun God), Garmesh (the elephant God) and Shakti (the female God). Typically in supra-regional state forms we witness a process where religious concepts replaced kinship as an integrating force (Bellah 2011, Trigger 2007).

The first major regional god to evolve was Vishnu, who grew out of a long process of ‘mergers and acquisitions’ of minor states and their minor local gods. The *Bhagavad-Gita* celebrated the almighty god Krishna – an early variant of Vishnu. The *Bhagavad Gita*, where yoga played a crucial role, was written by the Brahmins in the period between the Empires (Lupin 2005). *Bhagavatism* is actually one of the earliest of the Vaishnava (Vishnu) traditions – labelled *Vaishnavism*.<sup>218</sup> Vaishnavism now established its own canon, strongly opposed by the conservative Brahmin Mimamsa school, who only valued the *Vedas*.

The Northern India-based kingdoms in this period expanded and contracted even outside the Northern geographical region and were themselves invaded by foreign elites. As a consequence they came into contact with many communities worshipping other local deities often belonging to tribal pastoral and nomadic cultures. This means that there was a religio-cultural exchange influencing all those involved. As Northern Indian society was influenced by tribal communities and foreign cultures so many of the conquered communities copied the Northern Indian caste system. Conquered tribal areas were often populated by the professional holy specialists from the civilisation area.

Accordingly we begin to hear about early Siva based ascetic cults, which could have been conditioned or strongly influenced by these processes. Some Saivite cults lived as extreme ascetics. Some scholars have speculated that they were influenced by the Greek Cynics with whom they shared many traits (Samuel 2008). Siva was being seen as an ascetic god and the god of the ascetics. The beginning of the period was dominated by Vishnu cults but at the end of the period Siva worship became prominent.

The later epic *Ramayana* also emerged in this period and is similar in expressing this monotheistic ideology. So did the *Puranas*.

In summary this becomes the period of monotheism: the discourse of a single dominating, potent, universal and cosmic god, who became very involved with yoga. The dominance of monotheism was related to the rise and spread of the powerful king who embodied it. The supremacy of this monotheism did not happen overnight and it took time for it to spread from the royal courts and upper classes to the laity. At the end of the Gupta Empire, this monotheism had probably ascended to overall Northern Indian prevalence.<sup>219</sup>

The rise in India of what we could call ‘royal monotheism’ is an example of how fundamental changes in the socio-political conditions become reflected in religio-cultural changes (Trigger 2007). Accordingly as the politico-social environment changes, we would also expect a range of new social species of professional holy men to evolve. We would expect them to compete with existing groups and there will be adaptation and struggle. As we shall see in this chapter, the ideas and practices among the Sramanas and Brahmins became strongly monotheistic. Many Brahmin clans for instance became temple priests of the new gods. Or the other way round: a local Vishnu clan of priests would manage to become recognised as a Brahmin caste as their tribe was “Hinduised”. In other words they took up elements of caste organisation to gain authority. Other Brahmin clans would occupy the leadership role of a new Puranic deity cult as often only Brahmins were seen as fit to rule (der Veer 2004, Gross 1992, Nandi 1986, Thapar 1987). Accordingly we now hear about new groups of holy men like *Siva* and *Vishnu Brahmins*.

Some holy men and their discourses managed better than others to adapt to the centralised kingdoms, temples and their monotheistic discourses. We will look this into now.

## 2. Holy men adapting to new circumstances

### Some Sramana groups adapted extreme successfully

As we recall earlier in history about 5-400 BC the Sramanas challenged the dominance of the Brahmins. Buddhists especially gained the upper hand, according to the American sociologist R. Collins: *The Sociology of Intellectuals* (1998). New social groups related to large expanding kingdoms, trade, urbanisation, and accompanying social hierarchies found the Vedic religio-culture irrelevant and turned instead to Jainism, Buddhism and different varieties of theism ([Wikipedia link](#)) . The Jains due to their extreme strict moral code and their asceticism became deeply involved in trade and finance as trustworthy partners. Holy men entered into a holy alliance with the expanding merchant and finance classes.

The Buddhists with their highly organised collective monasteries fitted best of all into new state forms of the Axial Age civilisation, according to Collins. They were promoted by rulers like the Mauryas and the Kusanas, who spread Buddhist teachings over large parts of Indian subcontinent and Central Asia (Xinru Li 2011). In the period between the empires Buddhism became closely connected to many of the Indo-Greek and Persian elite groups ruling over Northwest India and Central Asia - for example King Menander. Soon Buddhism even managed to gain a foothold in China. The monasteries - spread all over India and Central Asia - received huge amounts of funding from private contributors in order to improve people’s

chances of better *karma* and after life. So the monasteries soon grew wealthy and became considerable cultural and social centres. Some of the biggest monasteries became universities and were frequented by the new elites for education in a wide range of disciplines. Some had thousands of students. In this way the Buddhist monasteries gained influence on the elites and supported the requirement of the new power structures for education and general legal foundations. In opposition to the Brahmin clans - rooted in local agriculture - the monasteries were transportable and could be moved out into newly conquered geographical areas. Here they could function as the state administration and teach the local elites about ethics and legal issues. Often monasteries would be placed along trading routes and in this way influence the new class of merchants.

The Buddhists and the Jains belonged to the much wider stratum of *Sramanas* – roaming vagrant elites following philosophical ethics. Many of the plethora of small Sramanic groups probably had a short life span due to their loose organisation. It is an open question how this substratum adapted to the new circumstances. What seems certain is that two groups emerged successfully from the struggle to adapt to the Axial Age civilisation – the Buddhists and the Jains. Both groups were trans-regional and strictly, almost militarily, organised in monastic orders often settled along trading routes (Schopen 2006). In order to maintain and spread their teachings both groups developed a scriptural canon. They became an intellectual *scribal class* mastering writing and knowledge. Unintentionally their newly developed skills found strong resonance especially with the emerging supra-regional king, who faced the task of setting up state organisations covering huge regional areas. This became an opportunity for the intellectual scribal class who were capable of helping to set up a state apparatus, an assignment which demanded hitherto unknown skills like writing, teaching, administration, people management, and legal systems. The Buddhists and Jains were quick to adapt to this opportunity.

As the state apparatus expanded physically and in complexity this also meant that there evolved social strata – often well educated – in relation to that. The ruling warrior aristocracy would often find a position within this new state apparatus and underwent the same civilising process: they became besides warriors also an educated and urbanised stratum comparable to the contemporary aristocratic clans and senators of Rome<sup>220</sup>. There were state departments involved with various issues like: finance, commerce, horses, elephants, chariots, infantry, forests, weights, measures, treasury, mines, manufacturing. Further there were roads, bridges, rest-houses, town planning, rivers, reclamation of land, irrigation canals and wells to be built and maintained. And let us not forget that there was justice, medical relief, orphans and social welfare to take care of. Finally there was the royal palace, the court, employees, harems, ministers, places of worship, kitchens, and education to be organised and managed (Chatterji 2007). It is within this social context that we must see the aristocratic rulers – often identified as the Kshatriyas - when we come to discuss them in relation to yoga and the *Mahabharata*.<sup>221</sup>

The Brahmin clans struggled to adapt to the new times. The Brahmins' conservatism, their rituals, their kinship based customs and their legal code contravened the requirements of the new regional- and non-kinship based kingdoms. Only where the state remained weak and decentralised did the Brahmins perform better. Existing local ruling Brahmin and warrior classes

(Kshatriyas) struggled to align with the foreign rule of Persians, Greeks, Sakta and Chinese, who often displaced the Vedic rituals and caste society upon which they relied. (Bandyopadhyaya 2007). The Brahmins at the beginning of this period lost their influence at the centre of power and were relegated to the local and provincial level to provide minor domestic ritual services and local education. Many Brahmins had to find new occupations, some became peasants and others even major landowners. This was almost the equivalent of a breakdown of the Brahmin Vedic culture. It was fragmented and only kept alive by provincial clans.

In general we could say that in this period holy men from cultural field of liberation and rituals - used to handling, storing and communicating an intellectual heritage of writings - found a role as a scribal class serving the emerging state apparatus as a new stratum of bureaucrats and educators (Yoffee 2005, Lull & Mico 2011). Their cultural capital – their knowledge skills – became the basis for a profession within the state apparatus. It brought them close to the centre of power, with substantial implications for the future.

### **The social basis of the yoga discourse in the *Mahabharata***

With this adaptation and selection process among holy men in mind, the reader might wonder what happened to the yoga discourse during this period. If the Brahmin holy men – the authors of yoga - were socially in retreat for the first 400 years of the Axial Age, and if many of the conservative Brahmins rejected *Upanishad* ideas and practices (like yoga), how did that affect the Brahmin part of the yoga discourse in this period? It seems highly unlikely that the yoga discourse under such circumstances could have thrived within the Brahmin caste.

It is in this period of Brahmin decline that the *Mahabharata* began to take form. Even if the *Mahabharata* was written by Brahmins, it reflected the issues and lives of the Kshatriyas (warrior nobility) and the urban elites. And judging from the stories in the *Mahabharata*, it seems that in these strata there was great interest in and knowledge about liberation discourses like yoga and Samkhya. We are here talking about the first milieu of *yoga sympathisers* – upper class strata driven by their fascination of the yoga sign. It seems that for them, like the first Jain proto-yogis, yoga often was a part of cultural practices and rituals related to dying and after death experiences. The yoga sign was *not* about turning their accumulated capital (their yoga knowledge) into a profession. Of course there would have surfaced yoga professionals who taught and assisted the sympathisers. But this was not the main issue for the upper classes. We can also see that some Kshatriyas were fascinated by yoga's supernatural powers – the symbolic capital -, which legitimised and strengthened the power of the upper classes.

There might have been an oral and practical milieu consisting of mainly amateurs among the urban and state elites. This stratum however did not leave much *written* trace of yoga and other liberation discourses. Such a milieu of yoga sympathisers could have been both householders and people who left their households and joined the Sramana institution, maybe late in life, to live as ascetic vagrants seeking liberation. Many former warrior nobles would probably have found the ethical lifestyle and non-violence attitude of the Buddhists and Jains

unacceptable, loathsome and scandalous. This milieu chose *not* to join the Buddhist and Jain orders but alternatively frequented Sramana milieus where alternative discourses like yoga and Samkhya were on the agenda. As we witness in the *Mahabharata*, such a milieu of mainly amateurs (non-professionals) could have developed the various advanced liberation discourses,.

As the *Mahabharata* was compiled over such an extended period it also reflects other social changes, which we need to investigate before turning to the Epic itself.

### Brahmins re-inventing themselves

The Brahmins managed to re-invent themselves, sometimes by copying the Buddhists, their strongest competitor for status. This revival happened slowly over hundreds of years – 200 BC to 500 AD - as they built up a close relation to the king as his ideological legitimiser. The Brahmin Sunga dynasty (187 BC to 30 AD) meant a major step forward for the Brahmins. At the end of the Gupta Empire they were fully back inside Northern Indian power and politics. This culminates with the later emergence of Sankara and [Advaita Vedanta](#). With the Brahmins followed the caste system. Their close and successful alliances with the state meant that the caste system began to spread all over India.

A paper by T. Lubin (2005) investigates the situation of the Brahmins from about 100 AD to the period of the Guptas about 500AD. There are many signs of the increasing revival of Brahmin clans. It is indicated by the fact that Sanskrit became the written language of many states' "legal documents" according to Lupin. The Brahmins even managed to move into a position where in the text genre called the *Dharma-sastras* they were seen to define the "laws of the universe", which then became the universal law governing many kingdoms. In these texts the caste society was defined, described and promoted. With the help of the caste ideology of the *Dharma-sastras* the Brahmins found a function in helping the king to hold the disparate realm together in an integrated social and legal system. This also implied that the Brahmins, as they defined the right thing to do in life for the different social groups, came to influence the population ideologically (Rocher 2005). The Brahmins became an integral part – ideologically and administratively - of the emerging state apparatus where religion and politics were indistinguishable.

This is reflected in a new genre of writings giving rise to a new branch of Brahmins called *Smarta Brahmins*. This genre was categorised as *smirti* – "*that which is remembered*". The Brahmins legitimised their *smirti* writings by claiming that they were rooted in the *Vedas* (which was named *sruti* – "*that which is heard*") (Olivelle 1993; Milner 1994). The Brahmins claimed that the universal laws of which they were caretakers were deduced from what was 'heard from the gods' – i.e. the *Vedas*. Such universal laws were interesting for a supra-regional king who needed a unifying law system to govern his realm.

This became a key reason for a political alliance between the royal institutions and the Brahmins. Through the *Dharma-sastras* a very strong power discourse was established (Pollock 1990): the king and his *Smarta Brahmins* expressed and enforced the divine law of the universe holding together the regional caste kingdom.

Another significant institutional change was the evolution of temples. From about 200 AD

they were constructed everywhere as part of the spread of monotheism. They often grew into huge economic, social and cultural centres employing hundreds of people. They also became the fixed point of the religious communities solidifying around them. The temples became strongly aligned and supported by the political sovereign. The king often donated the surrounding land and villages to them, and they were exempted from paying taxes to the king. Many temples became minor feudal institutions. Temples needed priests to organise the communities and the site; to run the rites of the temple and to maintain the buildings and people at the site; to organise and administer the agricultural production and the associated villages; to manage the inflow of pilgrims and markets attracted by the temple (Malinar 2009).

The evolution of temple institutions and monotheism opened new power opportunities for those who could control them. The Buddhist and Jains – now dominating the [cultural field of liberation](#) - instead of bending to new forms of monotheism seemed rather to build up alternative parallel systems. The Brahmins managed to adapt fully to the new temple institutions and cultural field of monotheism and also found employment there. This became a huge political and economical fortune for many Brahmins. Some of them even rose to become a mixture of powerful feudal landowners and religious leaders. Those Brahmins who controlled the temple also had easy access to the king. The royal institution was in many respects just a political outgrowth of religious institutions often indistinguishable from temple institutions. So many Brahmins managed to use their symbolic capital as a springboard to acquire economic and political capital.

A decisive step in this process happened in the Gupta period when the donation of land grants often occurred in conjunction with the establishment of temples. Donation of land previously had been restricted to Buddhist and Jain monasteries, but in the Gupta period was slowly extended to the Brahmins and temples. Brahmin clans were often donated land or villages in tribal areas into which the king wanted to expand (Thapar 2002). In this way Brahmanism and the caste system began to permeate new geographical areas. This system of grant donations – preparing the ground for “Indian feudalism” - would become an important condition for the rise of Tantra around 800 AD.

Due to institutional changes we can see how the Brahmin clans diversified and adapted. New clans of Brahmins populated the temples and they became defined mainly by monotheism. Hence they took new social identities as Saivite- and Vaishnavite- Brahmins, while others – the Smarta Brahmins - remained Vedic orthodox. These Smarta Brahmins became directly involved with the state, which benefitted from their *smirti* writings - for instance the *Dharma-sastras* - and ritual legitimisation. The conservative Smarta Brahmins were uncertain about yoga, while the monotheistic Brahmins, as we shall see, turned yoga into ritual and god worship.

So gradually many Brahmin clans – some old, others newly invented - managed very successfully to adapt to monotheism, temples and large kingdoms where they found new professions as ritual specialists, councillors, legal specialists, administrators and ceremonial conductors in temples and royal courts. They would run royal rituals of initiation and conduct all the daily rituals the divinised king was obliged to perform. In this way they re-introduced Vedic ritualism into society. The most important social function of the Brahmins became the

provision of *religious legitimisation* for new kings and Vassals. As we investigate the epics of this period and especially the *Bhagavad-Gita* we will see how yoga became utterly entangled in these institutional and ideological changes.

In summary, at the end of Axial Age many Brahmins had used their symbolic capital to position themselves within new hegemonic institutions like the state, the temples and monotheism. Some Brahmin clans had become formidably rich not only in symbolic capital but also economic, social and political capital. For yoga this meant, as this chapter will show, that it became sucked into the new powerful state and monotheism, where it was orientated with dramatic new ideological significance.

### Brahmin life cycle and renunciation

What happened to yoga among the Brahmins? In this period the Brahmins finally managed to integrate renunciation and asceticism – both central to early-yoga – fully into their caste society. It is in this period that renunciation is formally included in the “law” texts: the *Dharma-sastra* and *sutras*. The Brahmin solution became the *asrama* system, where what was formerly a choice between lifestyles now was defined as four sequential life stages that the Brahmin has to go through in life. The first phase was as a Brahmacharin (student living in celibacy), then as a householder, then as a forest dweller (*varnaprastha*) and finally as a Samnyasin at the very end of life (Olivelle 1992, 1993, 1995). Renunciation – life outside ritual based society - had in this way its stamp of approval from society: an obligation, regulated and classified (Kaelber 1989).

This gives an indication that renunciation and asceticism probably did play a role among some Brahmin clans during this period. It had not become totally extinct among them. But yoga is not identical with renunciation and asceticism. People can renounce without adhering to yoga discourse.

Thus the formal integration of renunciation into Brahmin society raises many questions: was yoga until then an essential part of Brahmin renunciation or not? What impact did it have on the yoga discourse as renunciation – to which yoga originally was closely related – finally became rubber-stamped? Did the *asrama* system have the effect of making the yoga discourse more widely available among Brahmins?

If we read the *Dharma-sastras* - the law texts introducing renouncing as a righteous way of living - the answer seems negative. Yoga is only sporadically mentioned and plays almost no part at all. Furthermore, when yoga is mentioned it is described as a mortifying ascetic-meditative technology (Feuerstein 1998), not as an Upanishadic mystical union. Does this mean that the discourse of mystical union – Absorbed Realisation – was only found among a few heretic Brahmin clans?

Overall we can see that many of the Brahmins in this period were busy with issues other than writing about yoga. Their writings and their profession are preoccupied with adapting to the new state form and its ideology of monotheism.

## The establishment of the Vedic canon and Brahmin dominance - *Advaita Vedanta*

The full revival of Brahmanism around 700 AD, following the collapse of the Axial Age empires, is evident from the emergence of the [Advaita Vedanta School](#) ([Wikipedia link](#)) according to R. Collins (1998). I will return to the philosophy of Vedanta in a separate chapter on [Gnostic yoga](#).<sup>222</sup> With Sankara and the Advaita Vedanta School, the Brahmins finally managed to mirror the Buddhist centralistic organisations and many core notions. A range of monastic movements and universities (*maths*) were founded. Many of them, like the temples, were granted land by the king.

At the beginning of the medieval period much of the Brahmin religio-philosophical discourses had been systematised and refined.<sup>223</sup> After this re-organisation there was a Vedantic intellectual and theological onslaught and dominance – a Vedantic revolution. Many competing intellectual schools were now incorporated under a hegemonic Brahmin umbrella. This happened to Samkhya and yoga. Both systems finally became a part of approved Brahmin discourse. In the chapter on the [Yoga Sutra](#) we shall investigate why the Brahmins finally and somewhat surprisingly accepted and embraced this stepchild. However the Brahmin acceptance of yoga and Samkhya was lukewarm. This meant that some of the schools included (the six *Darsanas*), later to become the ‘canons of Hinduism’, degenerated into impotent traditions of textual commentaries.<sup>224</sup> Overall the Brahmin Vedanta philosophy now had the upper hand (Collins 1998). This was not good news for many forms of yoga as Vedanta philosophy represented a form of [philosophical idealism](#) hard to integrate with their ascetic-meditative discourses.

Not only Yoga received its Brahmin rubber stamp by this Advaita Vedantic adoption. Another step in this process was the acknowledgement of the *Upanishads* as belonging to the Vedic canon. Hitherto these teachings among conservative Brahmins had been categorised as heretic. Now they were re-classified as a part of the Brahmins “ancient Vedic tradition”. The Brahmins in other words achieved ideologically motivated re-categorisations of their cultural field. The accomplishment of Advaita Vedanta was to successfully merge Brahmin Axial Age wisdom discourses – exemplified with the *Upanishads* – with Archaic Vedic sign systems. The Brahmins re-established and categorised themselves as ‘orthodox’ – the true embodiment of ancient truth and tradition. They had always claimed they were orthodox within their *existing* cultural field of ritualism. But this re-categorisation allowed them to gain recognition and become a true *and* orthodox part of the competing cultural field of liberation. Liberation and yoga in this Brahmin re-classification exercise became enveloped and included in discourses of Vedic ritualism, re-categorised as natural and direct outgrowths of Vedic ritualism. An ideological classification still being reproduced in modern yoga discourse.

One would have thought that this embrace of a hegemonic group was good news for the diffusion and knowledge of yoga. But as we shall see in the *Yoga Sutra* chapter, it was an ideological move with few practical consequences for yoga as physical body-mind technology. This manoeuvring was primarily about solidifying and legitimising Brahmin symbolic capital at the dispense of their Buddhist and Jain competitors. Within the cultural field of liberation two of the founding groups of specialists could now with good reason be categorised as ‘heterodox,’ while the Brahmin liberation specialists were ‘orthodox’. Sociological seen is orthodoxy about monopolising religious capital turning competitors to heretics (Rey 2007).

Let us now investigate one of the Darsanas incorporated and tolerated by the Vedantic Brahmin intellectuals: the Samkhya philosophy, very closely connected with yoga. In fact it is through Samkhya sign systems that many today describe and give meaning to the practices of yoga. Many actually identify yoga philosophy with certain varieties of Samkhya. They believe that Samkhya's signification of the yoga sign system defines the essence of yoga. Hence a short overview of the classical variety of Samkhya is needed.

Having done that we will look into how yoga was re-configured in this utterly transformed institutional environment of Classical Hinduism. We will find that there is some evidence that yoga instead of developing and spreading among the Brahmins probably evolved among the upper strata of society. Here it probably found much more popularity and recognition in the form of theistic yoga forms rather different from proto-yoga and the yoga of the *Upanishads*.

### 3. Samkhya (-yoga) adopted into Brahmin canon

Samkhya's ontological concepts (that is, teachings about what fundamentally constitutes the world) might have been some of the first philosophical worldviews placed in a system. The Samkhya concepts are often discussed in the *Upanishads* and especially in the *Moksha-dharma* part of the *Mahabharata*, but they never managed to formulate a coherent Samkhya philosophy. The word *Samkhya* is for the first time mentioned in the *Bhagavad-Gita* part of *Mahabharata*. However here it means "liberation by knowledge" – not a philosophical system.

The Samkhya discourse is atheistic in outlook. It imagines a world not created by Vedic or universal gods but coming into existence because of the unfolding of an abstract ontological principle. According to many scholars Samkhya notions were originally a part of the Sramanas viewpoints.<sup>225</sup> But as we have seen they could also easily have evolved among the Kshatriyas. The widespread use of Samkhya notions in the *Moksha-dharma* part of the *Mahabharata*, discussing issues related to warriors and the ruling elite, indicates that such notions were common knowledge in these social strata. As Samkhya was a dualistic ontology it lived in strong tension with orthodox Brahmin Vedantic non-dual (monistic) philosophy.

Around 2-300 AD Samkhya emerged as various philosophical doctrines in discussions with the Buddhists (Collins 1998). One version of Samkhya later became recognised as a canon – *Samkhya-karika*. It was written by *Ishvarakrishna* (350-450AD). He formulated it as a systematic philosophy by compiling previous fragments of doctrines. Samkhya means the "philosophy of enumeration" as it put up lists of concepts, which were broken down into further new lists. Basically it was an ontological philosophy (like the first Greek philosophy)

enquiring into the fundamentals of being. It answered the puzzle of “what is *pure existence* behind multitude and forms?” It envisaged the universe evolving from a single principle called *prakriti*. *Prakriti* evolved into a number of fundamental principles, underlying and configuring the entire universe *including the human mind*. Having grasped this, according to Samkhya, the knowing subject – now understanding the configuration of his own mind - would achieve liberation.

In opposition to Vedanta, Samkhya is a *dualist ontology* stating that the world was fundamentally divided into *two* principles, which had nothing to do with each other. On one side was *prakriti*, which was the whole universe – all matter including mind. So *prakriti* should not be confused with Western ‘matter’ – it is more than that.

As any colour can be broken down into a specific combination of Red, Yellow and Blue, so *prakriti* – mind and matter - combined three fundamental principles – the *three gunas*. In *prakriti*’s initial and undifferentiated state, the three *gunas* – or energy forms - were in absolute equilibrium.

Opposing *prakriti* was *purusha*, which can best be described as pure consciousness – somewhat similar to the concepts of *atman* and *brahman*. However, *purusha* was restricted to pure passive consciousness while *brahman* encompasses the whole universe. Somehow, despite its passivity, *purusha* became involved with *prakriti* and stimulated *prakriti* to differentiate and evolve into the universe as we know it. The three *gunas* which were *brought out of balance*, broke up and re-formed themselves into different independent combinations, configuring reality as we perceive it.

Samkhya discourse integrated *purusha* and *prakriti* into a liberation theory. The mind and thinking were a result of the evolution of *prakriti* and its imbalances. As parts of *prakriti* differentiated themselves into more and more *tattvas*, human consciousness and mind evolved. But mind and consciousness were not the real self, but only some particular elements of *prakriti*. The *real self* - behind the apparent *prakriti-self* - was *purusha*. In relation to yoga, it was the task of the yogi to turn back evolution: in meditative states to discover *purusha* behind *prakriti*, so *purusha* itself could finally separate from its infiltration by *prakriti*, with which it had nothing to do.

Buddhist and many other schools ridiculed Samkhya’s dualistic ontology. Its dualism was also impossible to combine with Advaita Vedanta’s ontological monism, so after the reformer Sankara’s Vedantic re-organisation, Samkhya experts did not develop its theories further.

Samkhya might or might not throw some light on our technical understanding of yoga. Some yoga forms are strongly connected with yoga, others not. The *Yoga Sutra*, later canonised as a Brahmin *Darsana*, enveloped the yoga signifier in a Samkhya sign system slightly different to that of Isvarakrsihna. Hence many today see the essence of yoga through the lenses of Samkhya.

We will now focus on yoga in the main texts of this period – the Epics. Here we will discover social groups that seem to be much more engaged with yoga than the reluctant Brahmin writers.

## 4. Yoga and Samkhya among warriors and kings in the *Mahabharata*

### **Yoga in the warrior Epic – the *Mahabharata* (*MBh*)**

In the gigantic warrior epic of *Mahabharata* (*MBh*) – and within that especially the *Moksha-dharma* and the *Bhagavad-Gita* – there are plenty of discussions of yoga<sup>[226](#)</sup>. These texts are heavily engaged in liberation discourses as the *karma* discourse had received general acceptance among the upper strata of Northern India society. The initial core of the *MBh* and the *Gita* is said by many scholars to have been composed around 100 BC (Bronkhorst 2006, Malinar 2007). The older parts of it were written at the same time as the middle *Upanishads*. So why not discuss the *MBh* in the chapter of *Upanishad* yoga?

The reason is that the *MBh* is compiled over several hundred years – from maybe 400 BC to maybe 400 AD – and in this process of formation, it went through major not only narrative but also religio-political developments. So scholars talk about *layers* in the *MBh* – each layer reflecting conflicts and discourses at a certain point in time. And it is true that some layers - which are probably old and belong to the era of the middle *Upanishads* - are part of those yoga discourses, where Brahmins elaborated the Sramanic and Kshatriya discourses on the immovable self and how to liberate it. However, over time these old (and probably oral) layers were enveloped by, edited and adapted to entirely different sign systems like for instance monotheistic discourses.<sup>[227](#)</sup>

This fits well with the fact that the first empires and their embryonic monotheistic discourses surfaced around 300 BC. As the core of the *MBh* took form around 100BC, various monotheistic discourses were simultaneously crystallising in Northern India. This transition in the overall sign system is reflected in the *MBh*. So the *MBh* is discussed in a separate chapter, as it is conceived over maybe half a millennium and as there always will be some uncertainty about the exact dating of text fragments. Finally, but not least, in the *MBh* yoga is discussed within sign systems different from the *Upanishads*.

J. L. Fitzgerald, a scholar specialising in the *MBh*, has suggested that seen from a distance the Epic is an anti-Mauryan text. We recall that under the Mauryas, Brahmanism went into decline and Buddhism among others became dominant. After the Mauryas (320 – 185 BC) there were a range of foreign based warrior rulers, weakening the ruling Vedic classes of Brahmins and especially the Kshatriyas (Bandyopadhyaya 2007). The Epic wanted to reinstate the Brahmins into power, according to Fitzgerald (2007). Hence its stories are about the apocalyptic destruction of the Indian warrior stratum (the Kshatriyas who have betrayed the

Brahmins) in order to establish good *Brahmanya kingship* and the *varna-dharma* (i.e. caste-law). The political significance of the stories is to convince about the need to establish a strict caste society putting the Brahmins in charge (Witzel 2006). In other words, the *MBh* propagates a kind of *theocracy* ([Wikipedia link](#)) , where the king and the ideology of monotheism secure the Brahmins their power - as we shall soon see. From the moral lessons woven into the stories, we learn according to Fitzgerald :

“ The king should have a Brahmin chaplain, have Brahmins in his palace, and seek Brahmin blessings. ... Pious Brahmins are entitled to the fruits of the earth; their wealth is property of the gods and the pious king does well to transfer wealth to them from the impious. ... If Brahmins are reduced to subsisting on non-brahmin tasks, or if others are allowed to subsist by performing tasks that should be reserved to Brahmins, the distinctiveness of the category “Brahmin” disappears. To the authors of the *MBh*, such developments develop great shame upon a ruler who allow either to occur.” (2007, p.279)

Hence the *MBh* eventually expressed Brahmin ideology and *monotheistic discourses* (Vishnu/Krishna as a transcendent creator god, the Brahmins as the people who know the will of Krishna, and the king as a loyal servant - or the king sometimes himself being a (semi-) god). At the same time the *MBh* legitimised the king as the true servant of god, imposing god’s order and will on society.

So as the *MBh* compiles a wide range of religious and sectarian religio-philosophical discourses, there is understandably no consistent description of yoga. Some of the yoga styles discussed most probably belong to the period around Buddha while other styles influenced by monotheism are certainly much later.

### **Yoga and *karma* evolving in hegemonic social strata**

The most detailed discussion in the *MBh*, except for those conducted in the *Gita*, is found within the *Moksha-dharma* (hereafter *MD*) (12.168-12.353). Translated *MD* means “teachings of how to become released” - from *karma* and *samsara*. The *MD* is presented as a sage advising a worried and concerned king. A similar structure is found in the *Gita* where a worried and troubled warrior is advised by a god. Thus the audience for the texts is the elite and warrior nobility stratum populating the courts and towns of India. They listen to stories and discussions about their own existential and ethical issues and how to overcome them.

We can deduce that the discourse of *karma* and *moksha* was well established among the political elites. Thus the [\*karma\* discourse](#) seems to have gained general acceptance in the upper classes since it initially surfaced in the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* 6-500 AD. This should be of no surprise if one considers the social symbolic significance of *karma*. *Karma* in a social context explains and justifies social inequality – whatever a person’s present position in society, it is a result of former lives. We all get what we deserve. Hence if people are rich and powerful, it is because they have rightfully earned it in a former life. Such an ideology suits the upper classes perfectly (Bandyopadhyaya 2007). This could be the reason why the *MBh* never leaves a critical question mark by the *karma* doctrine. It never finds it necessary to explain and justify the *karma* sign in detail. It is perceived as a fact of existence among the elites.

From the *MD* and the *Gita* – both finding their final form between 100BC and 100 AD - we can see that the teachings about *karma* on the other hand had made the elites deeply

concerned. It was the ethical aspect, which the Buddhist and Jains hammered: your deeds had consequences for your afterlife and rebirth. The Kshatriyas' life as warrior nobility, political rulers, slave owners, and exploiters of economical surplus often put them in the midst of violent situations, which created, according to the teachings, very bad *karma*. Hence they risked being reborn as evil or traumatised spirits. Further, as regional kings fought local princes and warlords, the kings' soldiers ended up in often unbearable situations, fighting their own kith and kin. Where was a warrior's loyalty grounded – in his local roots or in the royal institution embedded in divine cosmic order? No matter what he chose, as a warrior noble he seemed to end up with bad *karma*. Thus the *karma* doctrine must have created deep concerns among the elites. Hence their existential interest and concern and hence the title given to the section: *Moksha-dharma* – “teachings of how to get release” from bad *karma* and following suffering and frightening rebirth.

It is in this context of conflicting ethics and bad *karma* that yoga and Samkhya philosophy – both occupied by the issues of *karma* – becomes significant (Malinar 2007). We can see from the *MD* and the *Gita* that the term yoga and many Samkhya concepts seem to be well known. They were not presented as new concepts needing introductory illumination. On further scrutiny we realise that the yoga notion has various meanings. But that does not exclude the deduction that yoga is a generally known and used notion in the upper social strata.

So it seems that yoga and Samkhya became a part of the common vocabulary. Most probably wisdom based liberation discourses like Samkhya were not only popular but evolved among the Kshatriyas. If this is true we might then wonder why they were thrilled by the more ascetic oriented yoga discourse? Did it provide them with some specific symbolic or use-value?

The authors as in the *Upanishads* are still the Brahmins, but at first glance they seem to take a back seat, as they address the issues of new milieus. However, they still try to ensure that their rituals and old scriptures like the Vedas are still respected (Fitzgerald 2012). So the Vedanta philosophy, which gave meaning to yoga in the *Upanishads*, has been pushed aside in the Epic. Instead a sign system moved in, designed to address the issues of *karma*, and which was probably born with the *karma* sign: Samkhya. However, as we shall see in the *Gita*, the Brahmins still managed to place themselves at the centre of things. In the end the Epics propagate the spread and solidification of Brahmin and Kshatriya caste society and laws (Bandyopadhyaya 2007).

### **The multitudes of Samkhya and yoga forms in the *MBh*.**

Overall, the *yoga* signifier (word) in the *MBh* is used in a variety of ways like *method*, *activity*, *force*, *meditation*, *renunciation* (Hopkins 1901). It is used in the same vague sense as today we use the signifier ‘sport’. When we say ‘sport’ it can mean anything from ‘professional bodybuilding’, through ‘a walk in the park’ to ‘Formula One racing’.

If there is any common denominator to be found in the *yoga* signified (meaning), then it is possibly the word ‘harnessing’, in the meaning of ‘struggle and conquest of human nature’. More specifically, it is our human desires – negative feelings (distress, greed, impatience) as

well as positive feelings (joy, delight, satisfaction) - that need to be harnessed (Malinar 2012). Otherwise the desires activated by and through our senses take over human life and carry us away like a feeble person in a wild river. This is in the *Moksha-dharma* (*MD*) summed up in this way:

“And just as an elephant stand firm against the currents of a river, so he who has acquired the power of yoga harnessing, forces the many objects of his senses to part and flow around him” (MBh. 12.289.23)

These desires are built into our sense apparatus *and* psychology – our cognition and perception. So in this view mind is seen to be *one of the senses*, as the mind on its own can generate ideas, fantasies and sensations. So the diagnosis or condition of *karma* and following *samsara* is human desire. This is the same diagnosis we found in the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad*, which also claimed that human desires had to be overcome in order to realise *brahman* and put an end to rebirth. However the issue is *not* ethical here. It is not about overcoming unethical behaviour. It is rather a question of *stoicism* ([Wikipedia link](#)): whatever feelings a person has – positive or negative – they should not be allowed to govern action and thinking.

Hence yoga and Samkhya in this part of the *MD* are about achieving control of these default programs – the positive and negative desires – which run our body-mind system - the ‘senses’. This is where for instance Samkhya comes in with a philosophy, a sign system, which explains how it all works and relates. The ontology of the body-mind is for example explained in section 12.187. Here our body-mind system of senses - our self consisting of eight different elements - is seen to grow out of layer after layer of more and more abstract principles (called *tattvas*), *prakriti* being the last and fundamental. The three *gunas* (three fundamental *tattvas*) are the three abstract forces conditioning the human experience taking place within the ‘eight elements of the self’. Only by fully *understanding* and mastering the *gunas* can the final ‘deep self’ – named *adhyatman* (which is a sort of *purusha*) – emerge, and with that, final peace. Here, clearly, it is wisdom that leads to release from rebirth, not strict ascetic efforts of body-mind discipline. Through such wisdom, in this section called *buddhi-yoga*, the adept is released from the forces – the three *gunas* - driving the self and generating *karma* and *samsara* (Malinar 2012b). Hence in this section the *MD* frames liberation efforts within a Gnostic wisdom discourse. The guiding idea is that Gnostic insight enables a stoic attitude to life, which overcomes *karma*.

Despite their strong similarity the stoic attitude of *buddhi-yoga* should however not be confused with an ethically based life. In ethic-based liberation the adept is released because he adheres to ethical rules governing his relationship to others and himself. We recall for instance Jain and Buddhist ethics like non-violence, compassion and loving kindness. The stoic attitude is not concerned about the well being of *others* – only the control of the passions of the self. This control is orientated by the insight of Samkhya into the ontology of being. Why is this distinction between stoicism and ethical living important? This means for the ruling upper classes that the violence explicitly or implicitly underpinning their power and social position is left intact. We can deduce that as long as the upper castes conduct their life in a stoic way guided by Gnosticism, they will overcome the issue of *karma*. Thus the upper castes do not in this section of the *MD* have an ethical problem with the social inequality and

violence they embody.

The *MD* is thus in several sections discussing various ways – or we could say various yoga forms - this stoic harnessing of the desires of human nature can take place: meditation in various forms, *pranayama*, wisdom, and miscellaneous combination of those. It even introduces dietary requirements and requirements for where to practise. Some of the discussions and practices of the *MD* are however not orientated by Samkhya discourse.

### Discourses of supernatural powers

As an example of this diversity of practices, in section 12.289 we are introduced to a practice of yoga where Gnostic wisdom has no role to play (Malinar 2012b). Instead the aim here is to build up supernatural powers called *yoga-balu*. They can be built up through strict diet, ascetic living and firm ‘mind concentration’ (*dharana*). When sufficient supernatural powers are built up the yogi becomes an *Isvara* – a Lord (a god). From here he can decide to become released from rebirth. It is evident that this style of *yoga-balu* is radically different from the Gnostic based Samkhya yoga forms discussed in the *MD*.

This yoga of building up the supernatural powers of *yoga-balu* is in many respects similar to the mortifying asceticism that we encountered among some of the Sramanas. It is a path where the concentration of the mind leading to the arrest of sense inputs and stillness of thought is at the centre of efforts. From many places in the *MBh* we can see that such meditative efforts – often in combination with ascetic living – are related to the build up of supernatural powers. Hence the *MBh* is a direct continuation of the ancient discourse connecting ascetic discipline with supernatural powers. In other words we see already how yoga in the *MD* is enveloped in profound different sign systems giving birth to entirely different yoga constructions.

In 12.289 we meet a yogi, who through his yoga powers can fly, be invisible and omnipresent. He builds up his powers through concentrating on the sun – not *brahman* or the deepest self. The sun for him is the place of no return; the gate of immortality. His supernatural powers – sometimes called *yoga* sometimes *prabhava* - enable him to ascend to the sun at the moment of death and hence become released from rebirth (Malinar 2012b). Here we encounter a yoga form, which has not been enveloped by Samkhya, Buddhist or Brahmin sign systems. It seems to be closely related to early forms of Sramanic death rituals connected with sun worship. Thus the various yoga forms we find might sometimes represent different historical forms of yoga. This yoga would then be an old form.

In 12.228 we encounter yet another path to release, which indirectly dismisses the methods of accumulating supernatural powers of the previous yoga form. This path or yoga agrees it is important – but only to a certain degree - to build up supernatural powers now called *yoga-isvarya* (Malinar 2012b). These yoga powers, when mastered through ‘the fixation of the senses’ (*dharana* once more), enable one to master the ‘six elements of Cosmos’. However, as such supernatural powers are a part of *prakriti*, one has in the end to drop them in order to have a final release. So here we have a concept of yoga, which agrees with Patanjali’s yoga: meditation gives supernatural powers but they need to be dropped for

final release.

### The yoga discourse – a wide arena of “bewilderment and uncertainty”

It seems safe to conclude that the discussions we see here in relation to release from *samsara* (rebirth), are a reflection and continuation of the proto-yoga discussions conducted among the Sramanas and the political rulers (often pictured as Kshatriyas). Hence we can see that at this point in history there is still no agreement and no hegemonic or prevailing view, which has managed to establish itself. We have a cultural field with discourses centring around release from rebirth. Various paths compete with each other in delivering *theoria* and *praxis*. The authors of the *MBh* agrees that there is no unity:

“Some assert the primacy of meditation, other wise men that of sacrifice, and still others that of giving gifts. Some asserts the existence of everything, while other deny that anything exists.

Some praise austerity, while other people extol vedic study. Some assert that knowledge comes from renunciation, while nature philosophers claim that it comes from nature.

With so much agreement regarding Dharma leading in so many directions, we become bewildered, O god supreme, unable to reach any certainty.” *MBh*. 14.48.23-25

The word *yoga* is often seen together with the word Samkhya as a pair in the meaning of *theoria* (Samkhya) and *praxis* (yoga). At other times they almost oppose each other as alternative paths and philosophies. Samkhya, then, seems to stand for a Gnostic path to release while yoga is an ascetic path of harnessing the mind-body system.<sup>228</sup> Hence within the *MBh* we find a spectrum of understanding of yoga, often connected to different teachers who teach their idea of yoga to someone else. These sages neither agree on defining the yoga practice nor on its aim and meaning (Brockington 2003). Sometimes yoga is linked with death and access to heaven, sometimes it is linked with *nirvana* or the emergence of *purusha*, and at other times is praised for allowing the adept to vision *atman* or reach *brahman* when the mind is controlled. However soon after we are told that *bhakti* and revelation are superior ways to god.

If we confine ourselves to investigating yoga in the *MD* as a meditative *praxis* we soon realise that even then the *MD* leaves the same impression of diversity and disagreement. As we see the *MD* does not reflect a single cohesive yoga meditation style but a heterogeneous discourse field of contesting views.

### The many meditation styles and yoga

In the *MBh* scholars can trace different flavours of meditation even within yoga (Wynne 2007). Yoga is not just one but many styles of meditation. This confirms the fluidity and lack of conceptual clarification at that time. Bronkhorst (2006) confirms that a careful reading of the different descriptions of yogic meditation reveals that the *MBh* is strongly influenced by various Sramanic views. As an example let us first look at the discussions about *dhyana-yoga*. This is a yoga variety of *MD*, which is influenced by Buddhism according to Bronkhorst (1986). *Dhyana* is a central Buddhist notion for meditation. After mentioning the four *yoga-dhyanas* (Buddha also listed four levels) further Buddhist notions and views appear (here underlined):

“He himself, oh descendant of Bharata, as well as his mind and five senses, comes to rest when he has reached the first

course of meditation by the incessant practice of yoga. That bliss of him whose self is thus controlled, will not be attained by means of any kind of human effort or fate. Endowed with that bliss he will delight in the activity of meditation. In this way the yogins attain to that nirvana which is free from disease.” (MBh.12. 188.20-22)

Not only the influence of Buddhist meditation can be observed, but there are also clear examples of yoga meditation perceived as ascetic mortification meditation. This is clearly the proto-yoga of the Jains. The following extract gives a detailed description of the process of mortification:

”Having made his senses firm with his mind, oh lord of Mithila, and having his mind firm with his intellect, he is motionless like a stone. He should be without trembling like a pillar, and motionless like a mountain; the wise who know to follow the precepts then call him ‘one engaged in yoga’ [yukta]. He neither hears nor smells nor tastes nor sees; he notices no touch, nor does [his] mind form conceptions. Like a piece of wood, he does not desire anything, nor does he notice [anything]. When he has reached the Original Nature [prakriti], then sages call him ‘engaged in yoga’ [yukta]. And he looks like a lamp shinning in a place without wind; not flickering and motionless it will not move upward or sideward” (MBh 12.294.13-18)

This variety – linking mortification with Samkhya notions (like *prakriti*) - is typical for the many examples of *Samkhya-yoga* in the *MD*. But as we have seen, there are many other varieties where all kind of Sramanic discourses are mixed together. Then other sections mentioning yoga as meditation focus on some of the different meditation notions already known from the *Upanishads*. For instance one section describes yoga meditation as *dharana* (i.e. ‘concentration meditation’ - of which there are said to be seven levels leading to hard achievable release), while other places equate yoga with *samadhi*.

Then yoga is also taught as *ekagrata* (one-pointed-ness) combined with *pranayama* assuming that moral conduct, correct diet, right posture and right surroundings are all in place. So this part of the text, presents yoga as not just meditation but also as an integration of an ascetic lifestyle with a variety of specific meditative technologies. However there is not much clarification of what the difference is between the meditative notions.

There are also places were yoga meditation is related to Brahmin rituals of *tapas* (heating) and *japa* (chanting). Finally, as we have seen, it is linked to sign systems of monotheism, where the yogi first becomes a god (or small god seen in relation to the big “everything god”) – called *Isvara* (Lord). This allows the *yogi-Isvara* to ‘assimilate’ (whatever that means) with the absolute god – in this case called Narayana. This turns gods like Krishna and Narayana into yogis (Fitzgerald 2012, Malinar 2007). I will return to this later.

### **Use-value and symbolic-value of yoga in MBh**

We can see from this short overview that the *Moksha-dharma* (*MD*), where the main yoga discussions are found in the *MBh*, only adds a limited amount to the technical understanding about yoga already gained from the *Upanishads*, leaving aside that the *Upanishads* orientate yoga by a different sign system. The issue is that we still have no comprehensive and systematic doctrine and are often left with open-ended notions like *dhyana*, *dharana*, *samadhi*, *ekagrata*. No-one knows today the practical and specific difference between such notions and one wonders if people actually knew that at that time. The

discussions only allow us to conclude that there was a vibrant discourse arena focussing on release of the self, generating a range of *theoria* and *praxis* systems, whose contours and differences we can only vaguely define.

Overall, one can cautiously generalise that the meditative yoga technologies in the *MD* in general are about harnessing the body-mind system – ‘the self’ or ‘the senses’ - which consists of various elements (*tattvas*). If successful, this leads to a merger/union with “undifferentiated consciousness”. This will lead to salvation, ‘conquering of death’ and access to ‘realms beyond change’ (Schreiner 1999). This could give us the impression that these various systems were mostly part of death rituals: yoga as a multitude of systems of preparation for death.

The *MBh* confirms that the yoga discourse was not confined to the Brahmins, whose conservatism made them anyway very reluctant to adopt yoga. Instead the yoga notion seems to have been taken up much more favourably among the political elite. This has on one side diffused the yoga notion further, as it became used as an umbrella notion for all kinds of ascetic and meditative systems. Soon, it seems, everything related to the release of the self was yoga.

On the other side we can also see that this has led to discussions and expansions of the various views related to yoga. We get the sense of a living tradition full of debate, variety and change. It is a field of discussion very Sramanic in character regarding both *theoria* (sign system) and *praxis* (activity). The Brahmins are apparently mainly supposed to record and write down these discussions about release. They do not have much to contribute with regarding their Vedic or *Upanishad* theology. Thus the discussions of the *MBh* allow us a much better general sense of the yoga discourse than the mysticism of the *Upanishads* does.

Yoga in various forms has entered the elite life delivering the use-value of release of the self after death and, maybe more importantly, supernatural powers in this life. These powers are now so strong that the ultimate yogi is no longer only an *Isvara* (A Lord, small god) but the big god himself – The One. This would be a very good reason for a ruler to practise yoga: yoga is the One, the One is yoga. This is exactly a central theme of the *Gita*, where we also see how the Brahmins manage to move back into the equation with a vengeance.

### **The yoga ideology of *Bhagavad-Gita***

The *Bhagavad-Gita* is a small theological insert in the *MBh* consisting of about only 70 pages. Basically it is a *monotheistic text* ([Wikipedia link](#)) where the god Krishna explains to a minor war lord – Arjuna - why he should not worry about killing his teachers, friends and family! Arjuna’s dilemma is twofold: one problem is whether he should stay loyal to central power (the king and god) or loyal to local power (family, kin and friends who he is supposed to fight); the second problem is the issue of the *karma* generated from his actions especially as a warrior – in relation to having a chance of release, would he not be better off if he abstained from action at all? The answer to a large degree turns out to become a discussion of yoga: how can a warrior achieve release in the shadow of such dilemmas?

A. Malinar is a leading expert on the *Gita* (2007) and I draw on many of her insights in

my discussions of the *Gita*. Krishna's intensive discussions with Arjuna outlines a way of practising yoga, according to Malinar, which allows anyone – not only warriors - to do their duty (i.e. performing actions which normally would have a karmic effect) simultaneously with achieving release after death. Hence Krishna's message is, crudely put: “*Go to war and kill my enemies. This is my will and my will is your duty. In this way your actions – your duties – become a sacrifice to me. When you in this way surrender to me, I promise you release after death.*”

Most modern readers will immediately recognise the clear ideological and political issues that emerge from Krishna's yoga. It is clear that the *Gita* delivers ideological justification for warriors and kings, rubberstamping their violence and war. It creates a divine social hierarchy, where the king implements the plan of god. It is not up to soldiers to scrutinise their orders, however upsetting they might be. “*Do as you are told with no hesitation and afterthought*”. Most modern readers would conclude that this, is the typical discourse of the disciplining of not only soldiers but of society as such. At one stroke it defines any opposition to the king as violating god's will. It makes dissenting citizens into people ignorant of cosmic duties. A society accepting this monotheistic discourse is condemned to a life of docile duties.

### ***Buddhi-yoga and karma-yoga legitimising social order***

Obviously following orders will often tend to generate emotional and personal conflicts for the individual. This is also what Arjuna expresses. The problem is a part of a wider and more general issue: when humans act – doing their duties, performing rituals or just living their lives – following problem emerges: do these actions generate *karma* sending the soul into cycles of endless rebirth? How to handle this existential dilemma? Krishna introduces (in CH.2) a *buddhi-yoga* - very similar to the [\*buddhi-yoga of the MD\*](#) - aimed at calming the mind, so that it becomes detached and disinterested. *Buddhi* in Krishna's discourse is an ontological element ([\*a tattva\*](#)) of the mind or the self, which stands for ‘pure distinctive thinking’. The powerful capacities of the *Buddhi* in general cannot be utilised within the self as the imbalance of [\*three gunas\*](#) overwhelm the self. However through ascetic self-discipline and meditation the three *gunas* can be mastered. This allows the *buddhi* element of the self to emerge. Experiencing the world from the *buddhi* part of the self enables the yogi to become a detached person, who is neither plagued by negative (anxiety, for instance) nor positive (desire, for instance) feelings. This claim is in line with the Samkhya stoicism ([\*Wikipedia link\*](#)) that we encountered in the *MD*'s discussion of *buddhi-yoga*.<sup>229</sup>

Hence having gained access to the *buddhi*, a person will begin to act disinterestedly. This implies that one no longer acts from a point of the ego. Instead one just acts, without any personal intention. Such ego-less action – actions not satisfying personal aims – will not generate any *karma*. Hence at death there will be no rebirth. What is left for the warrior or the citizen is to carry out his duties, perform the rituals and follow the injunctions for his social caste with no personal intentions involved. In this rhetoric of Krishna's we clearly hear words originating in Brahmin discourses such as ‘rituals’ and a life prescribed by (caste) ‘duties’.

We get a sensation that Brahmin discourse is working in the background. Why?

On closer inspection Krishna's line of argument has wider consequences than just the release of the self. Krishna teaches a self-disciplined, disinterested and strictly regulated life of obligations, fulfilling the duties a person is born into: warrior, householder, wife, eldest son, student etc. The subtext of this instruction is about the legitimisation of one's actions. Any ruler would now be able to justify his actions by claiming that they are based not in personal motives but in cosmic rules.

Krishna here not only legitimises the actions of the king but also delivers blanket support for Brahmin hegemony. The aim of life, according to this teaching, is to perform our rituals and cosmically defined social duties and otherwise to abstain from actions motivated by either positive or negative personal motives. This however generates a crucial question: how do we know what our duties are? Krishna does not give an answer to this question as everybody – especially the Brahmins – knows where to find it. The answer is that you will find an outline of your *svadharma* – your ritual and social duties – and *samsara* – your life cycle rituals - in the Vedic injunctions. At the time of the *Gita*, the Brahmins re-codified these cosmic grounded rules for correct living. Each caste, gender and phase of life became regulated in texts like the *Dharma-sastras*, the laws of Manu (*Manu-smriti*) and the *Grhya-sutras* (household rules). Here even the king was subjected to Brahmin rituals and services (Malinar 2009).

As soon as we enquire who are the authors, guardians and interpreters of these texts defining cosmic order, we realise how the Krishna's yoga places the Brahmins in power. Any king subscribing to Krishna's theistic yoga, legitimising the king's power, will from now on have to consult and involve the Brahmins. The king's absolute and divine grounded power has its limitations: it always needs the consensus of the Brahmins who decide whether or not the king is following his *dharma*. This is a holy alliance between religious ideology (the Brahmins) and the state (the elite warriors of Kshatriyas). It turns the institution of the king into an extension of religious rituals and Indian society into a caste society.

### Krishna's yoga

We can see that what the Brahmin authors of the *Gita* are doing here is to link emerging popular monotheistic Krishna social movements with their own Vedic ritual world (Malinar 2009). Krishna is defined as the One behind everything. The cosmos – *prakriti* or *brahman* or what ever you name it – is only an unfolding of Krishna. Brahmin Vedic sacrifices, maintaining the order of cosmos, are linked into all this by claiming that they are fundamentally nothing but sacrifices to Krishna, as he is the ultimate power behind it all. Similarly human life and social duties are a result of Krishna unfolding himself through *prakriti*. As humans recognise this and fulfil their cosmically defined duties, they are actually living according to Krishna's will. Leaving their own will aside humans turn their life into a sacrifice. This is where yoga enters again (in CH.3). This time it is called *karma-yoga*: the yoga of a disinterested person who with no further question carries out his ritual and social duties – his actions or *karma*, turning it into a sacrifice to Krishna. The benefit of a disinterested and detached life of sacrifice – *karma-yoga* - is release.

Following Malinar (2009) Krishna's yoga in summary consists of several yoga forms. It contains a *buddhi-yoga* preparing the yogi for death and release. This happens through concentrated meditation where the *buddhi* – pure discriminative awareness - emerges as the effect of three *gunas* being neutralised. When the subsequent disinterested action is based on the *buddhi* aspect of the self no *karma* is generated. This is where the new *karma-yoga* sets in. It is however a radical rupture with all former *karma* discourse, when Krishna claims that *disinterested action has no karmic effect*. This is a change of definition of *karma*, allowing the problem to disappear (a strategy well-known to modern politicians, lawyers and accountants).

In other word *karma* changes signification under the orientation of monotheism: the yogi's disinterested action, implementing the will of god, is re-defined as a life long *ritual* of love and devotion to god. By adding this love and devotion to ritual practice (i.e. action – *karma*) life turns into ritual action, which is *bhakti-yoga* – Krishna's yoga.

Krishna's yoga - the intertwined trio of *buddhi*, *karma* and *bhakti* – is an ideology reinforcing the political and social position of the political rulers (the notional Kshatriyas) and Brahmins. It is clear that Krishna's yoga has many traits in common with Buddhism. However, as we saw in the *Upanishads* and in the *Buddhi-yoga* of the *MD*, there is in Krishna's yoga a striking absence of the ethical life underpinning Buddhist liberation: the necessity of building up *metta* (kindness), *karuna* (compassion), *mudita* (sympathetic joy), and *upekkha* (equanimity). The disinterested *buddhi* – an unbothered and composed mind-set of pure thinking - should not be confused with an ethical stance. The Buddhist ethic and universalism was no doubt a thorn in the flesh of the ruling castes as it was glaringly incompatible with their embodied violence and their discriminatory caste ideology.

Hence we might find a reason why the political rulers especially (often described as Kshatriyas) found it necessary to build up a parallel discourse to Buddhist liberation, which they named yoga. Some crucial aspects of Buddhism could not by any means be made congruent and become a part of a warrior's and ruler's life. What was adaptable and applicable to a Kshatriya life of (mainly Buddhist) liberation discourses, was called yoga.

In the early phase of yoga history it seems that the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas both opted for replacing ethics with various forms of Gnosticism: the Brahmins aligned liberation with non-dual mysticism and the Kshatriyas did it with Samkhya ontology. It is this Samkhya outlook which largely informs and constructs the *buddhi-yoga* of the *MBh*. Then monotheism surfaces: What the *Gita* did was to subsume *buddhi-yoga* within monotheism by linking it to *karma-* and *bhakti-yoga*.

### **From Ways of Liberation to Salvation**

The different styles of yoga discussed in the *Gita* are often divided into following headings: *jnana-* (knowledge), *karma-* (action), *bhakti-* (devotion) and ascetic-meditative yoga. The path of all these yoga styles in the end all leads to Krishna and the immortality of the soul. Studying each yoga style one realises that the authors continuously draw on diverse and often opposing discourses of liberation, Brahmin ritualism and monotheism. These are often -

by generation after generation of authors - mixed with each other in such a way that the texts now and then lose consistency and line of argument (Malinar 2007). This means that in the end it can be difficult to tell the styles apart – a problem which is not made easier by the fact that the text repeats itself over and over again.

In the end, the overall message is clear: *all* yogas – paths or disciplines - lead to god *if* we surrender and always perform yoga with Krishna in mind. However, we are warned that yoga without god in mind leads nowhere. The most supreme form of yoga according to the *Gita*, therefore has to be *bhakti-yoga* – the yoga of love and devotion:

“Not by study of the scriptures, or by austerities, nor by gifts or sacrifices, is it possible to see me as you have done. Only by tireless devotion can I be seen and known, only thus can a man become one with me O Arjuna! He whose every action is done for my sake, to whom I am the final goal, who loves Me only and hates no one – O my dearest Son! Only he can realize me” (11.53-55)

So in the very end, despite all the yogas discussed, any type of yoga not based on the love for Krishna is deemed futile. Behind the face of multitude and tolerance the reader in other words finds monopoly: One god, one path. Krishna towards the end of the *Gita* demands submission and love and if he gets that, he rewards:

“Of all yogins, he who loves Me with faith and whose inner self is absorbed in Me – him I deem to be most yoked.”

This theistic yoga flags a significant distinction from most previous discourses on yoga and release. Most of them have been based upon an assumption of release through *humans' self-effort*. Self-effort was an essential part of the *karma* discourse: *you create* – no matter what you do or not do - your own future and eventual release. Now we are told that human efforts alone will not suffice. God's grace is also required:

“Verily, those who surrender their actions to Me, who muse on me, worship Me, and meditate on Me alone, with no thought save of me (12.6). O Arjuna! I rescue them quickly from the ocean of life and death, for their minds are fixed on me (12.7). ... Verily those who love the spiritual wisdom as I have taught, whose faith never fails, and who concentrate their whole nature on Me, they indeed are my most beloved (12.20).”

Krishna's yoga turns Sramanic ways of liberation and *karma* discourse, initially empowering humans to solve existential concerns, into a discourse of dependency and submission. Liberation is substituted for salvation – self-reliance with grace and external powers. Basically one can say that the *Gita* in the end undermines ascetic-wisdom yoga forms according to the principle from *Animal Farm*: “All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others”.

### **Supernatural power and symbolic values in the *Gita***

In a previous chapter I have indicated how the *MBh* like most of later Indian folklore and narratives, repeatedly, connects asceticism and yoga with the super-natural. While one part of the *MBh* disempowers the yogi identity, teaching him that salvation is only achievable through surrendering and grace of god, the other parts blow the trumpet of supernatural powers. Yogic supernatural powers are central to the outlook of *Mbh*. Brockington (2003), Malinar (2012b) and White (2009) show how the Epics are full of examples of yoga leading to supernatural powers. The yogis often figure in the same way as magicians, for instance in *The Ring of the Lords*. So there are stories about how yoga allows a man to avoid Siva's trident and to enter

his mouth; or how another person by means of yoga protects a woman from the approaches of Indra. Even kings and gods practise yoga in order to increase their power. We have also seen that in some sections the supernatural powers are not seen as a by-product of yoga practice but as a stepping-stone for final release.

So supernatural powers do not play a secondary role in this discourse. At one point the *MBh* even tries to set up a theory based on Samkhya, explaining why natural super power grows naturally out of yoga practice in the same way as a low pulse rate is a natural by-product of intensive physical exercises. In the *Gita* the marvels of yoga powers are lifted to new levels. As Krishna reveals himself, it turns out that he is the master yogi of all yogis. He has become what he is thanks to his yogic powers (Malinar 2007). His omnipresence and ability to transform are clearly yogic powers (White 2009). So this is powerful stuff raising the symbolic profile of the ascetic yogi considerably.

In the theistic yoga of the *Gita* it seems that the core and central aim of yoga has changed: the issue of individual release has been replaced with power. The most powerful being of all is Krishna, who is a yogi. He has created a hierarchical power world – the unfolding *prakriti* - allowing the *karma* yogis who submit to him to climb the ladder of divine power. Those who follow him will reach him due to his grace.

In the social world he has created a power structure, where it is the king's *dharma* to implement the will and power of Krishna. Warriors and society have to obey the divine powers delegated to the king. To oppose the king is to oppose Krishna. When following their *dharma* – implementing the power of Krishna - the ruling elite and their warriors are actually doing *karma-yoga*. Doing *karma-yoga* and *buddhi-yoga* will also increase their personal supernatural powers, as it will bring them closer to Krishna. In the end it will mean their release. Hence this yoga discourse simultaneously creates and legitimises social power. This also applies to the Brahmins who have the role of guarding and interpreting the cosmic laws governing most aspects of social life. This discourse restores the Brahmins to the power centre of society, as only they know the cosmic duties of the various castes of society.

Power and submission – the establishment and legitimisation of social hierarchy – in this discourse is not a by-product but at the eye of the storm. Those who comply and submit – those who practise this theistic yoga – are promised divine powers, as they are released from a world, where they were powerless

It is no surprise that the upper classes adopted this theistic yoga. The various forms of yoga as discussed in the *Mbh* would charge them with supernatural powers. However the yoga of the *Gita* would deliver even more power as it transformed the whole cosmos into a power hierarchy, where they fortunately found themselves placed at the top. Never before had yoga radiated so much social symbolic power.

Based on these considerations it is assumed that various yoga and Sramanic discourses spread easily among the social elites of India, as they promised them release and supernatural powers.

In conclusion modern yoga students should not expect the *MBh* with its theological insert of the *Bhagavad-Gita* to add new significant technical understanding of yoga. The impression left is of a wide undefined current of yoga practices, which during this era did not manage to

crystallise into doctrines and general agreement. Yoga as a Way of Liberation by self-effort was a fragmented discourse under increasing pressure from monotheistic grace-based salvation discourses. However the ascetic yogi - the social identity construct - still received high status recognition and his magical powers filled people with dread and admiration. We will now investigate further variations of theistic yoga as they appeared in various texts.

## 5. Yoga in various monotheistic genres and milieus

### **Yoga in the texts of Puranic Hinduism**

As a range of new major gods or even monotheistic gods emerged in this period, all this gave rise to the *Purana* genre. This genre steps into the footsteps of the *MBh*. Each god and his accompanying clan of kings and rulers now had their own text canon - their *Purana*. In this epic genre the religious community, solidifying around king and religion, collected their rituals, myths, ancestor lists, hero legends, god descriptions, and philosophy (Malinar 2009). We are talking about religious communities – *sampradaya* - where state (king) and religion were hard to distinguish since the king as an institution seemed to be nothing but a political-religious ritual. The *Puranas* became a strange mixture of political constitutions, religious doctrines, legal frameworks, regional history, god mythologies, ideological legitimisation and entertaining narratives. They were popular and known even in the lower strata of society and helped to generate social identity and cohesion.

Sociologically and evolutionarily we could say that these communities reached a level of complexity and size where old local- and clan-based institutions and worldviews had long since become redundant. Instead there was an on-going institutional and ideological adaption to larger political and hierarchical societies. It is in this context that the *Puranas* emerged. However the new institutions and worldviews were still not strong enough to resist local and decentralised forces and then disintegrated. This gave the opportunity for the succeeding new local warrior lord, his god and his community to expand and introduce the next monotheistic god requiring another *Purana* to be written in order to legitimise the new ruler. Hence the huge number of texts in this genre.

The *Puranas* are a major textual event of this period – hence they have given name to the period: *Puranic Hinduism*. The *Puranas* were continuously created, edited and re-written from about 200AD to the late Middle Ages. Many of them were part of the popular *bhakti* movement spreading over India. They represented polytheistic mythologies under an umbrella of monotheism often recited by Brahmins in courts and villages. They were entertainment, role

models and education for the masses at the same time as they provided ideological vehicles to secure rulers' lineage back in time (Kumar Das 2005).

In the *Puranas* yoga is generally connected to the worship of a god. Yoga is often understood to mean "then there is technique A and technique B which leads to ...". The aim of yoga is for the worshipper to 'reach the ultimate ontological truth': the One - the ultimate monotheist god. Often yoga techniques or rituals are seen as an integral part of a householder's daily life infused by piety lived in the name of a god. At other times they are part of death rituals. This wide use of the *yoga* concept, which we encountered in the *MBh*, was typical of Puranic Hinduism. Conceptually yoga became hard to differentiate from a religious ritual.

However the texts are not always favourable to yoga. Sometimes they prefer prayers and rites of worship to yoga (Feuerstein 1998; Matchett 2005). On the other hand the *Puranas* continually confirm the notion that holy men thanks to their ascetic techniques have immense magical powers sometimes even surpassing those of the gods. There is no agreement on the status of yoga, but the sign is still strongly connected to supernatural powers. But this is often in a negative way, where the yogi is seen as a daemonic sinister character.

G. Feuerstein *The Yoga Tradition* (1998) gives a brief overview of yoga in the *Puranas*. According to Feuerstein the *Puranas* are divided into the 18 *Maha* (Great) *Puranas*. Even if the word *yoga* is mentioned in many of the *Maha Puranas*, there is apparently very little knowledge of or contribution to *yoga* understanding to be found<sup>230</sup>. Some of them mention Patanjali's eight-limb *yoga*, but often they show ignorance of the meaning of its notions. Often in order to gain recognition a religious community added philosophical elaborations to their text (Malinar 2009). This could be a reason for the author to briefly discuss the *Yoga Sutra*, which apparently had gained some status and acknowledgment.

The *Agni Purana* for instance discusses *Patanjali-yoga* in connection with Tantric concepts like *mandala*, *mudra*, *yantra*. The *Garuda Purana* discusses Patanjali in relation to the Vishnu discourse. The *Linga Purana* turns *Patanjali-yoga* into a *jnana* (knowledge-based) practice related to Siva ecstasy.

The *Vayu Purana* describes an interesting different five-limb *yoga* – consisting of *pranayama*, *dhyana*, *pratyahara*, *dharana* and *smarana* (recollection) – which leads to supernatural powers and the ability to focus exclusively on the God Maheshvara, which is a synonym for salvation. The *Siva Purana* has a noteworthy observation as it distinguishes between different types of *yoga*. It says there are three types of *Siva-yogin*: *kriya-yogin* who engages in sacred rites, *ta婆-yogin* who pursues asceticism and *japa-yogin* who in addition to the two former ones also constantly recites *mantra*.

Among the *Puranas* the *Bhagavata Purana* has gained recognition for its religio-philosophical contributions. It represents the *Pancaratra* religious community – a *sampradaya* – worshipping Vishnu. This *Purana* creates a synthesis of *yoga*, *Samkhya*, *Vedanta* and *Advaita Vedanta* within an overall *bhakti* (devotional) oriented Vaishnavistic theism (Rukman 1997). The basic theme is death – so typical of *yoga* – and the *Purana* is recited to a king who is about to die. *Yoga* in this *Purana* is seen as an important part of a death ritual, where the dying person is supposed to find a solitary place and meditate on the *mantra om*. The aim of meditation is to disregard two of the [three gunas](#) – *rajas* and *tamas* – so the third *guna tattva*

fills the self. This will lead to *moksha (liberation)*: in death the self reaches a state of Vishnu.

In other places yoga meditation is used to generate supernatural powers – the *siddhis*. It is said that all the *siddhis* are present in the god Bhagavan (Vishnu). By meditating, using *dharana* and *dhyana*, on different aspects of Bhagavan, the yogi in parallel builds up those *siddhis* and becomes released (Rukman 1997). So here, as in the *Moksha-dharma* of the *MBh*, we encounter a yoga form where, in opposition to the *Yoga Sutra*, the build up of *siddhis* gives the yogi the power to release himself. The *siddhis* are here a resource for liberation – not the distraction they are in the *Yoga Sutra*.

Even after the writing of the *Yoga Sutra* there is still no agreement on a definition of yoga. The impression left us by the *MBh* seems still valid: the yoga notion during the Axial and Middle Ages was watered down taking the general meaning of *sadhana* – consistent spiritual efforts.

So the *Puranas* add nothing to our understanding of the technical meanings of yoga. In general the *Puranas* in relation to yoga are occupied by the supernatural powers. So in these narratives we encounter many of the *jogis* as they were known to the masses: not as meditators sitting in lotus positions but often as creepy and scary wizards who sometimes would even eat children or take over your body (White 2009)!

In summary the *Puranas* like the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* epics are to a large degree political and ideological texts. They justify and promote the rule of Brahmins and Kshatriyas (warriors), who through the institution of the king rule a caste society legitimised by Brahmin Vedic ideology and monotheism. If the lower caste of the *Sudras* is in revolt and taking power, we find countless stories of how the gods in the form of Avatars return to earth in order to re-establish Brahmin law and order (Bandyopadhyaya 2007). Yoga in the epics is a part of maintaining, legitimising and sometimes entertaining this society.

### ***Yoga in the Narayana tradition - the Vaikhanasa-smarta-sutra***

Sanskrit literature from the third century AD describes the worship of the god *Narayana* (a Vishnu branch) in combination with yoga and asceticism. Scholars call this the *Vaikhanasa* tradition: a mixture of Vedic rites, asceticism and image devotion.

In the *Vaikhanasa-smarta-sutra*, which dates to 400 AD or later, Vishnu or Narayana are at the centre of meditation efforts and rituals. (Colas 2005; Eliade 1958). As we recall orthodox Brahmins were supposed in different phases of their life to live in certain ways. The last phase was a life of renunciation. During the final renouncing phase of life this *sutra* accordingly instructs the Brahmins to live a life of Vishnu devotion combined with yoga.

Unlike the *Yoga Sutra*, this *sutra* does not say much about yoga, but instead gives an insight into the rich varieties of renouncer lifestyles. The *sutra* gives short overviews of these ascetic lifestyles. From this we gather that these ascetic renouncer groups of seniors seem to have very different methods and goals. Some meditate on Vishnu. others on the ‘supreme self’ and so on. The *sutra* is however not neutral in its descriptions. Its aim is to sort out acceptable renouncer lifestyles from unacceptable. Several groups are rejected outright by the *sutra*. One

group for instance is said to be on “the wrong path” because even if they practise yoga, they go against god. Clearly this *sutra* strongly expresses a monotheistic ideology. Like Krishna in the *Gita*, the *sutra* only approves groups aiming for union with Vishnu or Narayana. Also as in the *Gita*, yoga and renouncing are in themselves of little value. What counts in this discourse is the devotion to god.

A few groups are discussed in relation to technical yoga terms. One of those groups is the *Kuticakas*, who practise *Marga yoga* to “seek deliverance”. While the *sutra* discusses another group called the *Sarangas*, we hear about four sub-groups among them. Many yogic notions like *pranayama*, *asana*, *pratyahara* and *dharana* are related to these small groups. One group actually follows the eight limbs of yoga – *ashtanga*.

The *sutra* confirms that a number of ascetic groups still flourished around 400 AD<sup>231</sup>. There seems to be little agreement about methods and goals of how to live the last phase of Brahmin life. There are a few atheists among the groups but most of those the *sutra* has chosen to describe are devotional groups using yoga as a tool to reach their god. The *sutra* seems to be part of a process of weeding out opposition and subsuming yoga and ascetic living to theistic devotion. The purpose of the *sutra* is to categorise, define, rank and evaluate its own cultural sub-field: one of the most important and popular activities of any cultural specialist.

Finally in relation to yoga, the *sutra* give us a little glimpse that there do exist some few renouncer groups who practise various forms of yoga. None of the renouncer groups are identified as yogis. Yoga seems not to be a crucial part of their social identity building.

To investigate further what role yoga played among Brahmins and monotheism, there is another Vaishnavite text from between 1000-1100 AD I would like to discuss. This text was written by a medieval Vaishnavite monk *Yadava Prakasa* for his fellow monks. It gives some insight into what role yoga played in the daily life of both pious Puranic Brahmins and especially medieval renouncing Vaishnavite monks.<sup>232</sup> We are in other words moving out of the institution of renouncing senior Brahmins and into a disciplined and organised monastic institution.

### **Yoga in the daily life of a Brahmin Vaishnavite monk**

The text of interest is the *Yati-dharma-samuccaya* (short form: *Ysam*). It belongs to the medieval *Nibandha* genre. This is a genre of scholarly texts commenting on earlier Brahmin canonical texts like *sutras* and *sastras* – in this case mainly *Dharma-sastras*<sup>233</sup>. This makes the *Ysam* relevant, because even if the *Ysam* belongs historically to the later medieval period, it still throws light on Axial Age monotheistic yoga. This is because it quotes and discusses a wide range of Brahmin *Dharma-sastra* texts originating in the Axial Age civilisation.

The *Ysam* comments on a Vaishnavite monastic life modelled on rules and laws – the *Dharma-sastras* - concerning Brahmin renunciation. As it examines how to live a pious and correct life, it leaves not even the tiniest activity of daily life unscrutinised and unregulated. The daily cycles of practice seem to be: bathing at dawn (enveloped in countless rituals), twilight worship, yoga practice (meditation), silent prayer, leave for next village, begging, eating, rites following meal, evening rites and duties.

From the many quotes of Axial Age Brahmin religious authorities, we can see the *Ysam* basically delineates a highly religious life committed to Vishnu.

“Meditation, purification, austerity, worship, control of breath, silent prayer, divine praise, twilight worship, begging for food, and divine service: he should perform these until death” (3.32, quoting Kratu)

“Bathing at dawn, silent prayer, silence, the habit of living in solitude, paying homage, fasting, devotion to Vishnu and to one’s teacher, belief, constant recitation of the Veda, being faithful to the control of the breath, and worshipping Vishnu at dawn, noon and dusk – that is the highest means of liberation” (5.76-77, quoting Kapila)

We see that every activity during the day is regulated into the tiniest details and accompanied with endless rituals and rites. Life as a Way of Liberation has ironically been turned into self-discipline and conformity with institutional rules.

### ***Ysam - yoga of ritual purification***

Failure to comply with rules and instructions (the *dharma*) has strong repercussions in terms of polluting the monk. This aspect of pollution is central to the Brahmin and Vaishnavite renouncer monk. It is his *purity*, which gives him social identity. Not only should he be a Brahmin (the purest caste), but his whole lifestyle is committed to generate purity and to avoid being polluted. Purity makes him one-up and the rest of society one-down. Purity sets the Brahmin monk apart, it makes a difference. It creates high social status, which in a monotheistic view signifies that he is closer to god than most of us. Without his purity and without our pollution, he is nothing special – he has no social distinction. The establishment of purity is crucial to the reproduction of caste society and his symbolic capital.

Hence it becomes a major task for this power discourse to discuss what to do if pollution has occurred, if a person has somehow failed or forgotten to comply with some institutional rules. Penance – the atonement for sins, the apology to god, self-punishment, the reparation of lost status (capital) – becomes a major topic in this discourse. Yoga – listed as one of the *Principal Activities* of ascetic life – is strongly related to such penance. There is ample of evidence of this in *Ysam*:

“The fire of yogic discipline burns up all sins of mind, speech and body committed through ignorance or negligence, as fire burns a bundle of straw. A man of devotion always sees Vishnu with the lamp of yogic discipline.” 5.21

“Control of breathing, silent prayer, meditation for a mendicant there is no means of purification other than these. A mendicant therefore should perform these alone to purify himself” (Quoting Atri)

Chapter 10.5-18 similarly gives further abundant examples of how specific yoga techniques – *pranayama*, *pratyahara* and meditation – are part of penance. So yoga, in this monotheistic discourse, is framed as a ritual restoration and amplification of the purity flowing from living a ritualised and institutionalised life in a caste society. Yoga has been turned into one among many rituals constructing a ritualised, regulated, disciplined and purified social identity – in this case a Vaishnavite monk.

The benefit of purity is that it allows the ‘pure person’ to do and achieve things other cannot. Hence the purity level of a certain caste allows its members to do certain things and forbids them other things. If you have become polluted you fall out of favour until you have been purified. In the context of a monk, having established purified identity, the monk in this discourse is able to ‘see Vishnu’.

This discourse has in other words turned yoga into a *purifying ritual*. But yoga is not just any ritual in *Ysam*. It is defined as one of the principal activities:

“Samkhya, yoga, devotion to Vishnu, vigilance, detachment: these are what is essential, while duties other than these are said to characterize it as an order of life” (5.23)

So unless the monk does not strictly adhere to all five principal activities, a life of asceticism (for instance begging, bathing, celibacy, worshipping other gods) would only be another way of living among so many others. Ascetic lifestyle – without these five activities - would not yield any religious benefits. In this way the *Ysam* creates a hierarchy among ascetic sects. Yoga is one of the parameters making distinction. Once more we see a written yoga discourse preoccupied with generating hierarchy and difference among former equals.

### **Yoga in the service of a religious caste society**

In some respects the theistic yoga of the *Ysam* – yoga as the principal activity of purification and differentiation – seems different from the many other styles of yoga we have encountered. It is still a yoga, in the meaning of ‘harnessing and disciplining the body-mind system’ as we saw in the *Mahabharata*. But the *Ysam* yoga does not ascribe any supernatural powers to the yogi and it does not construct him as a person who in deep trance descends into inner ontological categories. This yoga does not signal semi-divinity to the world. This is not how this Vaishnavite monk gains social distinction and symbolic power.

His symbolic capital is *purity*. It is a highly guarded and monitored resource. It is easy to fall out of this identity of purity and it is hard to get inside it. This identity carries all the hallmarks of Weber’s sociological category of high social status. Such high status has to be meticulously guarded and zealously protected. And this is exactly what the *Ysam* and its rituals are about: yoga as a *ritual of religious purification defending social distinction and hierarchy*. It is claimed that this leads the decontaminated to see Vishnu.

However as we generalise this discourse to the overall society the purpose changes. Politically yoga here is a part of ritualised society where various social classes are ranked according to purity. A social class in a caste society is not only defined in economic terms but also in status terms – i.e. by ownership of symbolic capital. Without for instance yoga, social differences and hierarchy - legitimised by purity - would disintegrate. Yoga, as one among five principal rituals, allows all the social status differences to be reproduced and maintained.

At this point we are able to see a pattern in the various genres of literature of this period. The *Mahabharata* epic (including the *Moksha-dharma* and the *Gita*), the Puranic epics, the *Dharma-sastras* and many Brahmin Sutras all express monotheism. Together through this religio-ideology they legitimise a hierarchical caste society ruled by the religio-political duo of the king and the Brahmins. In this context we find various forms of theistic yoga mostly geared towards reproducing and legitimising the existing social order.

## 6. Why write a text on yoga? – The messenger of symbols

After having covered more than thousand years of the cultural history of yoga, we can make some preliminary generalisations about the written yoga discourse until the Middle Age. First of all we can see that the yoga signifier is mostly not well-defined. In most texts – even within a specific piece of text - we encounter a variety of yoga styles and usages of the sign. There is no common perception of the means and goals of yoga – its use-value. This is clearly not the aim of the written texts. The written yoga discourse is not produced in order to produce use-value. Why then would certain social groups write about yoga?

In order to answer this I want briefly to discuss a yoga text which clearly exemplifies the reasons for writing a text on yoga. This is a Jain text surfacing in the 8 century. Even if this text historically belongs to the post-Gupta medieval period, it is still in some respects typical of the classical period. What is unusual for this yoga text, is that it is written by a Jain, who normally would not participate directly in the yoga discourse. However this Jain intellectual found it necessary to show the world that the Jains also should be taken seriously; they could also muster a yoga system.

### Comparing yogas around 700 AD: *Yoga-dristi-amuccaya*

What makes the Jain Haribhadra's *Yoga-dristi-amuccaya* interesting is that its intention is to discuss four different 'forms of yoga'. A modern reader would naturally wonder whether through a comparison of four yoga styles we could finally learn something about the technical meaning of yoga. As the reader advances through the text, it first of all becomes clear that the word *yoga* is used in the general meaning of *sadhana* (a religious practice – like 'praying', for instance). Haribhadra hence does not compare four different schools of 'yoga', but he contrasts four different "religious practices" – four *sadhanas*. The *sadhanas* representing four different religio-philosophies are: Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*, a Vedanta 'yoga', a Buddhist 'yoga' and a Kaula 'yoga'.

Haribhadra here steps into a typical Indian debate genre where an author – typically a theologian - compares and ranks competing systems. In such discussions the audience will initially be told that all paths are more or less the same aim (reaching God, *purusha*, liberation etc.) – people just assign different names to the goal. What only differs is that each school has developed different practices.<sup>234</sup> In the name of religious tolerance, to which the authors subscribe, everybody just picks his personal choice of practice – in the end they all lead to the same goal. So the discussion is in reality about what path to take.

However, soon or later this genre of debating comparisons *always* introduces the critical BUT! The rhetoric then goes that other schools, having so and so many stages for liberation (or for 'god' or 'ultimate reality') are only able to reach medium stages within the theologian's own system of stages.<sup>235</sup> Among academic scholars today this common and popular Indian strategy is often called *inclusivism* (Malinar 2009). In inclusivism other religious systems are

generously accepted and included within the author's own hierarchical theological system. However the gods and practices of other systems do not manage to reach the absolute levels of the theologian's.

This is also Haribhadra's real errand: he argues that the 14 stages in Jain liberation – the *gunasthanas* – of course are the ultimate and comprehensive description of the stages necessary to liberate the yogi from the influence of *karma*. These 14 stages comprehend and supersede the eight stages of the other *sadhanas* ('yoga systems' or religio-philosophical schools) discussed.

So Haribhadra's errand is not to teach the reader the details of how to practise various yoga forms. Instead this is a theological discourse ranking and including its theological opponents. It is about demonstrating Jain theological superiority and aligning Jainism with respected theological discourses. This kind of positioning and struggle for the power to categorise is an essential part of any cultural field, according to the French sociologist Bourdieu. The audience for such self-promoting theological texts were often the king and his court, who often showed interest in this. We can see from this that the notion of 'yoga' at that time in history still enjoyed high status, since the Jains found it necessary to claim that their regimen of liberation should be categorised as 'yoga'. However this use of the word was in the general and wide meaning of 'yoga' as '*sadhana*'.

### **The yoga of intellectuals and theologians**

The *Yoga-dristi-amuccaya* illustrates the agenda and context of most written yoga discourse. Yoga texts were not written by yoga practitioners in order to illuminate the use-value of their own yoga practice. Sages who allegedly made their insights in deep meditation, as is often assumed in modern Indian and Western yoga discourse, did not author these texts. Instead the texts were written by intellectual theologians, most of them probably with very little practical yoga experience. Their aim was not to propagate or illuminate yoga. Their aim was to build up their theological position, symbolic capital and power in relation to opponents. As part of that positioning they often mentioned yoga, as this discourse was closely related to status power: (1) yoga practice was thought to generate superpowers and (2) the yoga discourse in itself had high symbolic-value. The last point meant that it was important to become aligned and associated with the yoga notion, because of the symbolic power (high status) that this discourse radiated. Hence through Indian theological history we witness repeatedly how emerging religious communities align their theology in relation to yoga. This was why intellectuals wrote about yoga: to secure and enhance their social power by linking up to a cultural recognised power symbol (totem); not in order to illuminate the use-value of yoga.

### **Where are the signs of the practical yoga tradition?**

Yoga history until the mediaeval period indicates that instead of developing a technical oriented yoga discourse, the various Brahmin clans and the religio-intellectual elite were

occupied by issues such as developing monotheism, the revival of Vedic ritualism, the intellectual confrontations with Buddhism, and the implementation of a caste society based on *Dharma-sastras*. In this context it is hard to imagine the Brahmin intellectuals and theologians as the agents driving forward and developing hands-on yoga practices. However, despite this, the yoga sign was widely used in popular discourses addressing the householders of the upper classes. The grand epic works - the *Puranas*, the *Mahabharata* (including the *Bhagavad-Gita*) and *Ramayana* – all debated yoga in numerous forms. There was clearly a general fascination with yoga as a totem but little agreement on its use-value or methods.

The *MBh* revealed that the audience was assumed to have considerable prior knowledge about yoga notions as these were discussed without any introduction or explanation. This should not lead us to conclude that this audience, living a traditional life as upper class householder, practised yoga on a large scale. Their concern – like the authors' - might also have been mainly theological and political, not practical; or their practice of yoga might have been mainly related to the build up of purity or to their preparations for death. This might have been what yoga was about for the majority of its practitioners.

There is in all this little *direct evidence* of a wide practical movement of yogis as imagined in much contemporary yoga discourse. According to this vision we are talking about mendicant ascetics living in solitude in the forests or mountains, who *not* are Buddhists or Jains but instead are committed to yoga and yoga discourse. Mendicant ascetic groups are mentioned in some texts – as we saw in the *Vaikhanasa-smarta-sutra* - but they are never called yogis. They seem to have consisted of scattered theistic groups and it seems that sometimes their purpose was related to the final phase of the life cycle. Of course there could have existed a practical milieu of Sramana like groups who refined the Samkhya and yoga discourses, but there is no direct or indirect evidence of them.

### The alternative sociological vision

The alternative vision to the existence of Sramana based yogic groups is the following, based on a sociological outlook. As the Axial Age civilisation progressed it is likely that the Sramana stratum in general slowly withered away as the historical conflicts fuelling it took off. Only the well-organised Sramanas like Buddhists and Jains managed to outlive their initial historical conditioning and adapt to changed circumstances. The reduced surviving Sramana stratum became strongly influenced by monotheism, but there are no written traces that among them were groups of yogis whose main purpose was to practise yoga. Such fragmented Sramana milieus were however in close interaction and exchange of ideas with urban elites, from where most of the ascetic mendicants originated. It is however unlikely that such a declining Sramanic stratum could have maintained and further developed sophisticated yoga *theoria* and *praxis* based on proto-yoga and early yoga discourses.

So we need to turn our attention to the urban intellectual stratum among the upper classes often identified as the Kshatriyas. Such an urban intellectual milieu could easily have developed the kind of sophisticated Samkhya and yoga based monotheistic discourses that we see in for instance the *Bhagavad-Gita*. Following this assumption it is likely that the social

group that maintained and further developed the written yoga discourse was mainly an urban intellectual scene (comparable to Greek and Roman philosophical milieus). It was here that various liberation and monotheistic discourses were developed, while the vagrant Sramana-like groups were more occupied with assisting dying people by organising and implementing rituals of suicide involving yoga.

According to this alternative vision later sophisticated literature like Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra* and Ishvarakrishna's *Samkhya-karika* surfacing around 400 AD are expressions of a dominating intellectual urban upper-class stratum interacting with a disappearing (at the brink of extinction?) practical milieu of Sramanas. Hence as we shall see neither of these two texts were based on hands-on experiences of an oral line of *practical* transmission but were instead theoretical oeuvres.

It is first around 700-800 AD with the emergence of monastic institutions based on monotheism that groups of itinerant ascetics, envisaged by yoga popularisers as 'the yoga tradition', seem to gain weight and momentum. However, as we have seen among Vaishnavite monks in the *Ysam*, yoga in such circles played a minor role mainly as a tool for purification. It is doubtful if there was within such monastic institutions any further practical development of the technical use of yoga.

Thus it is maybe not very surprising that there are no texts reflecting a practical and vibrant yoga subculture of ascetic living a yogic life. In such texts we would have found intensive debates and descriptions of the use-value of yoga and not the theological and philosophical speculations of intellectuals that we actually see.

### The implications of the lack of yoga institutions

Let me reiterate that I do not deny the existence of *any* line of oral and practical oriented yoga transmission. However, unlike most contemporary yoga discourse, I do not believe it to have had much social stamina and consistency during history. It would constantly have become locally extinct in order to be re-invented and re-enacted by later generations in other geographical locations. The [cultural memory](#) of oral discourses only survive within historical coherent and lasting social groups and institutions. If left for sporadic individual or lineage based storage and transmission, such discourses will sooner or later become locally extinct.

I conclude firstly that the oral and practical yoga discourse was of such a fragmented character that it would not be appropriate to call it a 'tradition'. We are instead talking of a general 'discourse arena' – a kind of yogic cultural sub-field within the [field of liberation](#); a cultural subsystem subscribing to yoga discourse and energised by the strong institutional groups dominating the overall field of liberation.

Secondly, within this incoherent sub-field – this cultural yoga milieu - *any* exercise perceived as generating [Altered States of Consciousness \(ASC\)](#) could have been classified as yoga methods: austerities, breath restraints, meditations, chanting, body postures and movements. A new style of yoga – conceived by an individual or lineage group - would have been any combination of such recognised techniques. There would have been no general agreement – and hence boundaries - of what 'meditation' or 'breath restraints' consisted of in

reality. That would have been up to the specific and local creator to fill out. No specialists within the field would have had the institutional power to define categories. It was an arena of “(*almost*) anything goes” with the implication that ‘the referent’ of the sign – the physical yoga practice – was constantly in flux and under re-construction.

Thirdly this conclusion also applies to ‘the signified’ of yoga – the meaning. The purpose of yoga – defining the use-value of practice – could similarly take almost any form: release of the self, generation of purity and status difference, ontological transformation, supernatural powers, semi-divinity, god realisation, god union and so on. There were no guards, no custodians of a tradition in this cultural sub system.

Such an ill-defined discourse environment, which had no institutional limitations, storage, transmission and regulation, is not entitled to be called a tradition. Tradition implies that a standardised package of knowledge – the [DNA of a discourse](#) - is handed over. In the practical yoga milieu – within certain limits but unlike a tradition – almost anything was possible. It was like an ever-mutating typical folk religion, where new ideas would appear in order to mutate and then suddenly die out.

Such an assumed fluctuating oral and practical milieu did not directly produce written yoga discourse. Perhaps – or probably - it was much feebler and much more urbanised than we today imagine the so-called ‘yoga tradition’. But it stimulated intellectuals and theologians to write. Their interest in yoga was mainly the [symbolic-value](#) . Yoga was a totem associated with high status, metaphysical signs and supernatural powers and for those reasons these groups predominantly wrote about yoga.

I find it justifiable to conclude that there was never a persistent and general oral transmission line replicating a systematic doctrine of *practical* yoga DNA, but I do not deny the possibility of a frail jungle-like practical sub-culture. The practical and oral discourse would constantly have been forced to “return to the start” as it had no institutional and social framework enabling storage and refinement. It would not find much support in the written discourse, as this was not occupied by the technicalities of yoga but by theological and political manoeuvring. I will return to this discussion in the chapter on Tantra.

## 7. The early medieval period – institutionalisation and *Bhakti*

### The collective Organisation and spread of Brahmanism

As the Gupta Empire collapsed signalling the end of India’s Axial Age civilisation and we move into the following Medieval period the cultural field of liberation went into a final phase of collective organisation and institution building. [We have seen](#) how many Brahmins

had already become involved in state building and temples, and the role that yoga played here. We will now have a brief look at the monastic institutions established during the Middle Age.

As we have seen the well-organised Buddhist and Jain monks expanded rapidly at the beginning of the Axial Age across the subcontinent. Donations streamed in and accumulated in wealthy monasteries. These monasteries then functioned as competent ideological centres influencing royal courts and the upper classes. They left rich libraries of texts witnessing debate and refinements.

The *Smarta* Brahmins responded late with their *Dharma-sastras* and managed to build up a central canon of *sutras* and *darsanas*. With the Advaita Vedanta revolution around 700 AD the monotheistic Brahmins introduced collective organisations similar to the Buddhists' and Jains': the founding of universities and monastic orders – the *maths*. The Brahmins apparently realised that renunciation and teaching cannot be left to the level of individuals or clans. It needed to become firmly institutionalised.

From now on most renouncers – be they *Smarta* and monotheist Brahmins or heterodox Buddhist and Jains – were all contained within rigid institutional frameworks regulating the details of their life. Survival and success in this environment of competing schools of holy men was from now on a question of management of militant styled organisations, achieve supra-regional distribution and build up alliances with the state. It was the Brahmins who emerged victorious from this process of social adaption and struggle for economical survival and dominance. At the end of the medieval period as the Muslims began to arrive the Jains had been confined mainly to the South and the Buddhists were in terminal decline.

I believe that the reason for the Brahmins' success was their alliance with – or their adaptation to – three powerful institutions: the state, the temples and monotheism. The Brahmins had managed to become deeply involved in all those three institutions. In the medieval period monotheism – especially Saivism as we shall see in the next chapter – expanded rapidly. Saivism, whose ruling echelons were often Brahmins, became a dominant factor in the ideology behind most royal courts (Sanderson 2009). With the spread of Saivism followed the establishment of new temples, again often dominated by Brahmins. The king had much to gain from the Brahmins: Vedic rituals legitimised his rule and he was offered a disciplined caste society. We find Brahmins everywhere in the power structure of medieval India.

Did this institutional success lead to a similar consolidation and development of yoga? Now, organised like the Buddhists, who had a rich liberation tradition of both *theoria* and *praxis*, do we finally find similar developments within the yoga discourse?

The answer seems to be no. There are for instance no records of monastic orders calling themselves yogis. There are in this period no texts of which I am aware that indicate a revival of yoga *theoria* and *praxis* among the new mainly Brahmin controlled monasteries. We have already seen how among the Vaishnavite monks yoga was an activity of purification enabling the monk to ‘see Vishnu’. From this period, as we will see in the chapter on Tantra, we often get the impression that the main concern of many monasteries was to run their mundane feudal business.

Thus in respect of the written yoga discourse in the early Middle Age – dominated by

monotheist Brahmins - we find little innovation and consolidation despite a strong monastic institutional framework. The same considerations and conclusions probably apply to the temples. They seem to become loci for producing Tantric theology – not practical yoga discourse.

### **Renouncing, *bhakti movement* and lay people**

Finally an entire new movement evolved influencing the cultural field of professional holy men in the early mediaeval period. There emerged discourses often in vernacular languages contesting the validity of the ascetic discourse. Asceticism – the heart and habitus of much yoga discourse – came under strong criticism as being for the few and chosen. Austerity was accused of being life neglecting and not for ordinary people. The adepts of liberation became seen as excluding instead of including lay people. Renunciation was accused of leading to nothing but an inflated ego. Disengaged, meditating and remote monks were replaced with singing and dancing poets. Ordinary people from the lower castes demanded to become involved directly and emotionally in worshipping gods. The *bhakti* (devotion) movement had arrived. It stood in direct opposition to most existing liberating discourses.

At the end of the Gupta period the popular movement of *bhakti* emerged in Southeast India. From around 1000 AD *bhakti* poetic literature flowered. We have already heard about *bhakti* in the *Bhagavad-Gita*, but this kind of *bhakti* was entirely different. It had nothing to do with the stoicism and calm devotion of the elites in the *Gita*. This new *bhakti* was popular and ecstatic, full of frenzied emotions. It often began with temple congregations. Large concourses of people following a saint went from temple to temple chanting on their way. They were reciting their deities and performed ecstatic dances and choral music (Kumar Das 2005).

*Bhakti* spread all over Southern India and then entered the North where it especially became a part of Vishnu worship. *Vaishnavism* – the cult of Vishnu – became a devotional tradition with ecstatic practices of emotional surrender (Flood 1996; Colas 2005).

The *bhakti* cults often rejected the high status of the Brahmin caste. Buddhist and Jain monks were particularly hated and physically chased away. *Bhakti* was a serious threat to the established hegemony of holy men, as it did not accept their high status and power discourse<sup>236</sup>. So the very existence of *bhakti* threatened to pull the rug from under the feet of ascetic holy men, depreciating their symbolic capital. Hence the *bhakti* movement was a serious threat to the very foundation of the entire field of liberation; it challenged its use- and symbolic-value head-on.

The *bhakti cults* were easily turned into vehicles divinising the kings and they became an important part of the ideological underpinning of the dynastic rulers. The cults created sentimental legends around the rulers. They often received royal patronage in their clashes with Buddhist and Jain renouncers. So *bhakti* seriously put these groups on the defensive in the South (Peterson 1998, Davis 1998).

But the field of liberation with its renunciation, asceticism and Gnosticism did not go away easily. After a period we see how some *bhakti* cults adopted for instance asceticism and renunciation – even if it seems to contradict their devotional starting position. The fact was

that extreme devotions easily spilled into the rejection of household living – *bhakti* often became *de facto* a form of renunciation (Thiel-Horstmann 1989). In other words “total *bhakti*” meant that the mystic union became so imperative that this world concern was ignored. So who could tell the difference now?

After the movement’s growth reached its zenith in the South some Brahmins managed to respond to the challenge. They often became monastic cult leaders – *acaryas* – and constructed themselves as saints (*alvars and nayanars*) and the *bhakti* movement became orthodox and rigid (Narayanan & Veluthat 2000). In short, the field of liberation acquired a new dominant sub culture. The discourse and practices of *bhakti* had created a new type of specialist within the field. He was able through passion and ecstasy to mobilise the masses. He was a serious threat to the existing specialists, as he *rejected their categorisations, truths, values and codes*. The emotion and passion which for almost a millennium had been seen as a hindrance to liberation were now coded as the highway to heaven and salvation. The field of liberation had been turned upside down and for some of the groups a process of deadly decline was underway.

Closely connected with the rise of Bhaktism is a range of holy places that sprang up all over India in the early mediaeval period. Holy sites were associated with different aspects of the new gods. Such totem sites attracted increasing numbers of pilgrims. This again led to the rise of an extensive network of pilgrimage routes across India (Kulke & Rothermund 2006). For many Brahmins, monks and renouncers these sites and networks would become big business selling their services and symbolic capital (van der Veer 2004).

### **Summary - Why yoga in Axial Age imperial kingdoms?**

As this chapter leaves the Axial Age civilisation and the early medieval period it is clear that the general society and institutional framework in which yoga existed had changed dramatically from the previous period of mendicant Sramanas, proto-yoga, death rituals and amateur Kshatriyas.

The period under investigation – about a thousand years - brought us some philosophical texts delineating a specific Samkhya flavour of yoga – the *Yoga Sutra* of Patanjali and *Samkhya Karika* of Ishvarakrishna. Both texts became canonised much later, as they became incorporated into the *Darsanas* of Brahmanism. The irony was that the intellectual hegemony of Advaita Vedanta in philosophical terms rendered both texts more or less redundant. Samkhya’s ontology was widely criticised and rejected anyway and was now flattened by Vedantic monism. Further, ascetic-meditative yoga did not have much function within intellectual Brahmanism: it did not fit easily into the Vedantic discourse of philosophical idealism.

What this period illustrates is that intellectuals and theologians – not practical yogis - owned the written yoga discourse. Hence we get little clarification of the use-value of the various yoga forms but instead many symbolic signals. We saw how yoga became enveloped in the monotheistic ideology of caste society and growing royal power as yoga forms spread among the upper classes. We saw how the status of theistic yoga gained heights never seen

before as the ultimate god was revealed as a yogi who owed his power to yoga. As we moved into the early medieval period, this was turned upside down as we saw how the various Epics painted the yogi as a sinister fellow and how the *bhakti* movement chased away ascetic monks. We also saw how not only holy men, but the whole society became extremely strongly disciplined in rigid institutions. We wonder if the quest for ‘after-life liberation’ had led to ‘this-life prison’? If anything could be described as being Janus-faced it must be the yoga and the liberation discourses of which it was often part.

This chapter confirms the impressions gained in other chapters. If we as modern yoga sympathisers are looking for a vibrant tradition of ‘yogi sages’ - living an austere life committed to yoga practice and liberation - to confirm that our dreams of our yoga practice have roots in antiquity, we look in vain. I have found no social groups or institutions who deemed it necessary to support such a “hidden oral tradition of transmission”. The written yoga tradition – if we can talk about such a thing – was a theological discourse emerging in various religious communities who found it opportune to align themselves with the yoga sign for various reasons.

# **Chapter 7**

# Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra* – More *theoria* than *praxis*?

## Key Concepts

Brahmin kriya-yoga

Samadhi

Simulacrum

Buddhist nirodha-yoga

Yama & niyama

Vibhuti & siddhi

Samyana

Kaivalya

The Yoga Sutra totem

Samadhi 'ing

Ashtanga-yoga

Yoga Sutra producing myth

Exegetic commentaries

Samadhi in death

The main thrust of this chapter is to deconstruct the *Yoga Sutra*<sup>237</sup> (about 300-400 AD). identifying its symbols, ideology and myths. Even if the *Yoga Sutra* belongs to a later social era, it seems at first glance related to the earlier *Upanishads*. On closer inspection it appears that yoga in this sutra is framed within a *Samkhya* sign system unlike the non-dual *Vedanta* philosophy of the *Upanishads*. The chapter also explains the sutra and the technical meaning of its signs. As in the analysis of early yoga forms, this analysis is not about diving deep into the sutra, deciphering its signs and their contested translations in an attempt to give them new illumination. Once more, we look instead for genealogy, change and relationship to society.

At the same time I want to give a presentation of how the yoga canon, reconciled by expert discourse, appears to a modern lay yoga sympathiser. Millions of sympathisers are similarly trying to make sense of their practice by studying this “bible of yoga”. It is in this context that I investigate the use-value – the technical meaning of yoga. Does the text inform the actual practice of a sympathiser?

The *Yoga Sutra* describes a style of yoga often called Classical yoga, raja-yoga or sometimes Patanjali-yoga. The *Yoga Sutra* (YS) is by far the most quoted scripture in the contemporary yoga discourse, as it is thought to reveal the essence of yoga. The YS is also the closest we come to a philosophical treaty on yoga. Despite this, I argue in this chapter that contrary to the belief of many yoga experts and sympathisers the YS does not come across as a coherent philosophical oeuvre<sup>238</sup>. These conclusions are probably very

provocative to many. Even more provocative is the discussion where we contemplate whether the YS is an empty sign system not pointing towards any meditative experiential reality. Is the YS what Baudrillard calls a *simulacrum* (a copy without original)?

I then discuss why some Brahmin clans adapted this opaque text. The YS is often celebrated as the zenith of the yoga tradition, but some scholars see it instead as the testament of specific lifestyles, which at the time when the YS was compiled was actually extinct (Larson 1999). I conclude that, Patanjali's yoga techniques losing their social and practical basis, survived among urban elites and were used to bolster Puranic religio-philosophical systems.

This chapter is a very analytical and intense contemplation of a single but critical text. For the serious student of yoga, it is essential to engage with the YS in order to contemplate whether the rhetoric holds true that the YS defines the essence of yoga in general and therefore also gives meaning to yoga today.

## 1. A testament or a *simulacrum*?

### The *Yoga Sutra* as an empty sign system

The YS is complex, abstract and highly cerebral. It is therefore an entity with a strong magnetic attraction for intellectuals, drawing them into its complex world of psychological layers, ontological interconnections, philosophical notions and claims. Any intellectual with even some philosophical ambition would feel challenged to throw some light on this enigma. However, this reading of the YS consciously tries to put a foot on the brake in this respect. The goal is only to try and give a broad general overview of structure and critical concepts.

What instead guides this analysis is the other side of the Janus face of yoga, its shadow side: the symbolic-value (social meaning) of yoga. It is a so-called *oppositional reading* revealing and challenging underlying ideologies and power discourses. This leads to a proposition which many people might find arrogant and provocative. I suggest that the YS as a sign system does not point towards any reality. It is empty. It is an idea that builds on the French philosopher and sociologist Baudrillard. He describes most of the sign system of late-modernity as no longer pointing to any reality. They are *simulacra* – copies without originals – and so might the YS be. What is my suggestion based on?

In the yoga discourse, as we saw it exemplified in the early-yoga chapter, we were presented with the following mythical narrative: sages in deep meditative contemplation conceived yoga. The yoga canon is hence reports of those experiences. Implied in this narrative is that we should take the sages' claims and notions very seriously, as they have

experienced events that most people cannot even contemplate. The mythical narrative in other words invests the sage with [symbolic capital](#).

However, and this is a big however, the truth of such claims has not been controlled and tested.. The first act that modern academic methodology would undertake when facing such claims about the anatomy of (meditative) reality would be to test them. This has not happened to the *YS*, even if the notions are experimentally testable. The claims of the sages have been accepted at face value.

I am not suggesting that the meditating “sages” are deliberately lying, but we know from countless social psychological experiments that the human mind easily can be put in a situation where it is deluded (Kahneman 2011). Another possibility of flaws is that the meditators’ pre-suppositions framed and guided their meditative experiences. They thus came to experience what they expected to experience. This is also a well-known phenomenon in social psychology.

The point is that the claims of the sages have not been *controlled*, neither the narrative nor the notions. These have been accepted at face value – often due to our projection of the authors as being “sages”.

Thus we could propose the opposite narrative, that it was *philosophers* – and not meditative sages - who first developed various psychological, ontological and metaphysical sign systems. Having constructed a sufficient and comprehensive sign system, they *then exemplified* their new psycho-ontological ideas as meditative states. This was how they imagined that their sign system – mainly deriving from Samkhya philosophy - would play out in a practical reality. When they presented their notions, as based on such experiences, they simultaneously managed to legitimise them and give them authority. Out of this process appeared meditators who due to the social-psychological halo effects of the philosophical writings now started to have the prescribed meditative experiences. These practitioners became “the meditative sages loaded with ancient wisdom”.

Following this line of argument, until there is experimental evidence of the opposite, we should *not* read the *YS* as a “meditation manual”. Instead we should read it as an epistemological and ontological philosophical oeuvre, which imagines and exemplifies what would be experienced if we were able to change our conceptual apparatus according to this philosophy. In the words of Baudrillard the *YS* would then be a *simulation* (a fake) – it pretends to point to reality but only points to other signs. Thus expressed in *Semiotic terms* ([Wikipedia link](#)) , our *textual analysis* of the connotation and codes of the yoga sign can reveal a myth and ideology underlying the *YS*, which turns out to be the motivation and drive of the *textual production* of the *YS*.

The claim about the meditative sage must be exposed to social psychological testing. Many philosophers have already challenged the philosophical theories linked to those sages, but we need more conclusive experimental efforts. My suggestion for now is that it is important for the reader to keep in mind that we cannot exclude the possibility that the *YS* sign system is empty. It *could* be a simulation (a fake), meaning that it does not point towards any experiential reality.

## A diverse and dense compilation

A principal focus among many modern yoga popularisers is to explain *Patanjali's Yoga Sutra*. It is seen as *the* core yoga scripture and Patanjali as the father of yoga. However the Samkhya core-work of Ishvarakrishna entitled *Samkhya-karika* is rarely studied in order to deepen and improve students' understanding and practice of yoga. The reason is probably that while *Samkhya-karika* is a general and abstract philosophical treaty, the *YS* is imagined as a *practical* document concerned with describing the ascetic yoga lifestyle, its practice and its goals.

The *YS* – which many believe was composed between 200 BC and 200 AD (but was probably much later, around 300-400 AD) - is the first known comprehensive treatise of aphorisms on yoga. The *Upanishads* and The *Bhagavad-Gita* discusses yoga but none of those “pre-*YS* scriptures” would allow the student to fundamentally understand and commence yoga practice. However, it is claimed that the *YS* is much closer to such a goal.

Reading through the *YS*, the student experiences a collection of groups of very dense verses, which are hardly comprehensible. Most verses are technical descriptions, enumerations and classifications not understandable for most readers and already in those days requiring commentaries to be understood. As time went by meta-commentaries on the commentaries of the *YS* were required in order to make sense (See methodological section on [cultural memory](#)). This does not make easy reading.

Many researchers argue that *YS* is in fact a compilation. Initially it seems to consist of four separate and overlapping sources spread over four chapters dealing with different issues: *kriya-yoga* (Ch. I & Ch. II -first half), *ashtanga* (Ch. II - last half and beginning of Ch. III), *supernatural powers* (Ch. III) and *Samkhya metaphysics* (Ch. IV).<sup>[239](#)</sup>

Today most scholars agree that there was no single person – Patanjali – writing the *YS*. Like most other ancient Indian and Asian scriptures, it is a product of collective effort, where generation after generation adds their views and interpretations to the main corpus of text. Often researchers can demonstrate successive generations of a scripture. They can further establish how each generation of authors struggles to make sense of the text within their own culture by adding to, clarifying and subtracting from the text corpus (Wright 1998). It is a common assumption that the *YS* in this way found its present form about 200 AD, but Larson has argued convincingly that it probably dates from 3-400 AD. It seems that the final compiler, working on existing text fragments, was anxious to establish yoga as a consistent and comprehensive system, a liberation philosophy with its own practices. Only the final chapter leaves an impression of arguments for strengthening yoga's position in relation to competing Buddhist views (i.e. Abhidharma philosophy and Yogacara) (Yamashita 1994, Kalupahana 1987, Sarbacker 2005, Larson 2008).

Most students with only minimal knowledge of Indian religio-philosophy would, after an initial reading, probably come up with the following observations: 1. The text is actually a neat exposition of Samkhya philosophy; 2. Part of the *YS* feels like reading a Buddhist treaty (same notions, same argumentation, same conclusions); 3. The overall sign system or philosophy that describes and gives meaning to yoga is not related to the Brahmin Vedanta

philosophy we found in the *Upanishads*. 4. Part of the document is about the supernatural power an adept obtains by practising yoga - which, the reader is eventually told, is not really important; 5. Two yoga systems (*kriya* and *ashtanga*) seem to be portrayed, but is not clear why and how they relate. Let us look into these five general observations.

### The general themes of the YS

(1). One would be hard pressed to find any differences between the philosophy of Samkhya and *YS*. It could be argued that one is more atheistic than the other (but then you will find scholars who say that they both are atheistic in basic outlook) or that one operates with a plurality of *purushas* (universal consciousness) while the other only has one<sup>240</sup>. But, basically, the *YS* expounds Samkhya philosophy, and the *YS* is about how you find your way through the world of *prakriti* back to *purusha* with the help of yoga.

(2). Similarly, the text is full of Samkhya and Buddhist notions, explanatory models and methods<sup>241</sup>. Why? One explanation is that all the different groups of renouncers constantly and widely copied from each other. The effect was that over time the cultural field of liberation built up a common sub-stream of ideas and practices. Samkhya and yoga were often mentioned together as for example in the yoga discussions of the *Mahabharata*. The Epic often treated Samkhya as synonymous with *theoria* and yoga with *praxis*. So it should be no surprise to find that Samkhya notions and philosophy penetrate the whole *sutra*: certain social strata signified yoga with Samkhya signs.

However, the idea of the existence of a *common* cultural field of liberation opens the possibility that what we believe to be genuine Buddhist notions in the *YS*, could actually be signs that the Buddhists themselves adopted from common liberation discourses from within the field (Oldenburg 1991, Heiler 1922) - the signs are shared property originating neither in Buddhism or yoga.<sup>242</sup>

Following the logic of this view, the ideas which we believe today are specifically Buddhist are to a large extent a mixture of earlier Buddhism and yoga. However, according to this view, only the Buddhists managed to institutionally organise themselves into monastic orders. This had the benefit that these monastic orders from early on maintained and finally wrote down and documented meditation and wisdom discourses. However, this documentation did not happen among the social strata practising yoga. Their yoga discourses, according to this view, were first compiled much later and written down in the *YS*. Thus for us today it looks as though many ideas are copied by the *YS* from the Buddhist text, whereas much of the *YS* is actually an expression of early common discourse roots of in the cultural field of liberation.

Hence Senar and others claim that there is a coherent early yoga (and Buddhist) meditation discourse reflected in the *YS* – which just happened to be compiled rather late in the process. Many scholars today reject this line of argument. Some argue that many of the Buddhist ideas appearing in the *YS* are of rather late origin even among the Buddhists (maybe 200-300 AD) and therefore indicate that the compilers cannot have adopted these notions from an *early* common sub-stream.<sup>243</sup> This is also one of the reasons why Larson (2008) argues that

the texts are from 300-400 AD. Most scholars today would probably agree that the *YS* is an expression of an intense interaction between Buddhism, Samkhya and Brahmin yoga and it is not always easy to see who came up first with new ideas.

Let us return to the issue of the overwhelming dominance of Samkhya in the *YS*. From a close reading of the *YS*, J. Bronkhorst in a paper *Patanjali and the Yoga Sutras* (1985) argues that due to certain internal inconsistencies in the *YS* and due to omissions and discrepancies between the first commentary (the *Yoga-bhasya* – meaning “Yoga commentary”) and the *YS*, it is probable that the author of the *Yoga-bhasya* is the person who actually collected the various *sutras*. He, the commentator – and not Patanjali - put the *sutras* together and then “added” his commentary on interpretations of the *YS*. Sometimes, according to Bronkhorst, it looks as though the commentator knew the original interpretations, but then dropped them and gave the interpretation he favoured.

Furthermore, it looks as though the commentator, using the name of the mythological person Vyasa, was a Samkhya specialist with no experience in meditation himself! His goal was to illuminate Samkhya hence the full title “*Patanjali’s Authoritative Book on Yoga, an Exposition of Samkhya*”. His real name was probably Vindhyavasin. He might have attributed the *YS* to Patanjali, as Patanjali was a well recognised name.

Bronkhorst and the Samkhya specialist Larson thus claim that there is no independent yoga philosophy: *YS* is a compilation, which weaves practical techniques (yoga) and Buddhism into Samkhya philosophy strengthening Samkhya and making it more attractive (Larson 1987 & 1989 & 1999 & 2008). Larson (2009) actually calls it a *Neo-Samkhya treaty* – a revision of yoga in order to become compatible with newly revisions of Samkhya, which were under strong attack from Buddhism.

(3). The sign system constructing the various aspects of yoga and giving them overall meaning in the *YS* is not Brahmin. We saw, for instance in the *Upanishads*, how yoga techniques were incorporated in Brahmin discourses of realising *brahman*. This world of signs does not appear in the *YS*. It is a Sramanic world – mainly Samkhya and Buddhism. We do see some Brahmin rituals and practices mentioned, but no Brahmin Vedanta philosophy is introduced. So based on that, the *YS* seems not to be the continuation and clarification of the yoga sign briefly mentioned in the *Upanishads*.

On the surface, however, some of the techniques mentioned in the *Maitri Upanishad* are quite similar to those of the *YS*. So that could indicate some continuity. Against that observation we can hold that the *Maitri* – like the *YS* - expressed notions similar to Buddhist liberation discourse. So it should be no surprise that there are similarities. Furthermore, the *Maitri* is a very late work. Some parts of it could actually be from the same period as the *YS*. So the similarity could also be because the *YS* and the *Maitri* are contemporary texts both expounding Buddhist meditation.

Thus the overall impression remains that the *YS* does not grow out of a Brahmin world and its Upanishadic discourses on liberation. The total lack of a Vedantic philosophy, linking all the signs together, is a serious indication that most of these text fragments do not come from a Brahmin milieu.

(4). A whole chapter of *YS* is devoted to magical powers – the *vibhutis*. In this respect –

and in many others – the *YS* is much more similar to many of the [yoga styles of the Mahabharata](#). I will return to this. Why then is there so much talk about supernatural power in the *YS*? Critical scholars argue that it is because *YS* is about establishing a power discourse. The *YS* shows how humans, step by step, attain more power, which can be used for purification and knowledge (Pensa 1989). White (2009) argues that the *vibhutis* are an example of how yoga had several unrelated meanings. Most modern discourse on yoga tries to downplay this aspect. They feel it does not really belong to the *YS*, as they want to construct yoga as a rational and almost scientific discourse. We shall look into that dilemma later on, when I discuss the notion of '[Classical yoga](#)'.

However, according to the philosopher Pflueger *Person, Purity and Power in the Yoga Sutra* (2005) power is not just an unlucky add-on, but organic to the whole structure of *YS*. The human and the divine coalesce in the *YS* world, and it is important to display the inventory of power, which becomes available with practice. This not only sends an impressive symbolic signal to outsiders, but also signals that the real god is the yogi, and the god - *Isvara* – mentioned in the *YS* is nothing but an object of meditation like the guru.

So, according to Pflueger, the discourse of supernatural power is not accidental and not an appendix to the yoga discourse of the *YS*. So even if the *YS* brushes supernatural power aside in a short by-the-way-comment, we should be aware that this could be just a rhetorical trick: the yogis say they have the power – but they are not going to show us! In this line of argument power discourses and the build up of symbolic capital are inherent in – not an appendix to – to the *YS*. The *YS* is about creating social difference and elevating the liberation specialist to a semi-divine stratum in society.

Early-yoga discourse among the Brahmins pays little attention to supernatural powers and Samkhya. However both the *YS* and the *Mahabharata* interweave various yoga techniques with Samkhya discourse and both make supernatural powers intrinsic to yoga. This could be an indication that the *YS* belongs to the same stratum of intellectual upper castes of Axial Age India as the *Mahabharata*: the mixed milieu of ascending Kshatriyas and Sramanas. [Such a milieu](#) would have a strong interest in mixing yoga with discourses on supernatural powers. This could explain the centrality of supernatural powers in the *YS*.

(5). To explain why there are two styles of yoga described in the *YS* – *kriya* and *ashtanga* - we need to look more closely at the *YS* in order to discover all the various social conflicts it is trying to mediate and then we will return to some final general considerations.

*Some readers who might find the following de-construction of the various yoga forms of the *YS* too detailed can go directly to the general analysis in "[3. The Aftermath of the Yoga Sutra](#)".*

## 2. The compilation of several yogas

### The three limb *kriya-yoga* – chapter 2

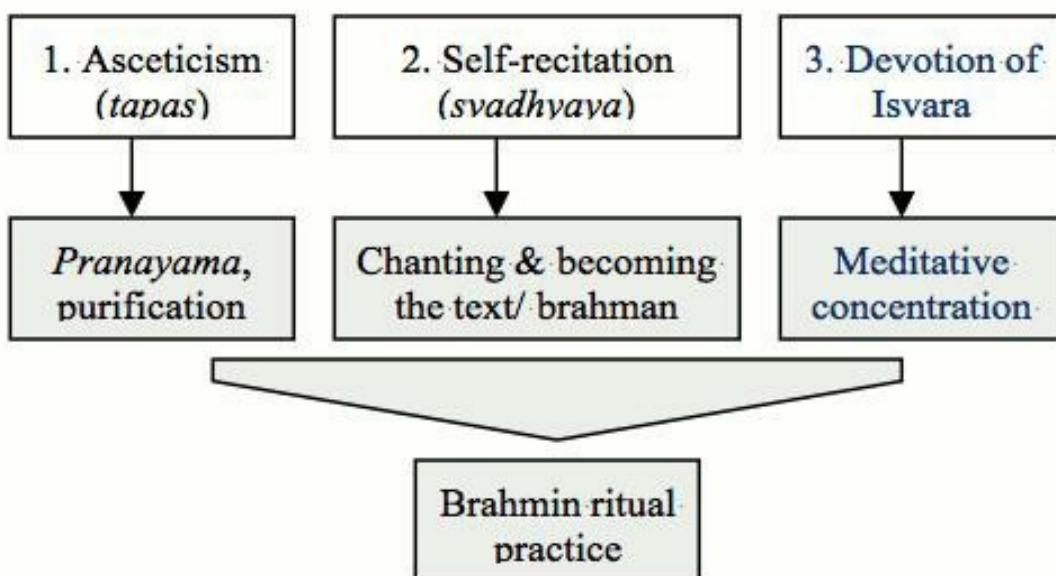
It is only in chapter two that the yoga under scrutiny in the *YS* is named as *kriya* (“action”) *yoga*. This name might surprise many modern students as the *YS* is often mentioned as *raja-yoga*. Why does it then call itself *kriya-yoga* and why first in chapter two? Let us first investigate what the *YS* has to say about the specific yoga sign it represents and gives a name.

Chapter two (II.1) defines *kriya-yoga* as constituted of 3 *elements* or techniques: 1. Asceticism (*tapas*), 2. Self-recitation/ memorisation (*svadhyaya*) (meaning “rehearsing oneself in the recitations of the *Veda*”) and 3. Devotion to the Lord *Isvara*. Let us investigate the three elements.

Our first impression is that this combination leaves a picture of *kriya-yoga* as a rather religious enterprise – god devotion, scripture memorisation and asceticism. Such a definition could for instance also be applied to a conventional perception of a pious Christian monk living his monastic life: devotion to god, bible study and asceticism.

This impression is confirmed by D. Carpenter in a paper *Practice makes Perfect* (2003). In fact, at least two of these three techniques were *Brahmin ritual practices* already performed at that point of time in history, says Carpenter. *Svadhyaya* had become the ritual of repetitive chanting of the *Vedas*, performed until the practitioner ‘became the Vedic hymns’: through absorption and identification with the *Vedas* one becomes *brahman*. For the Brahmins, this repetitive chanting practice (*svadhyaya*) was closely associated with *tapas* (heating) – especially with the technique of *pranayama* (breath retention) and the *pre-ritual purification* of the sacrificer. As the two ritual techniques of *tapas* and *svadhyaya* were widespread in Brahmin circles the *YS* spends no time on explaining them further.

### The 3 limbs of *kriya-yoga*



Repetitive chanting and heating techniques - *svadhyaya* and *tapas* - had to be performed by the Brahmin in total concentration (*dharana*). The Brahmin in other words also uses *meditative concentration*.<sup>244</sup> This meditative aspect is especially related to the third element of *kriya-yoga*: mental concentration on *Isvara*. So the third *kriya* technique is actually a kind of concentrated visualisation of a god. The purpose of visualising god was that it facilitated the achievement of “calmness of mind” – *samadhi*. Hence, this third *kriya* practice of *devotion* seems to be a merger of meditative yogic and devotional Brahmin techniques.

Taken together these three meditative-rituals are very similar to what the Brahmins earlier had called *upasana* – the confluence of meditative-worshipping-rituals. So the three limb *kriya-yoga*, has many of the hallmarks of *upasana*. Maybe (this) yoga was, in the eyes of the Brahmins, a new upgraded ritual of Brahmin worship-meditation.

In summary *kriya-yoga* techniques seem mainly to consist of existing ascetic Brahmin ritual practices (*upasana*), now used for liberation purposes – to realise the One. The YS’s chapter on *kriya* is probably just a codification of this. So maybe we should begin to understand certain parts of the YS as an expression of meditative chanting rituals (*upasana*), leading the Brahmin into deep absorption and union with a god (Pflueger 1999). As Carpenter says, such an interpretation breaks with modern prejudices of what yoga meditation should be about.

What is surprising is that this apparently Brahmin three-limb yoga is not framed by a Brahmin sign system. As we recall, an overall sign system gives meaning and purpose to notions, and as soon as we ask for further meaning and purpose of this three-limb yoga, we move into a Buddhist sign system. Thus as we continue to read, there is no introduction of *atman* or *brahman* and their mystical ontological transforming realisation. Instead the *kriya* practices are given meaning within a Buddhist sign system.

### The purpose of *kriya-yoga* – (Ch. 2)

Why practise *kriya-yoga*? The double purpose of *kriya-yoga* (II.2) is to ‘cultivate *samadhi*’ and ‘stop the causes of afflictions’ or burdens. The notion of ‘affliction’ is equivalent to the word ‘suffering’ in Buddhism. It was a shared goal of most ways of liberation to gain release from suffering.

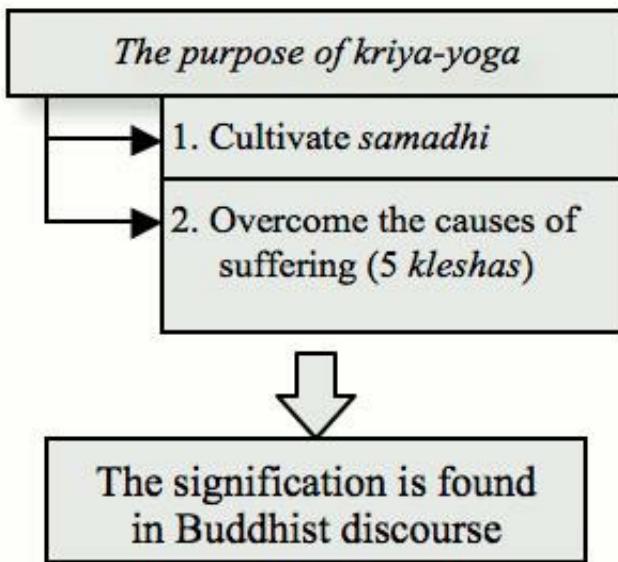
As in early Buddhism, the line of argument of *kriya-yoga* is that one has to stop the causes of suffering (afflictions) because, if they can be overcome, then – and only then! – *nirvana* (*samadhi*) emerges. Five causes of affliction – the *five kleshas* - are identified (II.3). If the yogi does not succeed in rooting out these five afflictions his practice is meaningless. A mind full of suffering can never reach the peace and release of *samadhi*. Buddha gave the same warnings. He identified the root of *kleshas* as *trisna* – “thirst”: when there is thirst/attachments/clinging in the mind there is suffering. The sutras further maintain that the five *kleshas* arise primarily out of ignorance (*avidya*). Again this notion is central to Buddhism.

So, as in Buddhist practice, *kriya* practice is about acquiring the wisdom required to

identify the unconscious mental processes – the five *kleshas* – that cause suffering. The end of suffering means release and peace. All in all, *kriya-yoga* seems to be informed by a very Gnostic version of Buddhist discourse.

The similarity to Buddhism continues, as the *YS* states that the *kleshas* produces memory traces or seeds in the mind (II.15) that lead to suffering. These seeds are called *samskara*, another central Buddhist concept (it is one of the five Buddhist *skandhas*). *Samskara* can be compared to unconscious or hypnotic programs causing a person to suffer. These subliminal orders, hidden from the conscious mind, determine the behaviour and life of a person and will even follow him into the next re-incarnation. They have in other words *karmic* effects (III: 9,10,18). However, through the impact of *kriya-yoga* (or Buddhist practice), they can slowly be eradicated, and new positive seeds can be planted. These positive seeds predispose the mind to calm, so *samadhi* or *nirvana* can arise.

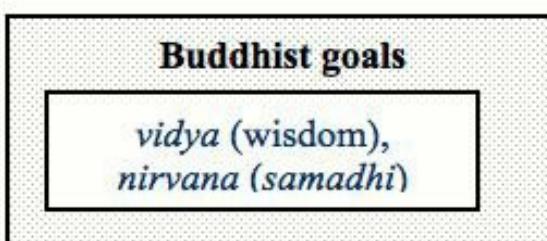
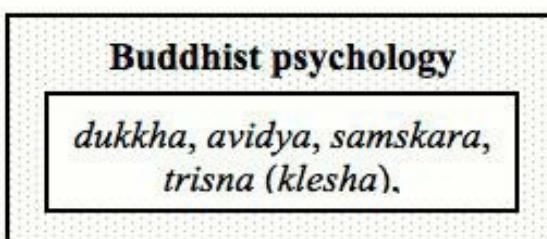
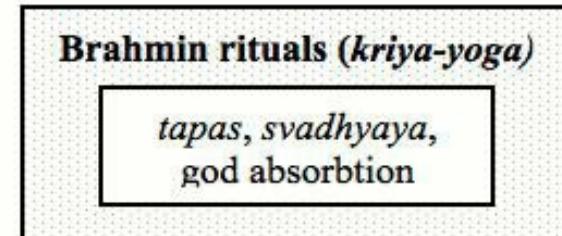
### ***Kriya and Buddhism***



In other words, the *YS*, in chapter 2 (and parts of 3) struggles to combine two different discourses. It takes the ritual practices of the Brahmins (*tapas, svadhyaya*) and combines them with Buddhist psychology and liberation philosophy (*trisna, samskara, avidya, nirvana, citta*) (Carpenter 2003). Chapter 2 leads us to conclude that there is a connection or a bridge between the three *kriya* practices (heating up, repetitive chanting and devotion) and the Buddhist analysis of a mind suffering from unconscious activators (based in ignorance). However, a modern psychologically oriented reader is left wondering how Brahmin asceticism, chanting and devotion can eradicate our psychological attachments and subliminal cravings. These techniques would instead induce trance in the mind. It is easier to see how Buddha's recommendation to cultivate *wisdom* to fight ignorance (which creates suffering) would solve this problem. Many Buddhist schools in fact argue that practices like asceticism, meditation, expecting help from gods or studying scripture (Buddha recommended scepticism instead) would *not* help in achieving *nirvana*!

In other words, chapter two seems to present a specific yoga form called *kriya-yoga*, which seems to consist of Brahmin rituals informed by Buddhist discourse. A closer reading reveals a clash of incommensurable Buddhist and Brahmin discourses within the three limb *kriya-yoga*. Hence the reader is left wondering how Brahmin rituals can be meaningfully incorporated into Buddhist wisdom discourse, which is concerned with the eradication of suffering.

### ***Rituals dressed up in Buddhist robes***



### ***Nirodha-yoga of Chapter 1***

For more details about *kriya-yoga*, the reader will have to turn to chapter 1 of the YS, where the meaning of yoga is explained and where further new techniques are introduced. However, the word *kriya* is not mentioned here. Why not? Does chapter 1 deal with yoga *in general* (trying to define it) - and is *kriya-yoga* then just a *specific example* of yoga? But why should the YS operate such a distinction? Why should it inform us about the specific *kriya-yoga* example and not just yoga in general? Alternatively should we assume that chapter 1, as it introduces new and different practices to *kriya-yoga*, is dealing with another *type* of yoga? We don't know the answer to these questions.

Yoga researchers have opted for a third possibility. They assume implicitly that chapter 1

is also about *kriya*. They assume that the *YS* discusses one single form of yoga, to which it happens to give the name *kriya* in chapter 2. Is it a valid assumption, that the *YS* is a compilation of various sources? Can we freely combine concepts from different chapters, which are most probably rooted in different discourses? So let us look at the unnamed yoga of chapter one and see if it can be aligned with *kriya-yoga*.

Chapter 1 starts with defining the yoga sign. Yoga is ‘to stop (*nirodha*) the fluctuations (*vrittis*) of the mind (*citta*)’ (I.2). This is the core aphorism and most of chapter 1 defines and classifies its three concepts.<sup>245</sup>

First the mind – *citta*. When the mind is still the yogi will experience *purusha*. *Purusha* is ‘pure consciousness’ often explained as being always there, but unmanifest and static. *Prakriti* is the opposite principle. It is dynamic and evolving. It creates the world and, in the end, mind (*citta*) and intellect (*buddhi*) evolves out of this. Normally, *purusha* is so entangled in *prakriti* that it dissolves there like salt in water. Stilling the mind (water), the salt – *purusha* - begins to crystallise in a reverse process. This discourse is undoubtedly core Samkhya philosophy.

So as our mind is a part of *prakriti*, we gather that the mind is in continuous dynamic movement – in fluctuation - which leaves us in a delusionary world. These fluctuations are now described. We are told (I.6) that there are five types of mind fluctuations (*vrittis* – mind states), which are described and which logically must be stopped. How do we do this – what are the yoga methods of stopping (*nirodha*) the fluctuating mind? This is where new yoga techniques, not mentioned in chapter two’s *kriya-yoga* are introduced.

There are basically three ways of stopping the mind (I.12): *abhyasa* (“repetitive practice”), *vairagya* (“detachment”) and devotion to the lord (I.23). Chapter 1 has now defined its three core yoga techniques of stopping the mind: *repetitive practice*, *detachment* and *devotion*. However, in chapter 2, as we recall, the *kriya-yoga* techniques were defined as heating up (*tapas*), chanting of scripture (*svadhyaya*) and devotion. The *YS* gives no direct explanation of how all the techniques relate to each other. So we now have two groups of techniques defining ‘yoga’ and ‘*kriya-yoga*’.

Firstly, Chapter 2’s Brahmin rituals of *kriya-yoga* (the techniques of *tapas*, *svadhyaya* – plus meditation on *Isvara*), secondly in chapter 1 yoga-to-stop-the-mind-techniques. Let me call the techniques of chapter 1 “*nirodha*”-yoga (i.e. mind-calming-yoga) so that we can distinguish them from ‘*kriya-yoga*’.

## Kriya-yoga

## Nirodha-yoga

*Meditative-chanting-rituals* Mind calming

*tapas* (heating up)                    *abhyasa* (repetitive practice)

*svadhyaya* (chanting)                *vairagya* (detaching)

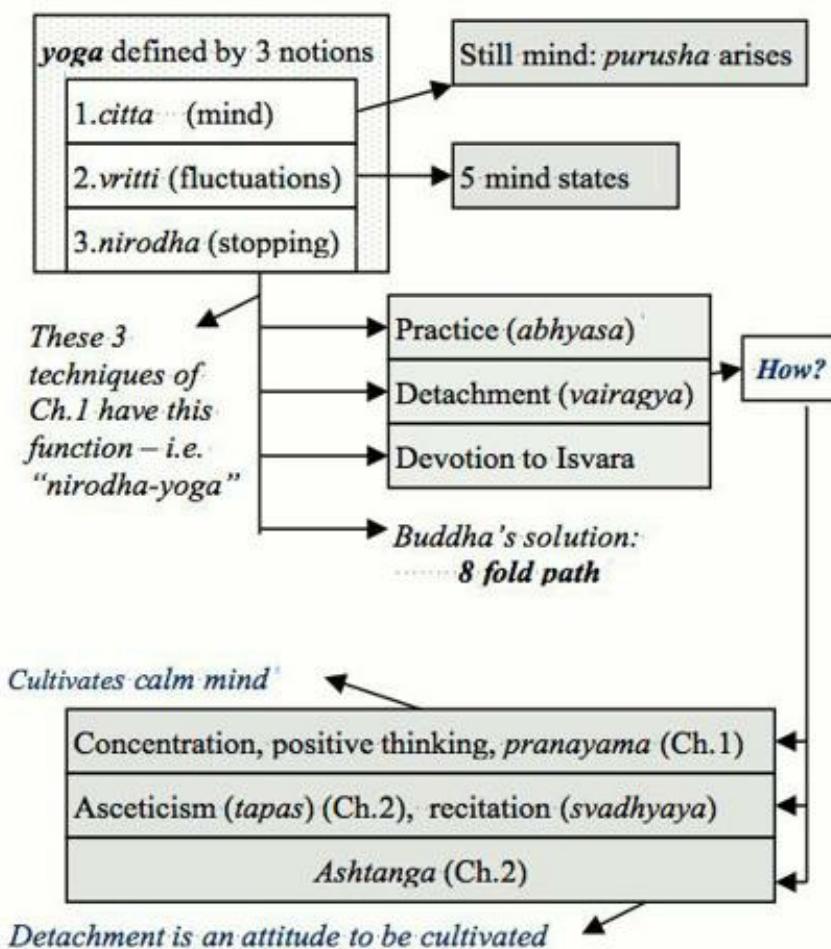
Devotion-meditation                  Devotion

The *nirodha-yoga* I have identified here is not the same as the *nirodha-yoga* discussed in

the *Moksha-dharma* of the *Mahabharata* (XII.188). The *Moksha-dharma*'s *nirodha-yoga* is a “still-mind type of yoga” consisting of sense-withdrawal, concentration and meditation. But this is not what the *YS* is discussing here.

Let us examine the three *nirodha-yoga* techniques of the *YS*. First what is *abhyasa* (“repetitive practice”) specifically about? This practice, we are told, is the repeated effort to maintain calm mind (I: 13, 14). How do we do this, we ask, as we need further specification? We find an answer 20 verses later (1.33–39). In modern words, the repetitive practice consists of: concentration techniques, positive thinking techniques and breathing techniques. This makes sense to a modern reader – these *abhyasa* techniques could calm the mind.

### *Exposing the logic of Nirodha-yoga*



What is the second technique of *vairagya* (“detaching”) specifically about? As in Buddhism, the purpose of detachment (1.15) is to stop the cravings. Detachment is about dropping our attachments (clinging/desires). It sounds good, but again the reader must ask, how do we actually *do* this?

Several interpretations are possible. One interpretation is that the same methods used for *abhyasa* (“repetitive practice” - see above 1.33–39) can be used to achieve *vairagya*.

(“detachment”). I.e. the two practices of *Nirodha-yoga* are using the same methods. This would fall in line with presumed Buddhist roots. But detachment (*vairagya*) could also be achieved through the methods of *tapas* and *svadhyaya* (“chanting” of scriptures) from the *kriya-yoga* of chapter 2 – but is it plausible to mix and match notions from various parts of the YS?

A third interpretation is to understand detachment (*vairagya*) as just ‘an attitude’ – the attitude of dispassion. However, this interpretation gives just rise to a new question: how do we cultivate this attitude of dispassion? Buddhism again has its clear answer in the *8-fold path* and especially mindfulness.

The YS’s answer to how to achieve detachment (*vairagya*) could in a similar Buddhist inspired way be found in the following chapter’s instructions about *Ashtanga* – the 8 limbs. *Ashtanga* is so to speak an eight-stepped stairway to *samadhi*. In *samadhi* there is final release. Hence *ashtanga* could be the YS’s alternative to the Buddhist eight-fold path.

But – once more - we have to critically assess whether it is really feasible to understand concepts in one chapter by pulling in concepts from other chapters, when we take into consideration the multi-source nature of the YS. Are we thereby exposing ourselves to the problem of mixing signs from various sign systems? If we accept such a limitation on merging sign systems, the reader is left in the dark as how to *actually* perform the technique of ‘detaching’ – *vairagya*.

### Goals of *nirodha-yoga* – ch.1

Overall, chapter one of the YS – defining yoga as the mortification of the mind movements - is very Buddhist in its feel and character. For instance, the conceptual coupling of *abhyasa* (“repeated practice”) and *vairagya* (“detaching”) is very Buddhist in its presentation. This *coupled* combination – where the components mutually reinforce each other - forms a critical part of Buddhist discourse. The Buddhist discourse roots become even clearer when we investigate what the yogi is working on (overcoming) when using these two limbs of the *nirodha-yoga*.

Chapter 1 for instance warns us about the ‘nine obstacles’, which must be overcome (a typical Buddhist theme), and from chapter 2 we understand, that through ‘repetitive recitation’ (*svadhyaya*), the yogi has to overcome the ‘5 causes of suffering’ or afflictions (*kleshas*), again central to Buddhist discourse. The YS warns (I.14), that the yogi will only succeed by being disciplined and persistent over time, and he has to be properly motivated (the ‘five drivers’ or ‘attitudes’ (I.20)). It is all *very* Buddhist rhetoric.

In summary the yoga described in chapter 1 - which for pedagogic reasons I named *nirodha-yoga* – is overall very Buddhist in its nature. A Buddhist yoga! It therefore gives meaning to the conceptual coupling of the two limbs of *abhyasa* (“repeated practice”) and *vairagya* (“detaching”) – both central to *nirodha-yoga* - in Buddhist terms. Orientated by Buddhist discourse they are techniques or mind states leading to a quiet (*nirodha*) mind. [246](#)

Finally, according to chapter 1, after much effort using many techniques and mind states, the fluctuations (*vrittis*) stop (*nirodha*). This mortification of the mind implies that the yogi

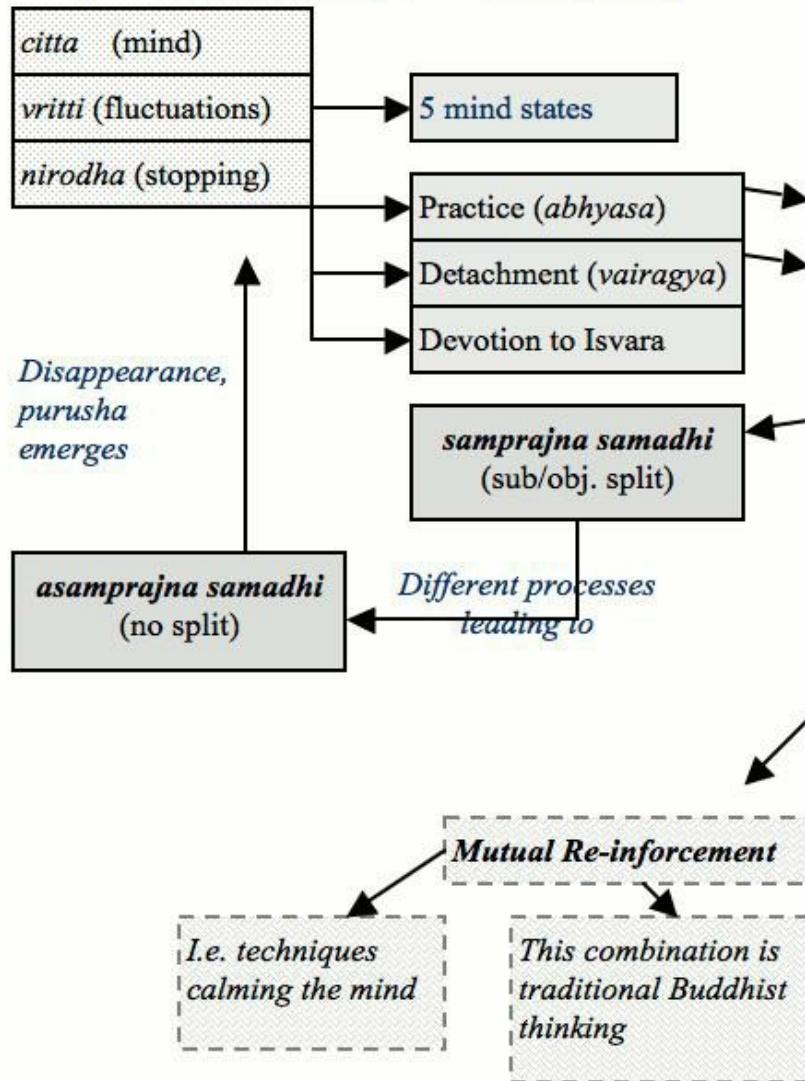
now enters *samadhi*. Many yoga popularisers believe *samadhi* to be the end goal of the yoga, which is defined here.

However, the process of isolating *purusha* is not over even if the mind has been arrested – there is still more to come, according to chapter 1 (I.41-44). *Samadhi* is not a goal, but a further refined process. In the first phase of *samadhi* – called *samprajna samadhi* - the mind is quiet, but there is still a difference in the mind (*citta*) between the subject (the yogi) and the object (what is meditated on). The yogi has not emerged into *purusha* yet. It is maintained that this first happens when the split between subject and object is overcome (I.46-49);; the mind (*citta*) disappears and the yogi becomes *purusha* (I.51). This state of eradicated mind is the state of *asamprajna samadhi* or *nirbija samadhi*. *Purusha* is isolated from *prakriti* and liberated.<sup>247</sup> Thus – based on our discussion of the various [liberation types](#) - our first impression of *nirodha-yoga* is that it is situated between two ideal types of liberation: it is close to *Meditative Absorption* (because of the *samadhi* aspect) but still has an element of Gnostic Realisation (because of the aspect of Buddhist insights). Later on we will see that on further reflection this kind of liberation seems to become a mystical event.

It seems at this point in time that *nirodha-yoga* is divided between various liberation models. The description of the process of *samadhi* is in one aspect almost identical to Buddhist descriptions of deep meditational states – [the \*jhanas\*](#)<sup>248</sup>. Many Buddhist schools claim, however, that release does not happen in this meditative trance. Instead, it is a Gnostic (knowledge based) insight coming *afterward* through mindfulness. Other schools of Buddhism, probably under influence of Brahmin philosophy, believe release happens in meditation (Wynne 2007). Hence these schools would probably have agreed with *nirodha-yoga*'s description of *samadhi*. However, as Buddhism in general is anti-metaphysical, they would not have agreed with metaphysical considerations like the surfacing of *purusha* etc.

So all in all it is hard to place *nirodha-yoga* squarely in the camp of Buddhism although it is strongly influenced by Buddhist discourse.

### The Buddhist influence on nirodha module



I have so far argued that the *YS* actually combines two yogas of probably very different origins: the ritual-meditative *kriya-yoga* and the Buddhist like *nirodha-yoga*.<sup>249</sup> It is now up to the reader to consider whether these two yoga forms are incompatible. Is it possible to combine the *kriya-yoga* of chapter 2 – the Brahmin ritual techniques of *tapas* and *svadhyaya* – with the *nirodha-yoga* of chapter 1 – the Buddhist inspired yoga? And if the answer is yes – does the *YS* succeed in doing so?

Now to make things more complicated there surfaces a third description of yoga at the end of chapter 2 based on eight methods (Sanskrit word for ‘eight’ is *ashta*) – *ashtanga*.

### The eight Limbs (practices) – *ashtanga-yoga*

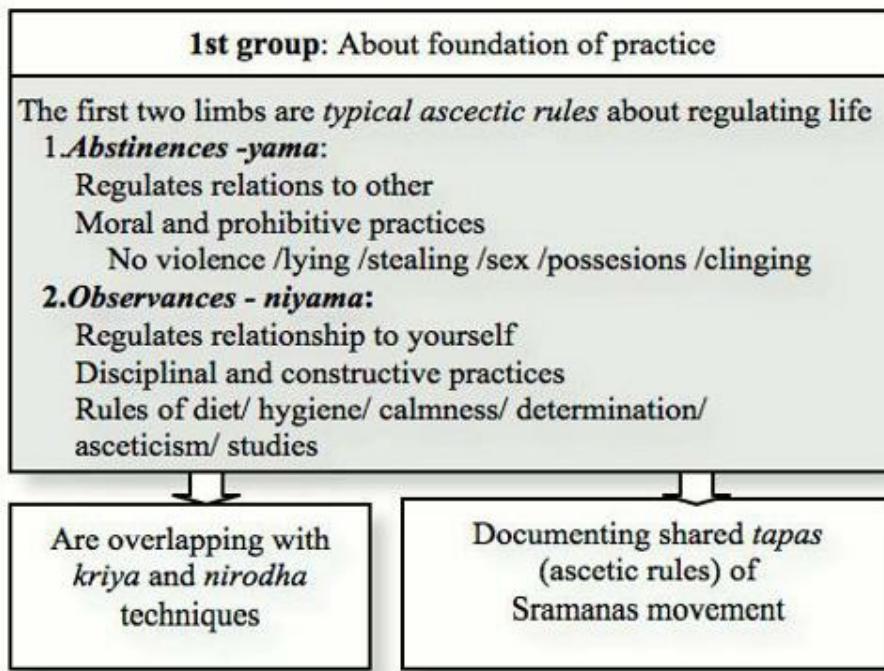
Most students find “the eight-limbs” – *ashtanga* – of practice to be the central part of their studies of yoga. Here they find practical instructions giving meaning to their daily practice. The *ashtanga* module is essential. However, the scholar and populariser Feuerstein

(1979) maintains that the 30 *ashtanga* verses placed at the end of chapter two and the beginning of chapter three are a later addition to the *YS*, while its core contribution is seen to be the verses on yoga already analysed.

The *ashtanga* module overlaps with both *kriya-yoga* and *nirodha-yoga* as the *YS* now (actually for the third time) teaches eight techniques or elements of yoga. There is an overlap because many of the *ashtanga* techniques have common characteristics with the techniques already instructed. It should further be noted that this module on *ashtanga* is in same chapter as the *kriya-yoga* instructions. Might this be significant? Is *ashtanga* thought to add something specific to *kriya-yoga*? Even before studying the *ashtanga* module, there emerges a range of issues. Why was the *ashtanga* module added? Was it added because of its impressive and detailed descriptions of the elements of release? Why was neither *kriya-yoga* nor *nirodha-yoga*, seen as sufficient in their descriptions?

The eight elements or limbs – *ashtanga* - of yoga can be grouped into three. The first group, consisting of two elements – *yama* and *niyama* -, is about the attitude of the student. These two elements are typical ascetic regulations not specific to yoga techniques. Before any meditation the mind and body of the student needs to be in a certain condition.

### ***1<sup>st</sup> group of limbs***



The first element regulates the yogi's relation to others. It is called *yama* – “abstinences”. It is about moral and prohibitive rules like no violence, no lying, no stealing, no sex, no possessions and no attachments. The second regulation is *niyama* – “observances”. This one is about the yogi's relationship to himself. It is concerned with rules of diet, hygiene, calm, determination, austerities and studies.

In some respects there is nothing new in the two first limbs or rules. They codify the

ancient ascetic discourses from which yoga grew. They also overlap with some central *kriya-yoga* notions like *vairagya* (“detaching”), *tapas* (“heating up”), *svadhyaya* (“self-recitation”). Further, most of India’s ascetic discourses like Jainism, early Buddhism and ascetic Saivism (Siva worship) would subscribe to those rules of *yama* and *niyama*.

However until now the early-yoga forms we have encountered through history have not paid much attention to an ethical conduct of life. They were instead occupied by the [stoic attitude](#) of the noble warrior. So what is new for us here is that yoga practices are deemed to rest upon a foundation of *ethical living*. This is where liberation starts from – an [ethical based life](#). If the *YS* reflects a stratum of Kshatriyas – the ruling upper classes – then we have to ask, why this significant change in outlook? Such an ethical life – based on compassion and non-violence - would be hard to align with the life of a noble warrior. Does this acceptance of ethics imply that the yoga milieu was no longer dominated by the clans of the warriors, but instead by urbanised intellectuals strongly related to the administration and management of the new super-regional or imperial state? As the *YS* surfaces rather late in the Axial Age, I find such an explanation plausible. The concerns and outlooks of the warriors had been overridden by those of the intellectuals. Yoga was still a part of an upper class milieu framed by hegemonic warrior nobles, but at this time intellectuals increasingly formulated the discourse.

The two sets of ethical rules probably give us an insight into some of the core practices and ideas of the early ascetic renouncer movement. This asceticism, reflecting the two rules, was adapted over the course of time and followed in many other traditions.

Seen from a modern psychological point of view, *yama* and *niyama* are very much rules to strengthen and discipline the *super ego* – the rational and controlling part of the yogi, the self disciplining itself and thereby infusing the body with power. When the yogi can master his relationship to himself and his environment, then the real work can begin. This is what the next group of six elements/limbs is about.

### ***Ashtanga-yoga – preparation and meditation***

The next three elements of the eight practices could be put under the heading of *Preparation of body and mind for meditation*. They are the second group, dealing with *asana*, *pranayama* and *pratyahara*. Their common function is to bring the yogi into a calm, absorbed state of mind. There are just three verses regarding the first element *asana* – body pose (II.46-48) They state that the yogi should find a stable and comfortable sitting position, which in effect allows him to forget his body and concentrate on meditation. There is no description of how exactly this pose is to be performed.

When the body is steady and undisturbed, the next element can commence: *pranayama* – breath control. By slowing down the breath significantly with long periods of holding the breath the body and mind relaxes. A sense of quietness emerges. Now the third and final preparatory element commences: sense withdrawal – *pratyahara*. All external sense inputs are ignored. This is very much a *trance*: all attention is withdrawn from the yogi’s environment

and focused on internal experiences.

### *The 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> group of limbs*

2 <sup>nd</sup> group: calming and absorbing the mind	
3. <i>asanas</i> - posture	Stabilising sitting postures – forgetting body
4. <i>pranayama</i> - breath control	Calming and preparing mind for meditation
5. <i>pratyahara</i> - sense withdrawal	Process of turning attention inwards – <i>pranyama</i> incl. Senses distract and agitate mind

3 <sup>rd</sup> group: meditative realisation	
6. <i>dharana</i> - concentration	Process of fixing the mind on something
7. <i>dhyana</i> - meditation	Absorption – mind only conscious of object – no self Steady attention – stillness and subtle experience
8. <i>samadhi</i> – "same as the highest"	Consciousness and object merge Development of higher consciousness Recognition of purusha

Now the third group with the last three elements can be introduced. They are called the ‘integrated’ elements – *samyana*. This is because the practitioner is now in meditative states of mind, where he glides from one process or element to the next. One cannot achieve these states of mind by will and decision – it is rather a question of persistence and patience. The jumps are spontaneous and unpredictable like quantum leaps of electrons. *Samyana* is the core of the practice today described as meditation.

First, the yogi will concentrate the mind by stopping it from jumping from issue to issue in an endless stream of consciousness. *Dharana* – concentration – is the process of fixing the mind on an object: it can be by looking at an object, observing the breath, focussing on an internal sound or thinking of an abstraction like a god. Having mastered stopping the mind from wandering and keeping it focussed for a prolonged time the yogi will slide into *dhyana* – meditation or absorption. The mind is now only conscious of the object of meditation. There is only steady attention, a subtle experience of stillness. The yogi forgets his self – there is only the object; the mind has become ‘one-pointed’ (*ekagrata*). This one-pointed mode allows the yogi to move into the final process of *samadhi*. *Samadhi* means “placing, putting together”,

“one-pointedness”, or “steadiness” [250](#). The object and the consciousness merge.

Finally, at the end of the *samadhi* process, there is recognition of *purusha*, as higher and higher forms of consciousness are penetrated. In the words of Samkhya philosophy already seen in the *Mahabharata*, the dynamics of *prakriti* – its three *gunas* – have been brought into equilibrium. *Purusha* has been separated or isolated – there is “solitude” (*kaivalya*). It is important to note here that this is exactly the opposite of the Brahmin view of realisation encountered in the *Upanishad* and Vedanta philosophy. Here in a Brahmin sign system the end result was ‘union’, the meditator becoming one with the underlying non-duality of the cosmos, an ontological transformation. However in the Samkhya discourse of the *YS* the end result is a dis-union, a separation of two principles, which have hitherto been entangled with each other. This time it is an epistemological transformation.

This is in short the *ashtanga-yoga* largely to be found at end of chapter 2.

### The power discourse of chapter 3 and 4

Chapter 3 mainly deals with the magical power and the special consciousness connected with yoga practice and *samadhi*. Most scriptures throughout Indian history dealing with religious practices and Ways of Liberation are occupied by accounts of superhuman powers (Sarbacker 2008, White 2009). Similarly the *YS* spends a whole chapter (out of a total of four) on matters of supernatural powers and blissful conditions accompanying yoga practice<sup>251</sup>. This indicates that the compiler sees supernatural powers as central to a discussion of yoga. The chapter is called *vibhuti* meaning “manifestations of super human powers”. When actually describing the various supernatural yoga powers the term *siddhi* – meaning “perfection” – is used.

Basically this chapter claims that by using the combination of three meditation elements of *dharana*, *dhyana* and *samadhi* (this combination is called *samyama* - “integrated”) the meditator achieves various *siddhis*. The various types of *siddhi* that arise are a function of the object or subject towards which the *samyama* meditation is directed. The yogi can meditate on issues like the sun, power, body parts, intuition, *karma*, connections, and distinctions. Each subject generates its own super powers. Meditation on the navel *chakra* for instance gives ‘knowledge of the ordering of the body’. Paths for generating *siddhis* other than meditation are however also available such as austerity, mantra recitation and drugs

In philosophical treatises one would expect to be presented with a rational explanation as to why supernatural powers occur as an integral part of yoga practices, especially *samyama* meditation. The *YS* however does not. It gives only a list of headings and descriptions. There is a significant theoretical omission here, as there is no attempt even to explain an admittedly crucial phenomenon like the accrual of super powers. How on earth, most readers would wonder, does meditation enable you to become invisible? The reader could speculate on why the *YS* fails to produce an explanation of this. Does it take this accomplishment as given? Does the compiler really not believe in supernatural powers and hence shies away from delivering an explanation? Is the reader supposed to deduce an explanation from the overall Samkhya philosophy?

One of the very few texts that offer a rational explanation of supernatural powers in a Samkhya context is the *Mahabharata*. In its *Moksha-dharma* the accrual of super powers is related to the meditator gaining control over and insight into the constituting elements of reality – the *tattvas*. By controlling the *tattvas*, which constitutes the self, the meditator not only manages the processes of his conceptual apparatus but also the equivalent processes in the outer reality. In MBh 12.228 these powers are called *aisvarya* – the power of the sovereign (Malinar 2012b). So, as the yogi accesses and brings deeper and deeper levels of *tattvas* (ontological elements) under his control, he is also able to manipulate them. Thus he is no longer restricted by either psychological or physical nature. He can become invisible, omnipresent, fly through air, enter bodies, gain knowledge of previous lives.

For a modern reader however this does not provide a valid explanation. We do not share the implicit code – a power discourse - which signifies this argument. For us, the understanding of the sub-atomic world, the fundamental physical laws of the universe, evolution, the nature of time does not imply that the scientist is able to transcend them. For us there is an ontological distinction between epistemology and knowledge on one side and physical reality on the other. Physical reality is what exists independent of thinking. Hence no matter how much we are able to change our thinking through meditation, this will not enable us to transcend or transform the fundamentals of physical reality. However, in some Indian philosophies – especially the mystic and idealist ones - this distinction is deliberately ignored: through special ways of mind processing a person becomes the underlying reality. This ontological transformation bestows super powers.

In a modern context we could divide the supernatural powers of yoga into the following two groups: (1) para-psychological (for instance mind reading, knowledge about past and future) and (2) para-physical (for instance omnipresence, invisibility, flying). The possibility of para-physical powers most psychologists would disagree with today. They would be seen as a product of the yogi's imagination: a meditative hallucination. On the other hand we could analyse some of these extraordinary powers as capabilities resulting from *hypnotic trance*. We know how people in hypnotic trance are able to endure pain levels that they would normally not tolerate. People put into a hypnotic trance and people in yogic trance are renowned for accomplishments like walking on burning coal, having needles penetrating the tongue, lying on nails, hanging in the air only supported by the neck and ankles and other astonishing things that people in a normal state of consciousness cannot do. In this way we could see *some* of the para-physical powers of *siddhi* as an effect of hypnotic trance.<sup>252</sup>

The other category of the *siddhis* - the para-psychological accomplishments - would today have adherents; some of these powers cannot be excluded *a priori*. Some of them could maybe even be explained within Western scientific paradigms (Sarbacker 2012). In any case, that would be for more social-psychological experiment.

Overall, it seems that the *YS* has an ambiguous attitude to the *siddhis*. On the one hand these accomplishments seem critical to further progress towards the final goals, on the other hand, these super-human achievements also entail their own seductive risks. If pursued too far, they will lead the path of liberation into a dead end street. So the *YS* warns, like the Buddha, that these *siddhis* have to be left behind in order to achieve final release (Sarbacker 2005 &

2008).

But why dedicate a *whole* chapter to something the yogi should treat cautiously and in the end leave behind? A short warning would surely suffice?<sup>253</sup> The word ‘spin’ comes to mind.

### *The chapters and their themes*

**Chpt 1 (Samadhi) & 2 (Sadhana):** Three yoga doctrines - (*kriya, nirodha, ashtanga*)

**Chpt 3 (Vibhuti):** Magical powers - (*siddhi*)

**Chpt 4 (Kaivalya):** Liberation/ isolation – (*kaivalya, Samkhya philosophy*)

In the final chapter 4, the *YS* becomes very complex as it moves into abstract philosophical speculation. Chapter 4 is called *kaivalya* – “isolation”. One could summarise that yoga as described in Chapter 4 is a reversal of the Samkhya *evolution* process: a returning to *purusha* – i.e. *involution (pratiprasava)*. It would take a lengthy study of the *YS* and its commentaries (which in any case contradict each other) to understand what is going on in chapter 4. Topics like *dharma*, the ontology of reality, consciousness, self-consciousness, means of power, time, and their mutual interactions are discussed<sup>254</sup>. The *YS* positions itself in relation to competing philosophies and sectarian controversies (Yamashita 1994, Kalupahana 1987).

We now have an overview of the “3 yogas” compiled in the *YS* (*kriya, nirodha* and *ashtanga*). However, there is one process outstanding, absolutely crucial to the *YS*, which needs further investigation: *samadhi*.

### *Samadhi’ing – the climax of yoga*

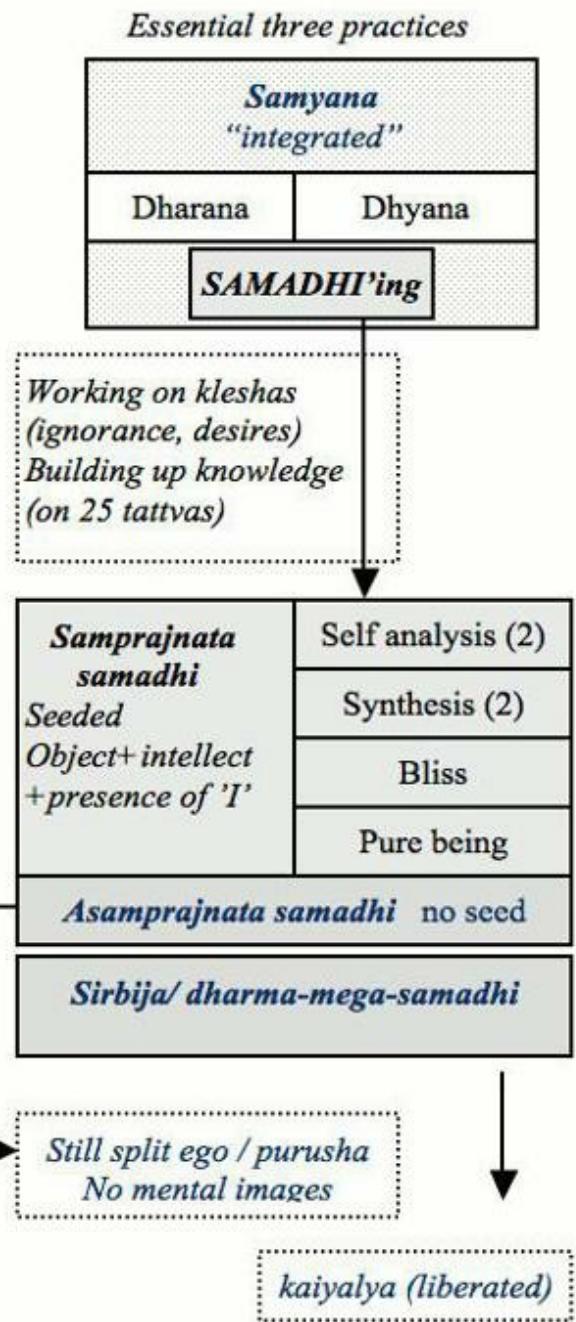
Most yogis agree that yoga is closely connected with the notion of *samadhi*. Many even equate yoga with *samadhi*. However there is much confusion about what *samadhi* actually means. As the *YS* actually defines it in several verses as a blissful state of mind (for instance I.2 and III.3), it has led many to believe that *samadhi* like *nirvana* is the final goal. But then from a general reading of the *YS*, it becomes apparent that *samadhi* is a prolonged process: by moving through different mind states the adept is liberated from *prakriti* and its sufferings. Below is a visualisation to clarify *samadhi*.

It is clear from *YS* that the core of practice of yoga is *samadhi*.<sup>255</sup> So where the reader is initially led to believe by its definitions that *samadhi* is still mind (*nirodha citta*), one can later on understand that actually the mind is not quite so still: there is still some subtle and decisive processing going on. The mind is not still, but “one-pointed”, – i.e. *samadhi*. Because of this continuous processing of the one-pointed mind, the *YS* operates with several types of *samadhi* divided into two groups.

The first group is called *samprajna samadhi*, which means “seeded”. This means that there is still an object or seed of meditation, the intellectual faculty is present and with it a deep sense of self (“I”). There is still in other words separation of a subject, the meditator, and an object, a seed. In this group of *samprajna samadhi* the adept moves through six stages of *samadhi*: two are related to self-analysis, two to synthesis, one to bliss and one to pure being. Each of these six *samadhis* has its own name. The yogi here works on the five *kleshas* (ignorance and desires) causing attachment. Slowly the adept accesses deeper and deeper levels of the *tattvas* (“manifestations”) of *prakriti* – each time realising that any *tattva* encountered is not the real self.

So the reader can conclude that even in *samadhi* there is much thinking and cognition taking place. *Samadhi* is not described as just ‘deep absorption’ here. Instead, this process is very similar to the mindful meditation of Buddhism, where the meditator is coming to grips with his or her own filtering of reality.

## *The process of samadhi'ing*



Spontaneously, the yogi will one day move into a new level of almost seedless *samadhi* – *asamprajna samadhi*. There are now no longer mental images in the mind, no split between object and subject and the ego is becoming *purusha*. The reader probably now thinks that this, the seedless mind, must be the end point of *samadhi*. However to our surprise, this stage seems not to be the ultimate stage, even if there is absolutely *no seed* present.

There seems further to be a final even deeper level of *samadhi*. This happens when *citta* – the mind – has disappeared or is free of desires<sup>256</sup>. Then liberation – called *kaivalya* (“isolation” from *prakriti*) - is finally there. The adept has achieved *sirbija-* or *dharma-mega*

*samadhi*. This seems to be a final separate layer of *samadhi*.

However the question remains: is this stage a final *goal* or the final *processing*? Further, we wonder if all intellectual cognition has now finally and utterly terminated? Is this *samadhi* describing an absolutely concentrated mind with no thought?

### **Samadhi as mystical or Gnostic event of release?**

This hair-splitting map of the process of deepened meditation is wellcharted water for the student of early Buddhism.<sup>257</sup> Some Buddhist schools operated in a similar way with 9 levels of *jhana* that the meditator passed through before achieving final *nirvana* (“blown out”).<sup>258</sup> However, once more, in Buddhism *nirvana* is kept clearly distinct from the meditation process as such: it is a goal, a state of mind – not a process.

We have often observed how Buddhism has influenced yoga, but in respect of achieving mystical release in deep absorption it is probably the other way round (Lynne 2007). When reading about yoga in the *Upanishads*, we concluded that the Brahmins had this mystic-metaphysical notion of release. In deep total trance, when the mind was in *turya*, an incredible ontological transformation occurred. The knower merged with the known; the subject became the object; the Brahmin dropped into an underlying non-dual reality; the meditator became *brahman* – a principle to which one cannot attach words. In the *Upanishads*, however, we never found a satisfying explanation of how this ontological transformation was exactly possible; it raised more questions than it answered. The question is now whether the *YS* is a continuation of this mystical model of liberation.

We have already discussed in relation to *nirodha-yoga* that the initial impression is that *samadhi* is about liberation in Absorbed Meditation. Now the *YS* has provided a more detailed analysis of this event. We are now more inclined to see the processing of *samadhi* as related to a Gnostic liberation model, as so much cognition and realisation is involved in *samadhi*. The *samadhi* process of *YS* does not seem to end in an ontological transformation as it did for the Brahmin adept. Instead it seems to be an epistemological event as the meditator gains control of the *tattvas* constituting the mental and cognitive apparatus. Even at the final phase of this process we can see that some sort of cognition and realisation happens as the meditator progresses through the deepest layers of *samadhi*. Cognition and distinctions here seem to become more and more subtle. But do they ever stop? Is there ever, we wonder, in this process a moment of absolute still mind? Definitely not before the ultimate release of *dharmaega samadhi*, we gather. But we cannot be sure: what happens to cognition as *purusha* becomes ‘isolated’ from *prakriti*? Is this a moment of *turya* where the mind is eliminated: where the mind is so to speak momentarily electro-shocked? In other words, is the final release a moment where the mind actually is best described as dead?

This line of argument, of reaching still mind turns *dharmaega samadhi* into a mystical event for a modern reader. It cannot be explained how *purusha* can emerge in an extinguished and mortified consciousness. Who/what is there to register the event? It would be like trying to project a movie without having a screen to project on.

Some say that actually there is still the state of ‘pure and calm wisdom’ present, the *guna*

called *sattva*. Thus by slightly redefining *samadhi*, they see liberation of the *YS* as Gnostic: the *sattva*-tised mind of *prakriti* realising it is not *purusha*, thereby isolating it.

Others have a slightly different solution to this problem: *purusha* has to wait to emerge until *after* the “moment of electro-shock”. This implies that the meditator has to return to normal consciousness to make his final release. This post-meditative Gnostic “aha-insight” we know well from Buddhism. But, as we shall see, the *YS* does not operate with this possibility and hence *samadhi* is not a description of such a Buddhist Gnostic liberation model.

### ***Samadhi as a map of release through dying?***

I use the word ‘dead’ carefully in relation to *dharmaega samadhi*. This is because underlying this discussion is the issue of whether the final release happens in this life or in an after-life. The question is whether *samadhi* is best conceived as a door to death whence the yogi does not return.

If we assume that the yogi can or must return from *dharmaega samadhi* to be released, then we would have to operate with the notion of a *jivan-mukti* (“living liberated”). The yogi would have travelled to a state of consciousness where the mind was brought to an absolute halt – a moment of mental death or *turya*. From here, the mind must somehow have ignited again and the yogi returned to normal social interaction. However, he is now re-configured; not ontologically reconfigured, but epistemologically. His whole mental apparatus has been transformed. This is the living liberated. The only problem here is that the *YS* does not operate with such a liberated person. *Dharmaega samadhi* is the end of the story in the *YS*. There are no speculations about how the meditator could eventually return from this end state and how he would then function.

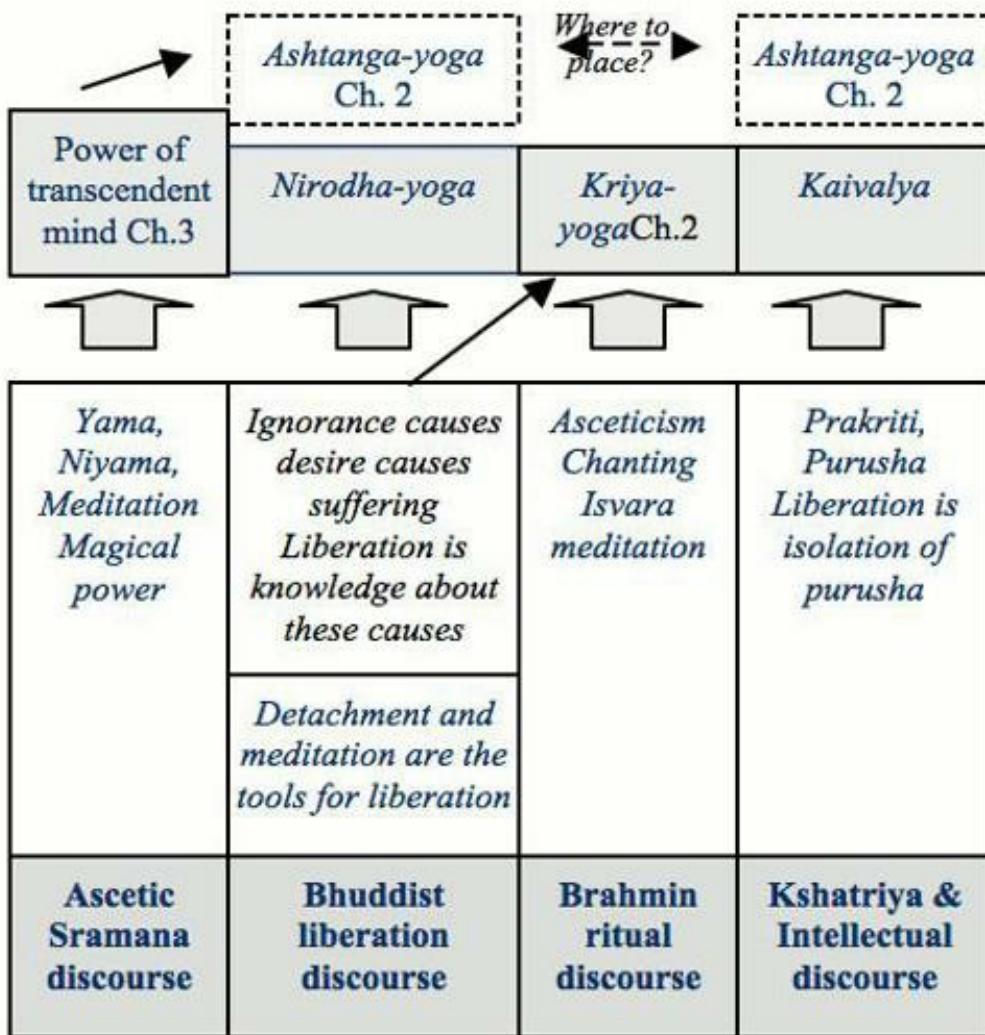
It seems therefore plausible that the *YS* instead envisages *samadhi* processing like the map of a death process leading to final release. Final *samadhi* is not a description of a deep process of meditation that one can undertake from choice. This is the final process of dying peacefully. There are hence no elaborations from what levels one eventually could reverse the *samadhi* process. When one has first reached a certain level, there is an automatic slide into death. This interpretation sees *samadhi* related to the model of liberation as a process of mortification discussed earlier in relation to *nirodha-yoga*. We are in other words returning to our initial impression of liberation happening in Meditative Absorption. We move in circles and cannot identify to which liberation model the *YS* belongs.

There is understandable uncertainty about which liberation models the *YS* actually adheres to when discussing *samadhi*. This has the implication that *YS*’s nebular *samadhi* notion has been freely configured by various religio-philosophies. Most seem to assume that the *YS* is talking about *samadhi* as a meditative process, the adept can enter and exit by choice. They do not realise that its notion of *samadhi* might point back to Sramanic discourses of yoga as a ritual process of dying. Especially Advaita Vedanta Brahmins have struggled to integrate *YS*’s *samadhi*. They tend to construct liberation as an ontological event and operate with a living liberated. Both constructions seem to be contradicted by the *samadhi* of the *YS*. Hence it

is strange that the Vedanta Brahmins agreed to include the *YS* in their canon – it instantly added a range of philosophical problems.

### The compilation and its discursive roots?

#### *The roots: social milieus, discourses, signs and yoga styles of YS*



In my own view, the *YS* seems to be a compilation of five main modules or discourses mainly concentrated and found in different chapters: i) Chapter 1 is about *nirodha-yoga*. ii) The first half of chapter 2 is about *kriya-yoga*. iii) The rest of chapter two is about *ashtanga-yoga*, which also stretches into chapter 3. iv) Chapter 3 is about *vibhuti* (“magical power”) that yogis are said to achieve because of practice and *samadhi*. v) Then finally chapter 4 discusses philosophical issues connected to final liberation, *kaivalya*. These five modules compose the *YS*. It seems to me that the five modules represent five different sign systems, from where the respective notions receive their meaning. I am very sceptical about the *YS* being a

systematic and closed sign system. I find that the implications of the *YS* being a compilation of incongruent sign systems have not been sufficiently considered. As so many other ancient texts it does not express a single doctrine but reflects underlying social conflicts and ideological contests.

In this module I have visualised some possible connections. I will not go into details, as the function of this sketch is to summarise and initiate further debate and discussion.<sup>259</sup> At the top of the figure I have shown the possible various modules, and at the bottom it is suggested to which discourses they might originally belong.

### The myth driving the production of the *YS*

I would now like to return to my hypothesis that the *YS* is an empty sign system. It relates to the *ashtanga* system.

The roots of *ashtanga* module are very problematic to place in the drawing. It could easily be argued, as one possibility, that the *ashtanga* module is strongly reminiscent of specific Buddhist practice and doctrine. Inspired by Brahmin mystic meditative experiences, some Buddhist schools claimed *nirvana* in deep meditation. So maybe the *ashtanga* module – seeing liberation culminating in *samadhi* - is lifted out of such mystic Buddhist schools.

If this observation is correct, then the *YS* provides an example of how philosophical categories of Samkhya were used to illuminate Buddhist meditative levels and experiences. In other words, original Buddhist meditation reports were framed – signified - by Samkhya sign systems. Hence the Samkhya descriptions of the epistemological changes happening during meditation were perhaps *not derived from meditative practice*. Instead, they were stipulated categories derived from philosophical speculations among intellectuals. They have in this case been used to illuminate the liberation process allegedly happening in Buddhist element meditation.

In other words, the author had knowledge of Buddhist element meditation. He then rewrote these experiences in Samkhya terms and claimed that this is what actually happened during meditation. Social psychological seen this framed the experiences of yoga meditators, who would confirm the myth that meditation is signified with symbolic powers like *purusha* and *vibhuti*. They knew it from experience!

This line of argument puts question marks beside the story about ‘the sages who in deep meditation discovered the process of meditative release’. If this textual reading is correct, we can suspect that the *YS* is an empty sign system, a *simulacrum* – a copy without original. So it becomes an example of what Baudrillard says is a sign which hides the absence of reality and only pretend to mean anything.

In summary, the *YS* compiles an ascetic meditative life-style with Buddhist liberation discourse, Brahmin rituals, meditative *samadhi* categories and puts them all under a hegemonic Samkhya umbrella of metaphysics. The compiler – whether it is Patanjali, Vyasa or Vindhyavasin – was definitely of Samkhya orientation and most probably an intellectual. Based on the confusing mixture of techniques, I agree with Bronkhorst and other scholars that it seems the compiler had little experience of meditation. Finally, I doubt that the compiler has

succeeded in bringing disparate sign systems together in a single, integrated and coherent philosophical system expressing the singular essence of yoga.

### 3. The aftermath of the *Yoga Sutra* discourse

#### ***YS* in not an outgrowth of Brahmin Upanishad yoga**

Today many scholars agree that some of the text fragments of the *YS* might reach way back in time, but the strong Buddhist and Samkhya influence shows that compiling of fragments came later. In fact, according to some scholars, there is so much Buddhist and Samkhya discourse in the *YS* that one can wonder whether there is any autonomous yoga doctrine left to detect?

Although there are some similarities between the *YS* and especially the late Buddhist influenced *Maitri Upanishad*, I doubt whether the *YS* crystallises the yoga fragments of the *Upanishads*. The main reason for this conclusion is that the yoga notions of the *YS* are clearly defined within Samkhya and Buddhist sign systems. There are no traces of Vedanta and non-dual philosophy. The *YS* is much easier to align with many of the yoga conceptions of the *Mahabharata*.

The yoga of the *Upanishads*, on the other hand, was clearly adapted to a Brahmin sign system. The *YS* expresses the notions of a separate non-Brahmin milieu. It could, in other words, be a compilation of various proto-text fragments belonging to the general cultural field of liberation, a non-Buddhist and a non-Jain stratum only sharing the ‘yoga’ word with the Brahmins. The *YS* – written by a heterodox intellectual – and certain yoga discussions in the *Mahabharata* – written by commissioned Brahmins – could reflect a heterodox milieu of intellectual urbanised elites and warrior nobilities, some householders, others ascetic itinerants.

#### **The various yoga milieus before *YS* summarised**

Let me try to establish an overview of the situation of the yoga discourse at the time of compilation – 300-400 AD. At this point the yoga discourse was about 700-900 years old. From the texts’ sources we can see that there was no common usage of the yoga signifier and no comprehensive yoga doctrine was developed. Furthermore we can see that the notion was enveloped in different sign systems providing the yoga sign with various use-values and meanings. Sociologically viewed, we would expect that the diverse envelopes or sign systems framing yoga were a reflection of miscellaneous social milieus. Let me expand on this – why did these various social groups not develop a comprehensive yoga philosophy?

Following the developments in the *Upanishads* we can see that yoga underwent changes within a Brahmin Vedantic sign system. There seems to have been a Brahmin milieu engaged with the surrounding Sramanic movement. It was a dynamic process where ascetic lifestyles and meditative techniques in both camps developed from strict mortifying practices, perhaps related to death rituals, into refined systems of meditation and philosophical self-analysis. This process left traces in the *Upanishad* theological teachings of some Brahmin clans – the *Black Yajur-veda* line (Cohen 2008). Around 200-400 AD this line of transmission, still not having produced a written philosophical treatise defining yoga, culminated in the *Maitri Upanishad*. Although the *Maitri* gives a refined view of yoga, it is still far from being a philosophical treatise. If in the oral and practical milieu there was such a philosophical clarification, we wonder why this effort did not find its way into the much later *Maitri*. Such teaching could easily have been put into the written word as it did in the *YS* from the same period. The only answer seems to be that we are encountering a Brahmin milieu faced by stiff competition which was mainly interested in the symbolic-value of yoga.

Perhaps other Brahmin clans adopted yoga meditation as an expansion of their ritual repertoire. Here yoga was enveloped by a ritualistically oriented sign system. It was probably seen as *tapas* (a new ascetic ritual technique) or more specifically as an *upasana*, a type of ‘worship-meditation’ where the Brahmin made a symbolic sacrifice of himself. Here, within existing Brahmin ritual institutions, yoga could also have been practised as a kind of silent chanting: as *nada* (sound) yoga. Finally in this Brahmin milieu various “yoga techniques” (the Brahmins might have called them ‘yoga’, but a modern reader would probably not) could have been a part of Brahmin purification rites maintaining social difference. The *kriya-yoga* of the *YS* might reflect one of such Brahmin types of “ritual-yoga”. As the yoga sign just represented another *tapas*, there was no requirement for elaborating a comprehensive yoga philosophy in this milieu.

In the *Mahabharata*, a very different text genre to the previous ones, we find yoga often enveloped or closely connected with an evolving Samkhya philosophy. In the *Mahabharata* most of the discussions of non-theistic yoga are found in the part called the *Moksha-dharma* in book 12, which as we have seen expressed and addressed the issues of the warrior elites, who adapted and evolved various versions of Sramana discourses. The yoga techniques described here, mainly being about harnessing the body-mind system, varied between wisdom-yoga (*buddhi-yoga*) (release through insight into reality and the self), ascetic still-mind-yoga and various combinations of these two discourses. We noticed that these discussions did not envelop yoga in Brahmin Vedanta signs.

Other segments of the *Mahabharata* linked the final yogic release into various theistic discourses of divine insight or union. Theism was especially predominant in the *Bhagavad Gita*. Yoga maintained its sense of harnessing, but was informed by monotheistic theology, branded *karma-yoga* and *bhakti-yoga* (Malinar 2012).

Once more the yoga discourse,, that we encounter in the *Mahabharata* in the Kshatriya milieu of mainly amateur yoga sympathisers did not manage to produce a systematically yoga philosophy. Instead we are left with the impression that the yoga discourse had become a wide arena covering all kind of techniques related to diverse metaphysical, supernatural and social

conveniences.

### **YS – an intellectual milieu**

The *YS* is the first systematisation of yoga discourse of which we are aware. Most probably it belonged to the same vaguely defined social stratum that we glimpsed in the *Mahabharata*. A mainly Samkhya milieu occupied by liberation topics like yoga; a fragile sub-culture within the general cultural field of liberation. What characterised this milieu of amateurs and professionals was that it did *not* belong to any of the dominant groups of professional holy men like the Buddhists, Jains and Brahmins. This milieu was so loosely formed that it had not hitherto managed to establish a canon and a scholastic institution of refinement and interpretation. So it was originally a heterodox upper class and urban intellectual stratum not only in opposition to the Brahmin ritualists but also to the Buddhist and Jain ethicists.

It seems that the *YS* codified the state of the art of heterodox yoga discussions reigning around 400 AD or later. We can see that the *YS* opens up the yoga discourse to Buddhist ethics, probably signifying that intellectuals were beginning to dominate this stratum. As a part of this adaptation, it probably lifted some theoretical elements from the various milieus and intellectual discourses. This act of compilation was necessary, as the compiler apparently had no single, well defined, and practical line of transmission upon which to draw. Hence he turned to various intellectual texts in the overall cultural field of liberation and combined them into one with the implication that the *YS* became not practical but theoretical in nature.

This gives rise to some questions. As in the *YS* we finally encounter a systematic doctrine, does that mean the yoga discourse went through the same processes of scholasticism, sophistications and institutionalisation, as we saw among the Buddhist and Jains? Further, what motivated this urban upper class milieu after almost 800 years to finally come up with a yoga doctrine? We will first answer the question about a scholastic institution.

### **After the *YS* – what then?**

Based on the *YS* did scholastic texts emerge establishing a comprehensive and refined yoga canon? Did the *YS* manage to stimulate its own institutional settings of a practical school of yogis? The answer seems to be negative. No practical yoga schools appeared, to my knowledge. No dynamic yogic scholastic discourse emerged trying to refine the *YS* as time went by. Usually, if there is a living scholastic philosophical tradition, there are also strong signs of disagreements, of communities, sects, conflicts, and new ideas developing.

To understand the difference, take the similar Buddhist *Chan* movement in China between 500 and 1300, as studied by McRae (2003). Here we see all the signs of a living meditative and philosophical tradition. Groups struggle about who can define and categorise Chan canon. Even core notions such as ‘liberation’ and ‘meditation’ metamorphosed fundamentally. Disagreement, discussions and change were the norm – not the exception. We get a clear picture of a living oral and practical tradition by reading through the *Chan* texts.

Then return to the Indian yoga philosophical milieu. Here there were no sign of

passionate conflicts, no further philosophical or practical elaborations or transformations emerging; no *YS* v. 2.0. Only a few commentaries emerged after the *YS* and they were mainly of a theological and exegetic nature<sup>260</sup>. However exegetic commentaries *clarify* matters – they do not develop existing core theories<sup>261</sup>.

Scholars can see from the first commentaries allegedly emerging 100 years after *YS* (around 500 AD) written by *Vyasa*, that he had lost contact with any “Patanjali yoga school”, if there ever was such a thing. Later commentaries all struggled to make sense of the cryptic *YS*, which indicates lack of continuity, practical transmission and institutions (Bronkhorst 1985). It is clear that the intellectual yoga commentators had no oral tradition to help them to make sense of the material, so they were guessing and interpreting.

Thus the emergence of the *YS* does not really change the problem we have in identifying a practical yoga milieu among the urban elites and their vagrant offshoots. Neither before nor after the *YS* are there clear indications of a vibrant practical yoga milieu deserving the label ‘tradition’. The post *YS* discourse rather lets us assume that this milieu must have been rather feeble.

It seems difficult to establish any connection between the theoretical *YS* and a practical yoga milieu, both before and after it emerged. Even among intellectuals and urban elites, the *YS* did not create much of a stir, based on the meagre commentary traces left. So the *YS* somehow hangs in mid air and we can return to the previous question raised: why was it compiled?

Bronkhorst (1985, 2005) gives an answer as he argues that *YS* was basically a Samkhya text compiled by a Samkhya scholastic, claiming his name was the mythological *Vyasa*. The purpose of writing was to take up the fight with the Buddhists Abhidarma and Yogacara schools on the march. Hence the text was not conceived in order to clarify yoga topics but as a part of an intellectual milieu trying to establish themselves among competing peers.

Larson (2008) agrees that *YS* is a Neo-Samkhya text, conceived to contribute to Samkhya philosophy. He suggests however that the *YS* simultaneously established yoga as an independent philosophy. Following Larson’s argument we are talking about a yoga philosophy not rooted in a practical yoga milieu and which probably never generated its own practical schools. Instead with the *YS* we are left with a yoga philosophy which only figured in the debates of theologians and intellectuals.

Later on the *YS* was imported into Brahmin mainstream as it was incorporated as one of the six philosophical systems. But it never functioned well with non-dual philosophy and Advaita Vedanta. It had become a hostage in their ideological manoeuvrings. Further there are no signs that the *YS* gained any practical function for a living Brahmin meditative movement. Everybody knew about it – like everybody today has heard of Einstein’s relativity theory - but that was probably all. The situation was as when we today buy a prestigious book but never read it, and still keep it on the bookshelf because it leaves a learned impression.

### **Why did the Brahmin adopt and celebrate the obscure *YS*?**

Why did some parts of the Brahmin *adopt* such an almost incomprehensible Samkhya based *YS*, as we know they did within Advaita Vedanta? Why did they honour it with

philosophical status, which earned it learned commentaries later on? Why did it become one of the six [\*dharsanas\*](#)?

One answer might be that the Brahmins needed a text that would *signal* that they also possessed strong *practical* technologies. I would like to develop this line of thought and return with a supported answer in the summary.

As mentioned, the *YS* only developed *exegetic commentaries*, efforts trying to understand the text. There are no indications of critical readings of the text. If one studies the commentaries on *YS*, they seem to be mainly theological texts, incorporating the *YS* into the religious thinking reigning at a specific time (i.e. ‘dominant’ or [\*‘preferred readings’\*](#)). The commentaries show that Brahmins only accepted the *practical methods* of the *YS*. They did not fancy its *philosophy* much – here there were more critical readings to be found. They reconstructed its dualistic philosophical views (*prakriti* and *purusha*) with Puranic theism (Siva and Vishnu theology) or non-dual Vedanta philosophy (*brahman*).<sup>262</sup>

In summary, the reason for producing commentaries *after* Vyasa was, to adjust the yoga techniques to new sectarian and theological doctrines, so that new religious theory and old yoga practice supported each other. This also explains why there never developed a critical and practical tradition based on *experience and observation* – but only *exegesis* (Grinshpon 1997). The purpose was *not* to engage practically with yoga *theoria* and *praxis*, but to adjust new theology to old power-inducing discourses or techniques<sup>263</sup>.

So the post *YS* discourse and its adaptation were mainly about signals and symbols. In the language of anthropologists, it was a *totem* – an object with symbolic power. Those who claimed that they mastered the texts would send a symbolic message to the world. If we draw on ethnographic evidence from the Buddhist camp (Sharf 1995, Stuart-Fox 1985), then we can suggest that the lay Brahmin - like the Buddhist monk – had little understanding of or practical involvement with the meditation canon. These lower Brahmin ranks might like their Buddhist counterpart have had little skill in meditation techniques. It is likewise clear from the Buddhist milieu that the texts detailing meditation functioned as *mantra* objects: the monks recited the texts endlessly without understanding a word.

And this probably could also hold true for the Brahmin monk or priest including the *YS* in their religious worship. By endlessly chanting the texts, the monk – Brahmin or Buddhist - in the end would either build up merit to improve further re-births, or even better: he would *become* the text - i.e. a semi-divine being (Pflueger 1999, Kaelber 1989). We have to remember that there was a general assumption that the universe consisted of words or sound vibrations. By endlessly repeating holy words, the adept would “become” those holy words. This was a strong signal to send out to the surrounding population and competitors. But it did not of course generate a philosophically based meditative movement – not even among professional holy men like the monks. The discourse was in other words primarily about symbolic communication – yoga as a totem.

I have not come across texts asserting that the Brahmin renouncer milieus were living a “*Yoga Sutra Life*” as depicted in the text. Hence, it is highly probable that the *YS* did not play any significant role in the daily life of Brahmin monks and renouncer groups within the Brahmin *asrama* system. Modernist yoga sympathisers have to face the possibility that the *YS*,

and its fascinating and complex meditative sign system, only plays a significant role in *our* modernist fantasies about the spiritual India and its wise meditating sages.

### Summary - Why Patanjali yoga?

So why *Patanjali-yoga* in late Axial Age India? It is not easy to answer, as it is not clear whether it was compiled (by the non-existent Patanjali) about 300-400 AD or about 100 years later by a Samkhya intellectual. One possible explanation is to see the emergence of the text as competition between *intellectual* schools: a Samkhya milieu boosting its status against the Buddhists by claiming they also were in possession of meditative technologies.

We know that during the period 200-600 AD the late Axial Age Brahmins were under increasing pressure as invigorated Buddhism in the form of Mahayana cults turned Buddhism into a popular religion. In this way Buddhists stepped out of their cultural field of liberation. They now also became direct religious competitors to the Brahmin ritualists within the field of religion. The Buddhist package of religion *cum* liberation meant that religious specialists needed to be seen as in possession of practical meditative technologies. This leads to the conjecture that against the challenge from a Buddhist Mahayana religion supported by meditative technologies, the high caste Brahmins responded by adapting practical yoga technologies. Hence they included the only yoga doctrine available – the *YS*. By adapting practical techniques the Brahmins arrived at an equal footing with the Buddhists. The post-Axial Age Brahmins in their commentaries combined yoga with their various religio-philosophies.

This explanation of symbols and *adaptation* can explain why the Samkhya metaphysics of the *YS* in later commentary discourse is hardly commented on and was always turned into Vedantic or theistic doctrines. The chances are that – as we know from contemporary Zen and Theravada monasteries - these holy men spent very little if any time at all meditating (McMahan 2008, Williams 2005). What was important was to be *identified* with a text of meditative technologies – a totem. A way of doing it would be, as the Buddhists often did and still do, to sit and recite the text; making you *embody* a text even though you had no understanding of it. Inspired by the philosopher Baudrillard, we could say that the post-Axial Age Brahmins were not particularly interested in the use-value of the *YS*, but in its symbolic-value – the associated signs, images and simulations. The *YS* was for them a *simulation* (fake) – a situation where signifiers only stand in relation to other signifiers and not in relation to any external reality – in our case a reality consisting of real meditative experiences.

About 500 AD the Gupta Empire collapsed about the same time as the Roman Empire, as central Asian nomads set in motion a chain reaction of events: invasion after invasion swept through the empires as they crumbled. For India as for Europe it meant the end of the Axial Age. Trade deteriorated and towns declined in both India and Europe. It seems to me that during those turbulent times India's ascetic-wisdom based liberation discourses – mainly drawing on the symbolic power of the discourse - survived in small pockets of elite groups and monasteries, as did Christian intellectual discourse in Europe. India and Europe seem to experience similar processes of decentralisation and the return to less complex societies. Both

India and Europe moved slowly into new eco-material and socio-political conditions.

*In 19<sup>th</sup> Century Europe there emerged a renaissance of interest in the Yoga Sutra. It was imagined as the bible of yoga – a text documenting the core principles of ‘classical yoga’ and ‘the yoga tradition’. Readers interested in this modernist intellectual discourse can refer to [Appendix 2](#) – the Yoga Sutra discourse of modernity.*

# **Chapter 8**

# Gnostic yoga – Stories about sages and wisdom

## Key Concepts

[Philosophical idealism](#)

[Maya](#)

[Three-limb yoga](#)

[Gnosticism](#)

[Wisdom as ideology](#)

[Jnana-yoga](#)

[Yoga-Vasistha](#)

[Advaita Vedanta](#)

*This chapter focusses on an example of yoga culture, which highlights wisdom at the cost of asceticism. Proto-yoga and early-yoga were both closely linked to combined ascetic-wisdom discourses. We often tend to focus on the ascetic part of yoga – still mind and breath retention for instance. However in many forms of yoga, the wisdom aspect actually played a more significant role (The word used for wisdom is jnana – “knowledge”; not to be confused with jhana/dhyana - “meditation”).*

*Most ways of liberation contain within them two often conflicting discourses. On the one side we have the claim that austerities leads to liberation, while the other side claims that we should put our weight behind insight and wisdom. Who should we believe, can the two ways of thinking be brought together at all?*

*We have seen many examples of how wisdom discourses and Gnostic liberation models signified many ways of liberation: [Buddhist mindfulness](#) , [buddhi-yoga](#) , jnana-yoga and [Samkhya](#) for instance. So liberation discourses were not necessarily linked to the [Altered States of Consciousness](#) generated by ascetic techniques. For some yoga and liberation was instead a dedicated intellectual exercise bereft of any form of trance induced by asceticism be it meditation or sleep deprivation.*

*In this chapter we focus on a pure form of wisdom yoga, which was widespread among the elites of Medieval India. As we look more closely we find as so often before that behind this specific jnana-yoga – wisdoms-yoga - were actually hidden several variations of yoga, some even conflicting with each other.*

*The way the popular text named *yoga-Vasistha* describes yoga may actually give us an insight into how many people perceived yoga in early Medieval India.*

## Philosophical idealism, Advaita Vedanta and yoga

The Gupta period meant the re-surfacing of Brahmanism into power and politics. Around 700 AD Brahmanism was on the verge of becoming hegemonic, as was evident from the emergence of the *Advaita Vedanta School* ([Wikipedia link](#)) . We need to introduce Vedanta philosophy as it became involved and engaged in the yoga discourse.

The *Advaita Vedanta School* founded by the philosopher Sankara was an offshoot of the *Mimamsa School* ([Wikipedia link](#)). The aim of Sankara and Advaita Vedanta was to pull Brahmanism together in an intellectual Veda-centred ideology so that it could stand up against Buddhism. The *Vedas* were at the centre of Brahmin Mimamsa philosophy, which was concerned about validating the undeniable truth and correct understanding of these texts. This kind of effort is often called theological exegesis.

The Mimamsa Schools - based on the *Mimamsa Sutra* - had already developed the ideology that the *Vedas* were the one and only authority and that the sounds of the words of the *Vedas* reflected the universal sounds of cosmos or *brahman*. It was an intellectual sophisticated ideology for a return to Brahmin rituals.

Vedanta philosophy, closely related to Mimamsa, came in many forms and varieties. It was often used as a name for the alleged philosophy underlying the *Vedas* and *Upanishads* apparently making them into an integrated whole. Thus the *Advaita Vedanta* school claimed that the *Upanishads* were actually an organic part of the *Vedas* – a linear and natural extension. In other words it was proposed that the discourse of liberation had evolved effortlessly out the Vedic culture. In this way the *Advaita Vedanta* Brahmin tried to lay claim to the whole [cultural field of liberation](#), which their ancestors had so intensely opposed. Advaita Vedanta further claimed that the whole Vedic corpus of texts was philosophically underpinned by *ontological monism*: there is nothing but *brahman* – the rest is illusion. The Vedic texts were accordingly re-interpreted by the Vedanta Brahmins and explained in the light of their ontological monism.<sup>264</sup>

The two schools of Mimamsa and Advaita Vedanta both subscribed to the [Gnostic Realisation](#) model of liberation: liberation is an event generated by the insight into the fundamental truth underlying and transcending reality, *brahman*. It was a dry and intellectual liberation discourse. In this intellectual milieu concerned with and receiving authority from ancient canons, ascetic-meditative yoga efforts could not and did not easily play any significant role<sup>265</sup>. Still as we have seen the Brahmins now incorporated the *Yoga Sutra* as a [darsana](#) . It did not play any significant role in their Vedantic philosophy, but it was probably deemed necessary to include ascetic-meditative technologies where the *Advaita* Brahmins tried to position themselves as standing in a long tradition of specialists in liberation. This deliberate manoeuvre made them look very much like their main competitor in their cultural field – the Buddhists.

So as we shall see in this chapter the various Vedantic schools realised that they needed to have some kind of yoga in their fold. In the *Yoga Sutra* chapter we have seen how some Brahmins tried to fit the *Yoga Sutra* into their Vedantic sign system by giving [commentaries](#) (a genre called *bhyasa*). Others went by different routes and discovered a *jnana-yoga* - a Gnostic yoga - among heterodox story-tellers, who entertained the Indian courts. Gnosticism (*gnosis*,

Greek: “knowledge”) is the teaching that through *insight* the adept can gain metaphysical benefits like one-ness with god, salvation or liberation. So it was a *yoga of gnosis (insight)* because it linked *gnosis* with yoga. It made *gnosis* the centre piece of yoga and liberation. It asserted that through yoga efforts, the build up of all illuminating existential *jnana* would lead to final *moksha* (release). It was a yoga discourse which seemed naturally to fit into the intellectual world of Vedanta Brahmanism and its wisdom discourses.

### A heterodox *Moksopaya* becomes the *Yoga-Vasistha (YV)*

The post-Axial Age *Yoga-Vasistha (YV)* is volume-wise in the same range as the great epics of India. Like the *Mahabharata* it is also a real epic with endless stories often contained within each other. But unlike the other epics, this is not a work promoting theism and divine salvation. The *YV* is rather a philosophical oeuvre deliberately using poetic narratives to communicate its optimistic message of liberation through a person’s own efforts. It has the strong conviction that liberation does not require the grace of god like in the *Gita*, but is solely based on determined efforts built up through re-birth after re-birth. So with the *YV* we return to the period of the early *Upanishads*, the Sramanas and early Buddhism - all engaged in liberation philosophies and self-efforts.

With the *YV* we again face a collective work that developed over hundreds of years. The early versions originating from Kashmir were perhaps conceived around 7-800 AD. They were originally called the *Moksopaya* (*Moksa-uapya*: “means to release”) and drew on a range of philosophical currents ranging from Mahayana Buddhism, Jainism, Saiva Siddhanta, to monistic Vedanta. So in many ways the *Moksopaya* was heterodox, as it did not directly match any of the orthodox philosophies (Dasgupta 1922,1991 ed.). But that changed over time.

Now it was subjected to Brahmin treatment. During the long process of editing and compiling, the Brahmin editors and co-writers deliberately began to delete all earlier Buddhist terminology, to insert Brahmin ideology, to eradicate all criticism of Vedic issues and to envelop the teachings in Vedantic monistic philosophy. As the text settled in its present form, four to five hundred years later, it also changed its name to, among others, *Yoga-Vasistha (YV)*, meaning ‘Vasistha’s yoga’ teachings to the warrior prince Rama (Hanneder 2006, Manjadria 2002).

It is not obvious why the notion ‘yoga’ was included in the title of *YV*. It is not until at the very end of the last chapter on liberation that yoga is finally introduced. This presentation however only stretches over 73 verses. So why put yoga in the title of a work of about 30,000 verses? There is no obvious answer. The way in which the sign ‘yoga’ is used in *YV* is in its wide and general meaning of a *sadhana*. In other words the use of the ‘yoga’ sign seems similar to that of the *Mahabharata*: yoga as ‘the harnessing of the nature human conceptual apparatus’; or yoga as a ‘focussed, systematic, regular and dedicated practice leading to release (*moksha*)’. This could explain the use of yoga in the title, as the text is about a dedicated practice leading to release. Hence the work could have as well been named “Vasistha’s *sadhana*”.

### **Ajnana-yoga – Buddhist or Brahmin?**

The many stories of the *YS* clearly express what in the West is called ‘*philosophical idealism*’ ([Wikipedia link](#)) . In philosophy, idealism is, according to Wikipedia, “the group of philosophies which assert that reality, or reality as we can know it, is fundamentally mental, mentally constructed, or otherwise immaterial”. Hence in the *YV* the reader is shown, in story after story, how we are all supposedly living in a dream reality. It is often called *maya* (“illusion”). The act of waking up from *maya*, realising that our experiences – our pleasures and pains - are all a function of our consciousness has a liberating effect. This insight and realisation of *maya* is in the *YV* a Gnostic event, like solving a puzzle or enigma. Suddenly the pieces fall into place.

It is important to realise that this style of liberation is not achieved in deep absorption, as we saw in the *Upanishads* and the *Yoga Sutra*. The many stories do not exemplify [mystical realisation](#) . Instead the liberation sign, promoted in the stories of the *YV*, is very resonant with the one endorsed by some Buddhist schools: liberation as a final intellectual insight happening in this life, metaphorically a quantum jump in consciousness.

The *YS* in its little yoga appendix envelops this Buddhist liberation model in sign systems from Brahmin Vedanta- and [Saivite Siddhanta](#) philosophy. The effect of this is that the liberation model changes signification. In the *Upanishads* and Vedanta, as we recall, the knowing subject became *brahman*, as the adept realised this connection. The *YV* appendix shares this signification of final release. It does not see liberation as *nirvana* - the blowing out of desires - but as *brahman*- or Siva realisation. The appendix also shares the *Upanishad* view that mystic realisation happens in deep absorption. With this, the theoretical appendix outlines an *Upanishad* model of liberation different from the liberation model in the stories in the main corpus, where people gain sudden insight during normal states of consciousness.

Hence the *YV* promotes various forms of *jnana-yoga*: they are all yoga of release through cognition and wisdom – but this can happen as a result of insight taking place in either normal or altered states of consciousness. In the [triangle](#) of liberation model which I use to analyse various liberation models, we can see that this tension actually reflects two ideal types of liberation: Gnostic Comprehension and Mystical Realisation. Such merging of conflicting Buddhist and Brahmin discourses of Gnostic liberation creates inconsistencies.

The text is very insistent that release is a case of deep understanding of the conditions of reality. It does not entirely dismiss traditional efforts – *sadhanas* - like asceticism, pilgrimage, rituals and *mantra* recitation. They all have their benefits, but they do not liberate in the end. *Moksha* first happens through a final ground-breaking Gnostic insight. What is further unclear in the *YV* is whether this liberation is epistemological – the restructuring of the human mind set – or if it is ontological – reality is not physical but non-dual (or should we say ‘ideational’). I will return to this.

### **Yoga – listening to stories or seven strenuous stages?**

If liberation means ‘insight’ the question naturally follows, what is it that we need to have insight into?

What do we need to have wisdom about? In general from the stories of the *YS* we can see that it is the fact that we are living in an illusion – *maya* – that we need to realise. But why is humankind caught in this illusion - what is it that conditions our dreamlike predicament and keeps us there?

To find an answer to our questions, it is natural to turn to the Appendix and the 73 verses describing *YV*’s vision of yoga. It is here that the *YV* condenses and provides an overview to the path to liberation. Reading them, at first glance the answer seems inspired by Buddhism. As in Buddhist schools of mindfulness, the answer seems to be found in our cognitive and perceptual apparatus (Dasgupta 1922, 1991 ed.). It is the attachment to desire which is our root problem and keeps humankind trapped in a dreamlike world. Only when consciousness is re-configured into an ultimate state, where there is experience of neither pain nor pleasure, then there is a release from *samsara* (“re-incarnation”). *Karma* has lost its fuel supply and *samsara* stops. Thus liberating wisdom is the mindful insight into our human apparatus of perception and cognition. This is what this *jnana-yoga* initially appears to be is about.

But if the 73 yoga verses say that we should focus on our way of filtering and thinking about reality, why does the main corpus of the *YV* then tell endless stories, thought to have a liberating effect? Based on these stories would we not instead expect that Vasistha’s yoga in its condensed form advised us just to listen to its stories until the curtains of delusion suddenly fall? In other words we would expect its yoga method to be for the audience to listen to narratives composed in such a way that they create insight into non-duality. Many scholars have accordingly drawn the following conclusion about the *YV*: the motivation behind the author telling endless stories - repeating more or less the same message - is that this will reveal *maya*. We just need to hear these stories enough times to become liberated. This is the underlying model of liberation of the main corpus of the text.

However, this is not the conclusion to draw from studying the 73 verses “*On the Seven Stages of Yoga*” in the final liberation chapter. The *jnana-yoga* described here is not about listening to enlightening stories. We encounter instead a yoga which is a long and strenuous process stretching over several lives. This process is described as consisting of seven stages.

These seven stages of yoga are nonetheless related to the main structure or composition of the *YV*. The 30,000 verses are divided into six main divisions: *dis-passion, qualifications of the seeker, creation, existence, dissolution and liberation*. These divisions represent or mirror the seven yoga stages required for release. So the corpus of the *YV* is structured like a yogic liberation process, hence perhaps its title.

### The three-limb yoga – stages of insight and development

Many will jump to the conclusion that the *YV* as it talks about seven stages should be categorised as a seven-limb yoga. But the elements of this yoga are not like those of for instance eight and six-limb yogas, where a group of various and complementary *methods* build up towards release. The elements in Vasistha’s yoga are *phases* of human development – like

phases a child runs through as it grows up. So this reminds us more of the stages of Jain liberation discourse.

In its summary of yoga in the first three phases, we dimly see some yoga methods. Those three initial phases – and not the aforementioned seven stages - seem on closer reading to express the core of this *jnana-yoga*. So if we insist on classifying this yoga, we could call it a ‘three-limb yoga’. Thus, as in Patanjali’s *kriya-yoga*, there are also three limbs in Vasistha’s *jnana-yoga* (Chapple 2012, Manjdadria 2002).

### Three-limb *jnana-yoga*

Stages of insight:

1 stage	Dispassion towards life ( <i>viraga</i> ), Due to build up of merits
2 stage	Deep thinking ( <i>vicarana</i> ) <i>Dharana, dhyana, tarka</i>
3 stage	Non-attachment ( <i>asamsanga</i> )                  Leads to yoga consciousness

The first phase does not originate in a person’s temporary will-power, but emerges as a result of countless reincarnations. The virtuoso in other words claims distinction and symbolic capital due to symbolic labour accumulated in former re-incarnations. It is due to the build up of positive merits through earlier lives that a person finally experiences the deep-seated feeling of “enough is enough”. Accordingly the *YV* claims:

“By performing yoga, through accumulated purity and by the storehouse of one’s good actions, one arrives at the mysteriously fortuitous first stage” (v.38).

The first stage commences with the final understanding that an endless process unfolds in the human mind: as soon as one human desire is fulfilled, the next desire emerges in consciousness and craves to be fulfilled. Due to this insight the adept at this stage becomes overwhelmed by a dispassion (*viraga*) towards life. Vasistha calls this phase of dispassion (*viraga*) towards life the ‘*stage of renunciation*’ (*nivritti*).

The person is now ready to “seek out the knowledge of the scriptures. This person should become a deep thinker (Vicarin)” v.13. The second stage is thus characterised by a dispassionate expert committed to doctrinal studies. Hence it is in this second ‘*stage of deep thinking*’ (*vicarana*) that the self-efforts of *jnana-yoga* really begin. How does one proceed? How to become a deep thinker?

This is described as a combination of concentration (*dharana*), meditation (*dhyana*) and through studying ‘revealed and remembered scriptures’. This combination has clear echoes of the *Maitri Upanishad*, which also described a yoga combining thinking (*tarka*) and meditative absorption. Meditation alone leads nowhere, said the *Maitri*. Meditation has to be combined with the understanding of canon. In this context it is perhaps important to recall that the yoga of the *Maitri* had strong flavours of Buddhist mindfulness. Thus it might be Buddhist liberation philosophy that we find at the bottom of *YV*’s *jnana-yoga* stages as it combines analytical thinking with meditation.

The efforts of stage two - calming the mind and the build up of dogmatic insights - will lead to the third stage. The third stage has the effect of ‘release from desire’ (v.21) and

‘awakening of the self’ (v.24). We note that the first stage is Buddhist in character (release equals freedom from desire) and the second is Brahmin (release equals *brahman* realisation). As the *YV* gives a name to this third stage, it seems to lean towards the Buddhist camp: this is the ‘*stage of non-attachement*’ (*asamsanga*).

This third stage climaxes in a re-configured consciousness. This ultimate consciousness achieved in phase three is interestingly enough labelled ‘yoga’. Yoga is here visualised as a ‘consciousness of ultimate negation’, a mind state where there is neither pleasure nor pain (Dasgupta 1922).

### The confusing last four stages

In summary, the self-efforts of *jnana-yoga* run through three main stages: dispassion towards life (*viraga*), deep thinking (*vicarana*) leading to non-attachment (*asamsanga*). This climax of yoga-consciousness however does not imply final release, but only to a re-birth to a (pleasant) life of yoga (v.57). There are still four more stages to go through. But this time it seems that the stages are about various *altered mind states* – not stages in insight and personal development. The stages all seem dreamlike, temporary and transitory.

It is not clear exactly how and why the yoga-consciousness manages to enter these last four stages instead of returning to *samsara* for another turn of the wheel. We are only told that this shift happens through the practice of the three previous yoga stages.

#### Four stages of yoga consciousness

4<sup>th</sup> Stage of the dream world (*svapna loka*).

5<sup>th</sup> Stage of deep non-dual sleep (*advaita susupta*)

6<sup>th</sup> Stage of living liberation (*jivan-mukti*)

7<sup>th</sup> Stage of free from the body (*videha mukti*).

When it has entered the fourth stage the yoga-consciousness perceives the world in a “non-dual vision with all thoughts of duality put to rest, the yogins see this world as it is a dream.” (v.60). This is called the fourth ‘*stage of the dream world*’ (*svapna loka*). It is not clear what is happening here or if anything further needs to be achieved. From the descriptions of ‘the non-dual visions’ of stage four, we would have thought it had happened already at stage three. So it is not clear what changed in the yoga-consciousness by moving from stage three to stage four. Then like in a dream sequence the yoga-consciousness moves on.

From the fourth state, yoga-consciousness – automatically or due to some unknown factor? – moves into a fifth ‘*stage of deep non-dual sleep*’ (*advaita susupta*). The Yogi is here “at the end of the remaining existence” (v.62). It is once more, not clear what the difference really is from the previous stage. Is the Yogi not really consciously present, but in a deep meditative sleep? Is this a description of a Yogi, after having lived a life as a *jivan-mukti* (a “living liberated”), now at the end of his life? Is this a description of the consciousness of a liberated person sliding into death to final release, as we saw it among the Jain meditators at the time of Buddha?

Then, once more, the dreamlike yoga-consciousness streams into a sixth *state of living liberation* (*jivan-mukti*): “With the knots of karma untied, one finds peace in the body, living as liberated soul” (v.67). Again it is not clear how the Yogi got there and what created the difference. What we do understand is that until now *karma* was not completely stopped. This arrest of *karma* seems to be what happens at this sixth stage. However, this is strange, because usually we are told that when there is insight into desire (as in stage three), there is release, which by definition also means the arrest of karmic energy.

Further if the adept is now in a state of living liberation then our conclusion that the previous fifth phase was a description of the Yogi sliding into death seems doubtful. This doubt is supported two verses later as it states that from the outset “this person seems highly accomplished, but also seems like nothing special” (v.69). This is not a description of the dying adept as we encountered in the fifth phase. Some commentators – not noticing the confusing description – claim that this verse means the Yogi here is only performing his duties when prompted. He dies some days after having reached the seventh stage.

So the reader encounters question after question. At this sixth stage, most readers would probably expect that the dream-like journey has ended in this state of living liberation. But there is a final seventh stage called “*free from the body*” (*videha mukti*). Our first thought is that in this seventh phase the yogi must have died, because “this is called liberated, freed from the body – a state beyond the horizon of the earth. By some it is called Siva. By others, it is referred to as Brahman” (v.71). But we never know when dealing with non-dual philosophy: this phase could also be a description of a living person’s non-dual realisation. Accordingly, keeping us in confusion as to whether this is happening in life or death, the final verse ends with a question: “How can this eternal, indescribable consciousness be described? (v.73).

So in the end, any audience trying to analyse the argument would become more mystified than enlightened on encountering the 73 verses on yogic liberation. They do not clarify the process of liberation. The reason seems clearly that the seven stages are trying to envelop various wisdom discourses of liberation with Brahmin and Saivite religio-philosophy. There is for instance clearly a rupture between the first three and the last four stages.

Further the seven stages seem disconnected from the main corpus of the *YV*. If the audience at the time of the *YV* instead turned its attention to the many stories of the *YV*, it would find between the lines a different type of liberation. Here woven into many stories, liberation was visualised as an act of grasping the propositions of philosophical idealism. By listening to stories expressing Vedantic and Saivite idealism, the audience was supposed to finally grasp philosophical idealism, and in that moment, they would become liberated.

### A process of linking yoga to Vedanta philosophy

In many ways, Vasistha’s yoga seems in its first three stages to derive from Buddhist wisdom liberation. These three stages would have sufficed for Buddhist release. The three stages are easy to comprehend as they describe a typical Buddhist epistemological change of liberation. In order to induce this three-limbed *jnana-yoga* with Brahmin significance, it was

deemed necessary by the editors to bolt on four stages of Brahmin Vedanta philosophy.

Another possibility is that Buddhist writers initially tried to include Brahmin Vedanta philosophy in their teaching. These efforts inspired Brahmin readers to take over. They then cleaned up the *Moksopaya* for Buddhist heterodoxy and slowly turned the text in to the *YV*. Under all circumstances, this merger of discourses created all the confusion discussed.

The last four stages, describing the final slide into the underlying non-duality, are hard to understand. As happens so often when we confront Brahmin non-dual philosophy, the last four stages are difficult to distinguish individually and one struggles to agree with their necessity. The reader wonders how much of the alleged change of consciousness is epistemological in nature and how much in this final release is ontological.

We could then construct the hypothesis, that in the early days of the *Moksapaya*, the text was developed in non-Brahmin circles. It constituted a genuinely new and clever way of communicating heterodox liberation philosophy to the upper classes of Indian society. Due to its success, the concept was then brought under Brahmin hegemony and editing, and changed its name to (inter alia) *Vasistha's Yoga*. Its philosophical idealism and Gnostic liberation were relatively easy to fit into Brahmin Vedantic thinking. For the Brahmins, this meant that they were able to complement their Vedantic theology with a practical liberation philosophy: a yoga taught by Vasistha.

### **The social impact of the *Yoga Vasistha***

According to the few secondary sources, the text became popular and celebrated among the upper classes outside Brahmin castes. I have not been able to verify this. Urban elite and warrior nobility householders – [yoga sympathisers](#) not living a strict and secluded ascetic life – found inspiration to live a life where worldly duties could be combined with textual studies and meditation. It is not unthinkable that Vasistha's yoga, being a gentle *jnana-yoga*, was an attractive and realistic proposition to a rich merchant or a large landowner, who late in life became concerned about the existential issues of life. Through these philosophical based stories performed at provincial courts and large festivals, people were captivated, enchanted and motivated by the stories optimistic liberation philosophy. From here it would have been relatively simple for people to find a teacher to instruct them in simple meditation and guidance in the study of scriptures. This is the moment when the Vedantic Brahmin steps through the door of the yoga sympathiser and offer his services.

So we here see a yoga genre which would have had much better chance of surviving and prospering within the overall culture of the upper strata than the dense, incomprehensive austere mysticism of the *Upanishads* and the *Yoga Sutra*. These ancient cerebral teachings, advocated a demanding self-restrained path of liberation which was only for the very few. Such a self-denying life would probably only have attracted a minority of householders and then maybe mainly because of the supernatural powers it promised. In short there is not much basis for a vibrant milieu adhering to the *Yoga Sutra*, as it demanded great personal sacrifice and was intellectually hard to access.

Thus the *YV* and its householder-friendly varieties of *jnana-yoga* is the much more likely candidate for an enduring yoga culture among the Indian upper classes. If the householder yoga sympathiser did not achieve release in this life, it was not critical, as he soon would return with much improved *karma*.

This might have been the way some of the yoga sympathisers of the upper classes understood yoga: it was a three-limbed yoga, where the householder, with gentle tranquil meditation assisted by scriptural studies, would cool his human ingrained desires, leading to increased non-attachment and a build up of merit for the next round of life. Others would, based on the *YV*, have thought about yoga as an *intellectual effort* leading to sudden gnostic insight - tricked for instance by listening to pedagogical liberation stories. And then there would have been countless versions in between those two perceptions.

### ***Jnana-yoga as cultural field***

Could such a *jnana-yoga* discourse provide [cultural and symbolic capital](#) and thereby the foundation for a life as a professional specialist? Did it contain sufficient power discourse to enable a cultural sub-system within the overall [cultural field of liberation](#)? Evidently it provided the economic basis for itinerant storytellers and bards who entertained the upper strata of society. However the *YV* also contained a defined three-limb yoga which was very Buddhist and Jain in nature. As within Buddhism and Jainism it is likely that this yoga would have provided a Brahmin or Saivite intellectual with a way of living as instructor in the knowledge-skills it presumed. There were first of all the scriptural studies requiring experts and teachers. Then there was the teaching of the skills of meditative techniques of *dhyana* and *dharana*. We realise that all these requirements would provide the intellectual specialist with cultural capital (knowledge resources), which he could then exchange with economic goods.

What about the symbolic capital – the ability to accumulate difference and perceived superiority? First of all the intellectual could refer to his former lives which would justify his quest for liberation and his expertise in this life. He was a ‘stage two deep thinker’ (a *vicarana*). No-one could argue with that. Secondly the liberation expert associated himself with the sign yoga – a totem radiating symbolic power. By linking what is basically Brahmin and Saivite philosophical idealism to powerful symbols like yoga and liberation the intellectual specialist accumulated symbolic capital. The meditative technologies, which were strictly speaking unnecessary for obtaining liberation, were also powerful symbols or totems. This shows us that after maybe a thousand years there was still an implicit [code or habitus](#) in force in Medieval Indian society, which invested totems like yoga, *dharana* and *dhyana* with power and difference. Brahmin and Saivite philosophical idealism linked into this and thus allowed the specialist to accumulate symbolic capital.

But this association also reveals some of the flaws and contradictions in *VY*. We recall that liberation was basically a question of sudden and fundamental *gnosis* – knowledge seeing through the deceit and illusions of this world – which could be acquired even by listening to stories. If *gnosis* can be attained so easily, why then all the efforts of *dharana* and *dhyana*? Yes, maybe they could accelerate the process, but they were not strictly necessary conditions

for liberation. They were rather there to imbue the Brahmin intellectual with authority and difference.

### ‘The sage’ – wisdom as ideology

There is not much scholarly research into the *YV* and what research there is does not focus on the sociology of the text and its interaction with society. What is remarkable is that we here have a text which at first glance seems more concerned with use-value than with social symbolic messages. There is very little about promoting supernatural powers, caste purity or theism in this yoga. Instead we encounter beautiful and optimistic stories of liberation by *our own efforts*. But then, on second thoughts, the reader will discover that the symbolic messaging of *YV* is subtler. It is obviously a refined tool for circulating and propagating philosophical idealism based on Saivism and Vedanta.

The *YV* does more than this, because it solidifies ‘the story of the ancient sage’, today often labelled the ‘guru’. ‘The story of the ancient sage’ is a myth and powerful ideological device that most of the world has strongly bought into. We have done it to such a degree that this story still shapes modernist perceptions. This myth prevents us from critical investigation of yoga and other liberation texts, because we are told that these texts are either created by such ‘ancient sages’ or are a product of their wisdom. What do I mean by that?

The stories of the *YV* construct, refine and expand the identity of ‘the ancient sage’. It is a narrative about an adept who, through *gnosis* and meditation, has left the world and his human nature behind him. It is a *dis-interested* person not concerned by the issues taunting human nature: desire, greed, fear, power, vanity, deceit, and anxiety. Through endurance and long-term commitment to meditation and self-insight, the stage two deep thinker has managed to distinguish himself from the rest of humanity. Thus the story about the sage is about difference and superiority. Indifference, superiority, *gnosis* has become inherent to the sign of a ‘sage’ - as ‘little’ is inherent to the sign ‘dwarf’.

If we, the audience of the story, accept the way it has constructed the ‘sage’ sign, it has repercussions. By labelling this cultural specialist ‘an ancient sage’ we have also removed our sound scepticism and evaluating power. The word ‘sage’ signals a special kind of truth and knowledge about existence and our place within. A knowledge which cannot easily be acquired, but which the ‘sage’ embodies by being a sage. Let me expand this argument.

The story of the sage of the *YV* claims that he has entered one of seven yoga stages, from where he is able to diagnose the malaise of those who have not entered those stages. He has put himself in the position of the ‘knowing speaker’ and defined his environment as his ‘ignorant audience’. He will tell this audience that they, unlike him, are captured by human nature and *maya*.

Sceptics are welcome to disagree with this sage, but that will only make their predicament lasting and worsen. Their scepticism is a part of *maya* – the delusional play of the world. As the sage claims – and we believe this *because* he is a sage – he is liberated from *maya* and the emotional and cognitive attachments embedded in human nature. He is by definition a disinterested and hence trustworthy person, who can see what for us is impossible

to see. We, the audience, are caught in a *Catch 22*.

The alternative is to follow the sage or the guru. Instead of probing and evaluating his claims of wisdom, nonbelievers should instead submit to his authority based in wisdom. “*Trust me*”, the sage says gently, “*I have no desire for power and status*”.

The *YV* embodies an ideology where wisdom is legitimating wisdom through story telling.

Hence the *YV* is a beautiful example of a wisdom power discourse in action. It seeks no justification in asceticism or rituals like many of the early Sramanic and Brahmin discourses. It expresses the core of Buddhist and Brahmin wisdom discourses, as we encountered them in earlier chapters in this book. Its message is that if the audience listens long and carefully to its wisdom, they will harvest the benefits.

We don’t know how widespread the text was; if the audience only perceived the stories as sophisticated entertainment, or how far the stories inspired the upper classes to transform their lives. But, then on the other hand, we can ask the same question of our time and era: how much do Hollywood movies, often coded with moral teachings and life philosophy, motivate and transform our modern lives? Following this, can we ask whether the sages of the *YV* had the same impact as the celebrities and figures of Hollywood movies have on our society?

As we accept the power of captive story telling and their identities, I believe that the *YV*, and the yoga wisdom it expresses, deserves its own short chapter. Modernist yoga discourse mostly focusses on the *Yoga Sutra* as the decisive and towering text of the yoga discourse. Perhaps the majority of yoga sympathisers in pre-modern India saw it differently. For them yoga was not about release in absorbed meditation. Instead yoga was about listening to enlightening tales, scriptural studies and a bit of tranquil meditation in good company with a guru.

# **Chapter 9**

# Tantra and Saivite yoga – Body and power

## Key Concepts

<u>High-caste Tantra</u>	<u>Mandala &amp; mantra</u>
<u>Tantric sadhana</u>	<u>Kama &amp; sakti</u>
<u>Tantraloka</u>	<u>Divinisation</u>
<u>Yoga-Upanishads</u>	<u>Saivism</u>
<u>Hinduisation</u>	<u>Great and Little Tradition</u>
<u>Agamas Tantras</u>	<u>Saivite ascetic cults</u>
<u>Malini Tantra</u>	<u>Bhukti</u>
<u>Diksa-guru</u>	<u>Jains' Yoga-sastra</u>
<u>Feudal grants system</u>	<u>Kula, Krama &amp; Trika</u>

*Leaving the Axial Age Empires behind us we now move into a new matrix or eco-social environment of the Indian subcontinent. It is a fragmented and de-centralised environment and often compared to Europe's feudal and medieval times. In my sociological model I expect a plethora of new discourses, social groups, practices and social identities to emerge under new conditions and conflicts. And this is indeed what we witness in this era, often known as the Tantric cultural era, which evolved out of conflicts between structurally different societies, a process often called Hinduisations. This chapter will show in detail how social conflict and power struggles between structurally different societies create the conditions for fundamental religio-cultural institutional and social interactional changes in those societies. In other words out of this clash evolve new religio-cultural institutions, interaction and discourses, expressed in the Tantras. Integral to and tightly woven into this evolution of discourses and institutions we find new social identities and communities. We shall investigate how the yoga discourses fared under these new circumstances.*

*'Tantric yoga' is a purely scholarly notion. In fact if by yoga we understand ascetic-meditative practices then such practices were radically criticised in some Tantric texts at that time. Instead some Tantrics suggested using the body as a source for quick transformation. If Tantra tends to be critical of yoga and if the Tantrics rarely describe their sadhana as yoga, why then include Tantra?*

*First of all, as Tantric discourse was often such a frontal attack on ascetic-wisdom discourses, we need to see how they reacted to the impact: many texts deal with yoga issues and adapt them to the new circumstances. Secondly, despite some Tantrics being negative towards yoga and meditation, there appears to be a Saivite ascetic discourse during this period, which continued to praise yoga and to adapt it to the impact of Tantra. We will look into this almost forgotten Saivite yoga. Thirdly, at the end of this period, there emerged several texts focussing on and praising a new radical form of yoga discourse. It was called hatha-yoga and many contemporary yoga popularisers honour hatha-yoga as the source of their practice. So, fourth and finally, to understand the hatha-yoga discourse we need to get to grips with the social dynamic forces of feudal India, which conditioned Tantric discourse of which hatha-yoga was a part.<sup>266</sup>*

*So this chapter does not aim at a comprehensive account of Tantra but focusses on those aspects that would become crucial for holy men committed to yoga. <sup>267</sup> This chapter will focus on understanding the historio-sociology and power discourse of Tantra.*

## 1. A short overview of Tantric- and medieval yoga discourse

### A new cultural epoch

It has been argued that throughout its long history Indian society and culture experienced some decisive ruptures or discontinuities. This argument denies the doctrines of modern Hindu nationalism and most yoga popularisers, who take the opposite view that we can talk meaningfully about a single coherent Hindu culture since the *Vedas*. ‘Revolution of paradigms’ is an often-used term inspired by Thomas Kuhn’s analysis of the history of Western science – a paradigm being the overall model of the world around which various theories, ideas, concepts and doctrines are clustered. A shift in paradigm is a fundamentally new way of perceiving and understanding the world, in other words, a rupture in *episteme*. This rupture means that previous thoughts, words and practices change their meaning and function.

### ***Shift of paradigm:***

fundamental re-configuration of worldview  
so constituting ideas and practices change meaning

The body and its desires has been re-defined  
and constructed with new meaning



Large parts of ‘feudal’ or ‘medieval’ India experienced such a cultural paradigm shift [268](#). Scholars today name it *Tantra* – i.e. the Tantric period - lasting from about 600-1300 AD [269](#). By looking at some of the visual imagery from the period often displayed at royal courts and in temples, it can easily be verified that something had changed. While the ascetic-wisdom discourses typically had been about controlling and mortifying the body, the new Tantric imagery revealed bodies in lustful situations. - people copulating and enjoying the desires of the body as a part of finding release and salvation! It is apparent that the body and its desires had been redefined and constructed with new meaning. Where for instance *Patanjali-yoga* and *Krishna-yoga* saw desire as a fundamental hindrance to liberation, it seems that desire now has the opposite meaning as sexual intercourse is even sculpted into temple walls.

The Tantric discourse is often very secretive, as many of its viewpoints and practices are perceived as subversive and repulsive. Further, Tantra portrays itself as a mystic discourse believing its know-how and practices as dangerous and powerful and to be kept away from the un-initiated. Finally, Tantra has for a long time been pushed under the carpet by Orientalists and Colonial Indian intellectuals in their efforts to present Indian culture as rational. Hence it is difficult to find systematic and qualified research on Tantric mysticism..

### **Tantra and the ideological struggle**

At about 600 AD scriptures emerged, calling themselves ‘*Tantra*’. They reached their zenith between 800 and 1000 AD and stopped being released after around 1200-1300 AD. The people who wrote the *Tantras* would not call themselves *Tantrics*, but would typically describe themselves as *Trika*, *Krama*, *Kaula* or *Buddhist Siddhacaryas*. In contrast to the traditional way of writing theological treatises – i.e. the *Sutras*, which explored and clarified the themes of the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads* - the Tantric treatises saw themselves as a new path going beyond – being *superior to* - the classical scriptures. [270](#) However, under the umbrella of Tantra is grouped a range of scriptures emerging from different traditions: the *Agamas* (Saivite), the *Samhitas* (Vaishnavite) and the *Tantras* (Sakti, Saivite, Buddhist).

The scriptures legitimised themselves as being ‘revelations’. They would typically commence: “*this and this guru was told by this and this god that ...*”(and then the treatise would begin). They were ideological devices giving themselves strong authority, as they challenged existing knowledge and [cultural fields](#) . As a part of this discourse strategy they

would typically construct complex hierarchical cosmologies, where earlier traditions' cosmologies and gods were given a lower ranking. This also often happened to yoga. Rituals, *mantras* and *Gnosis* were often seen as far superior to yoga – often yoga was at best tolerated as a minor ritual of preparation. This indicates to us that new categorisation and valuation were taking place within the overall [cultural field of liberation](#); as for cultural fields, a typical struggle for position and ability to define the field was under way.

However, this should not let us believe that the yoga sign and the ascetic-wisdom discourses had disappeared. During the Tantric period there were still many scriptures produced within the established genres in the field of liberation. There emerged numerous writings carrying in their title the notion *Upanishad*, writings which consciously and deliberately signalled that they belonged to the orthodox Brahmin Vedic discourse. The period became a melting pot of conflicting new and old discourses. This resulted in momentous changes to the yoga sign: both the practices ('the referent') and the meaning ('the signified') were re-constructed and re-valued.

So despite all the changes and devaluation of symbolic value, the yoga discourse was far from extinct. Some texts of this period discussed yoga.<sup>271</sup> It was still a totem radiating the symbolic power with which specialists found they needed associate. Even the Jains, who often devalued the word *yoga* ('the signifier') found it necessary to come up with discussions of *yoga*. The Buddhists also discussed a six-limb-yoga in a couple of their Tantras.

In this period Saivism rose to dominance. It was especially in the ascetic Saivite renouncer discourse that *yoga* was frequently discussed. Here *yoga* discourse often became merged with new Tantric ideas (Vasudeva 2000).

In general, one can possibly conclude that the *yoga* sign in this period acquired a stigma. It was not just a high status notion. Most Tantric theological discourse did not treat *yoga* positively. Often *yoga* was dismissed as inefficient or redundant. *Yoga*'s stigma seems to be reflected in popular narration (White 2009). In medieval romances, tales and farces the figure of the *Jogi* began to gain prominence. He often emerged as a sort of anti-protagonist – the symbol of wickedness ruining the life of good people. So in these genres the *Jogi* was not portrayed as a peace-loving meditator – as modern popular *yoga* discourse would like to show him - but as a powerful evil sorcerer scaring the audience.

So the Tantric period was a tumultuous period for the medieval *yoga* discourse. At one moment it seems that *yoga* was renewed and blossoming, at the next it was hidden away in a theistic closet. Let us now have a short sketch of Tantric theological discourse as expressed among the high-castes and then have a look at the cultural sociology of Tantra.

### Tantric high-caste discourse in a few words

One of the most recognisable practices of the Tantric communities was their endless ritual of muttering syllables often leading the practitioner into trance. This practice of putting consciousness into trance by reciting *mantra* was seen as one of the most powerful ways of accessing the power of the gods. The vibration of the words would resonate with the gods, so the practitioner would become one with the gods (Feuerstein 1998). Tantra was therefore often

named the “path of mantra” – *Mantramarga* – even if mantra’ing was also practised by non-Tantrikas.<sup>272</sup>

Instead, what seemed to make a difference was firstly ideological: Tantric practices and rituals did not acknowledge the Vedic ritual tradition, but constructed and legitimised their rituals in relation to the gods they worshipped. Secondly Tantric practices defined and focussed on the body-mind in a new way. Where former practices typically aimed at calming or even mortifying the body-mind system, the Tantrics typically moved the body-mind system into ecstatic and possession-like states. So we find many similarities to [Shamanism](#). A third significant difference was that for many groups Tantra primarily aimed at immortality and power *in this world* – not the afterlife release of the soul.

This new discourse constructed the Tantric body with different meaning and purpose – with new use- and symbolic-value. It was often constructed as an integral part of a divine world. Here for instance god would be pure consciousness or pure energy. Human mind, body and overall physical matter would just be lower and slower forms of the divine. Thus the body-mind system was fundamentally divine. Human consciousness and body were nothing but lower manifestations of divine energies. Through various often ecstatic techniques human consciousness could be accelerated and raised to divine levels. The body’s sexual energies, its ability to orgasm, and its potential for emotional and physical ecstasy were a part of the divine seen as divine resources. These divine resources were often not solely directed towards release but toward gaining power in life. All this was unheard of in the old ascetic-wisdom discourses. Seen in relation to our notion of [Altered States of Consciousness](#) (ASC) we could say that Tantra compared to Axial Age yoga forms offered a significant increase of acceptable ASCs.

The Tantric expert H. Urban (2010) has suggested that one could define Tantra through its explicit focus on two key notions – *kama* (desire) and *sakti* (power). Both were seen to be omnipresent resources available to be used by the Tantric adept. This definition highlights a significant difference from historical earlier yoga forms that saw *kama* (desire) as the archenemy.

Among the wider population the Tantrics became mainly sorcerers, magicians, healers and exorcisers, who through their magical powers could manage earthly events and deities. It is obvious that the rural low caste Tantric evolved out of the Shamanic institution of non-Aryan India.

The upper classes often geared Tantra to quick release and salvation. Their High Tantra (upper caste) discourse - like early Buddhism - claimed that liberation could happen in this life. They termed it *siddhi* (“the perfected one”) or *jivan-mukti* (“living liberated”). However, two pre-conditions were often deemed necessary: the practitioner needed to be initiated by a guru and liberation would only take place with the final grace of god. The power of self-effort was simultaneously strong limited in the Tantric discourse.

The locus of Tantric liberation and immortality was slowly mapped out and attained a name as the *divine subtle body*. This was a divine energy body configuring the physical body-mind system. It was a metaphysical system of channels, veins, fluids, winds, centres (*chakras*), and deities. Tantric *sadhana* (“practice”) aimed at in various ways to manipulate the divine

subtle body by meditations, visualisations, *mandalas*, movements, gestures, rituals, *mantras* and so on. Even antinomian techniques breaking all Brahmin taboos were applied – the use of wine, meat, and sex.

### New technologies of salvation

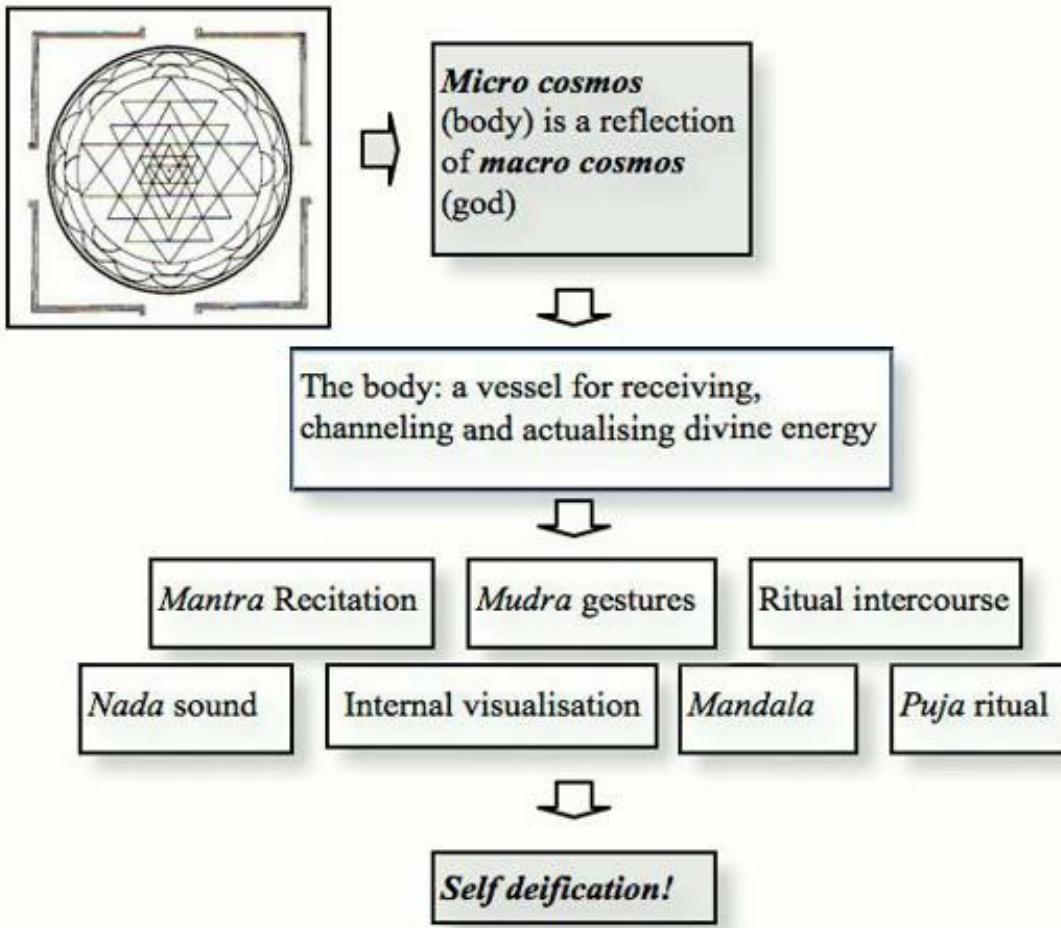
Underlying the urban High Tantra discourse was the Chinese concept that micro-cosmos corresponds with macro-cosmos: in every tiny part of the universe you will see reflections of the totality – in Tantra ‘the total’ being ‘the universal divine principle’ [273](#). Most of the Tantric practice – *sadhana* – reflected this new ontology. In Western terms *sadhana* was often aimed at generating a state of trance - ASC. We would typically use terms like: physical and emotional ecstasy; possession; overload of sense input; or the numbing of mind. Other techniques were geared towards the mortification of the body/mind system. Here follows a short introduction to the new ASC generating techniques.

The *mandala* as a Tantric sign probably has its origin in Buddhist discourse. Buddhism refined the practice of using *mandalas* – sometimes also called *yantras* – as a new method to achieve the new Tantric goal of Buddha-hood. *Mandalas* were visual diagrams seen as an energy map or grid of the universe. The lines in the diagrams (see figure below) represented human and divine energy pulses: an energy map of the human and divine world. By continuously watching a *mandala* one will receive the “god’s eye view” of everything, experience the world as god does. The practitioner was supposed to watch the diagram for hours until totally absorbed by it. At that stage - of deep trance - one will see one’s own Buddha-hood at the centre – one’s divine nature.

The *mandala* practice was in other words a typical Tantric practice of harmonising one’s own energy and consciousness with the deity (White 2000), becoming what one already was: a deity. This practice of *self-deification* or ‘perfection’ (*siddhi*) can be seen in a range of other Tantric practices. The *mudra* practice for instance was often about using special gestures and poses. These gestures symbolised a deity and by keeping the gesture for prolonged time - in perhaps deep meditation or using breathing techniques - the *siddha* (“the adept”) accessed the divine.

The same applies to the *japa* practice of muttering syllables (*mantras*) (Timalsina 2005). *Japa* was the endless repeating of a word, which was thought to cause the consciousness to vibrate in divine ways. This took place in *nada-yoga*: by using sound (*nada*), which resonates with the universe, the adept became that divine universe. In Tantra, *mantra* chanting was often tightly integrated with visualisation techniques. Visualisation can on its own similarly produce states of trance. Visualisation was mostly used in combination with other techniques - often with *pranayama*. In such instances the breath was for instance visually guided through various channels in the body in order to bring *prana* (representing Sakti) and consciousness (representing Siva) to resonate together.

***The new Tantric sadhanas (practices)  
and their cosmic anchoring***



Finally, all these techniques were integrated and sequenced in comprehensive Tantric rituals (*puja*) – often combined with offerings (of often taboo items like wine and meat). Some groups would even include sexual intercourse as a part of their offerings - all for the worship of the deity.

We can see that some of these ASC generating techniques seem similar to many of the original yoga technologies. But in the Tantra discourse they received new priorities and were often re-defined in relation to Tantric sign systems like the subtle body.

It is clear that within High Tantric discourse the body had a very different purpose and meaning to that of the *Upanishads*, the *Mahabharata* and the *Yoga Sutra*, where it was typically supposed to be monitored, disciplined, re-constructed and subdued. In the High Tantric discourse *the body was a vessel* for receiving, channelling and actualising divine energy. The practice was now about energising – perfecting – the *body*.

It is clear from this introduction that the cultural fields of liberation and religion was shaken up by power struggles about core categories, codes and values. The cultural field of liberation which initially grew out of Archaic rituals and had defined itself through its hostility to Brahmin rituals was now being invaded by Tantric discourses often signifying the act of

liberation as a ritual. They introduced radical new liberation technologies, which were legitimised with [code, habitus and power discourses](#) contradicting those whom the Axial Age specialists had relied on and propagated. This is a central subject of this chapter as the yoga sign became caught in these conflicts, turning its world upside down.

## 2. The socio-political dynamics of Tantra - Hinduisations

### Feudal India – background of Tantra

Many historians<sup>[274](#)</sup> term the period from 500-1500 AD – from the breakdown of the Northern based Gupta Empire to the rise of the Mughal Empire - *medieval India*. The two German historians H. Kulke and D. Rothermund have developed a useful historico-regional model of India in *Geschichte Indiens* (2006). They suggest that in this medieval or feudal period new power regions emerged along rivers, deltas and fertile areas south of the northern region. In these regions societies had grown into hierarchical states developing their own cultures on equal terms with the northern region. India south of the Indus-Ganges region had formed itself into four new dynamic power and cultural centres. As all India's regional societies were socio-economically de-centralised and as they did not have the necessary technological-economical resources or organisational structures, no single region was any longer able to dominate the sub-continent. That is, a system of balance of power had emerged which was further reinforced in that each regional dynasty tended to collapse from within after a short while because of its de-centralised structure.

As Southern and central Indian regional states grew in size in the same way as in the northern region 500-1000 years earlier, there developed a socio-political system, where defeated kings and rulers paid tribute to the victorious king. This system of tribute was called *samanta* and implied that independent ‘neighbours’ of the king’s core area had to acknowledge the king as the overlord. The local rulers and vassals attended the king’s court and were often given courtly responsibilities. The king would also remunerate loyal supporters by granting them areas to rule in his own core area. This Indian political system had the effect that as soon as the central power weakened, one of the local vassals or kings would grab the opportunity and take over.

After the disintegration of the Gupta empire there was almost a collapse in foreign and internal trade. This meant that most northern towns degenerated and their population or artisans, warriors, administrators and priests had to migrate into the countryside (Nandi 1986). In the south, from about 500 AD, a royal system of granting newly-gained agricultural land to the Brahmins and temples became widespread (Heitzman 1997; Chattopadhyaya 1994). It was

a system initially developed by the Guptas and used increasingly as their empire fell apart and was very similar to the *samanta* system mentioned previously. As royalty appointed vassals and the Brahmins settled as landowners and temple priests, local forest people and migrant workers from non-Aryan India were incorporated as land tenants and peasants paying tributes (Nandi 2000b). The new Brahmin “feudal landlord” and temple priest in turn collected taxes for the new local and regional kings. About 900 AD as trade recovered, new urban centres and markets emerged, mainly in Southern India. It was this *decentralised “feudal” society* where Brahmin culture and caste society met local tribal non-Aryan culture that gave birth to Tantra<sup>275</sup>.

The king was just one among several exploiters: feudal vassals, Brahmins and temples controlled and extracted economic surplus from its local population. So compared to earlier periods the regional state was in some respects weakened by feudal structures. Despite its weakness, the state and its rule of law was still strongly legitimised and hold together by the religious culture - as in the Axial Age. As in Europe, the institutions and power structure of feudalism and the Middle Ages were legitimised by a hegemonic religious field and its professional holy men – in Europe institutionalised by the Catholic Church. In India it became the era of Saivism.

### **The meteoric rise of Saivism – the discourse of inclusion**

Medieval India became a period where ruling classes adopted a belligerent military culture, according to R. Davidson in *Indian esoteric Buddhism – a Social History of the Tantric Movement* (2002). Maybe this was due to the system of balance or maybe it was an original part of the new regional cultures. Before, the king was often seen as a protector securing peace for the people – a culture of chivalry; now however war and military destruction was seen as a sexual and divine play where the heroic warrior-king expressed his divinely violent nature, power and authority. This was expressed in the ideal of the *cakravartin* – a world-ruler who was *obliged* to conquer and rule the world. The king was, in other words, legitimised as a warrior. When this was combined with an ideology making the king divine, it became a lethal cocktail for the sub-continent, according to Davidson.

As in the Axial Age, but perhaps now even more so, kings were turned into deities and gods into kings. This was clearly seen in those of the *Puranas*, conceived during this period. Divine life force was embodied in the king and bestowed on his reign. The subcontinent now became densely populated with fortresses, castles and armed encampments. In this culture of military adventurism all social groups had to adapt or die.<sup>276</sup> In this new environment a new religious discourse evolved and through its successful adaption to power structures it rose to prominence: Saivism.

From about the 6 century AD Siva worship (Saivism) (Siva is the warrior god of destruction) became dominant in nearly all parts of India and was adopted by most royal courts (Sanderson 2009). Many different cults and sects of Tantric Siva worship emerged in this period and had little difficulty in coming under royal protection and support as, ideologically, they legitimised the violent military culture. According to the Tantric specialist A. Sanderson

(2006, 2009), rulers were now required, after they had undergone initiation by the Brahmins, to go through further Tantric Saivist rituals. These rituals entrusted the existing socio-religious order to his care and protection. New temples, kings' residences, palaces and urban centre plans and newly claimed farmland all had to observe Saivist rules and to be initiated by such rituals. There were critically important Saivist rituals and *mantras* to observe on the eve of wars and others to weaken enemies. As Saivism did not follow caste rules, it allowed powerful local Sudras (i.e. people from newly Brahmanised areas) to rise in power around the king and opened the way for local gods and cults to become acceptable. So Saivism was successful, as it managed to integrate diverse local cultures and strengthened the king. It was an inclusive ideology which never confronted Brahmanism but instead profiled itself as a necessary addition to Brahmin rituals, if they were to work for the king, according to Sanderson (2006). So here we see an example of how state, politics and religion in pre-modern societies merged into each other – they could not meaningfully be distinguished.

Saivism was initially an ascetic cult promising liberation (*atimarga*) but developed to include householders (*mantramarga*). Including the householders meant a significant change. It thereby developed a much wider social base. Here it was adopted by traditional Brahmins and added to their existing rituals. Saivism promised liberation *and* worldly power and was a discourse, equally thriving in the field of liberation and the religious field. In Saivism the initiation was an extremely important affair, as it gave access to Siva. The initiation practice came to consist of a vast range of ritual observances – mainly *mantra* based – and meditative disciplines which would liberate the soul.

### Tantra and *Hinduisisation*

The medieval period meant especially in Southern India that pastoral farmers, hunters and gatherers belonging mainly to non-Aryan aboriginal population were incorporated into emerging warrior states<sup>277</sup>. This mostly happened through deforestation and expansion of irrigated agriculture. For these aboriginal tribal areas the belligerent warrior culture and the migration of Brahmins meant the seizure of their sacred sites, the enforcement of caste and class structures (the non-Aryans were often given the status of untouchables), the subordination or exchange of their gods with Siva, Vishnu and other Puranic gods. Female goddesses like Durga and Sakti were incorporated as an aspect of Siva or Vishnu. Aboriginal tribal rituals were transformed or modified and Brahmins or Saiva ascetics were now in charge. This aggressive cultural repression is often called by historians the *Hinduisisation* of tribal people.<sup>278</sup> It is out of this clash that Tantra emerged. Tantra and Hinduisisation are closely linked.

Hinduisisation kicked off the history of Tantra. About 600 AD, in the very beginning of the medieval period, these new kind of scriptures emerged in outlying tribal areas settled by Brahmins and temples (Sharma 2000). These texts often had the word 'Tantra' in their title line. Often the literature was composed to serve the needs of the local aboriginal ethnic groups (like forest people, pastoral nomads, shepherds, hill men, gatherers and hunters) who had succumbed to feudal Brahmanism and petty kingdoms. In the Tantras, non-Aryan local rites and occult practices were systematised and described. Sometimes a Tantra would signify a local

group's resistance and identity building. At other times a Tantra would signify the assimilation and incorporation of non-Aryan culture into Brahmin caste society. Behind a Tantra there would often be found Brahmins. In the eyes of the locals there were for local Brahmins many benefits of adopting Tantra. Acquisition of this new occult skill and knowledge allowed the Brahmin to avert the negative effects of planets and spirits and put spells on enemies. The Brahmins, enriched by Tantric symbolic capital fitting the habitus of the aborigines, attained thereby an important function in the local society.

Many Tantras evolved out of the temple institutions. Often they described the rituals and ceremonies crystallising around an emerging community with its new temple. Thus the Tantras were often signs of communal identity building. Because of the strong influence of the Tantras, it is possible that they signalled a general strengthening of the temple institution in medieval India.

Tantra is in other words a late-comer in the influx of aboriginal (tribally based) non-Aryan culture in what many scholars call the ‘Great Tradition’ (the textual based urban culture of Brahmanism and Buddhism)<sup>279</sup>.

### The dynamics of Hinduisations

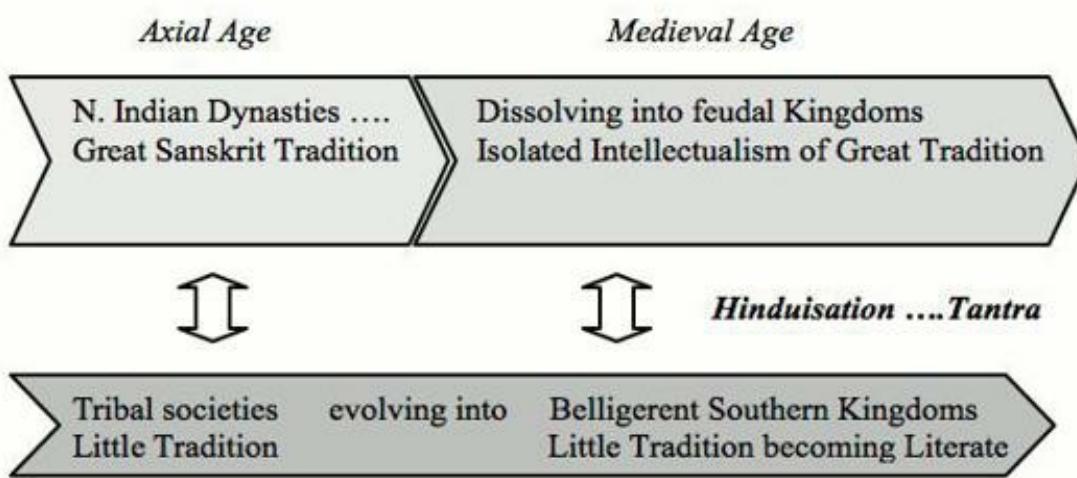
In earlier chapters it was shown how Axial Age empires and civilisations came about and changed in Northern India, the eclipse of the Vedic societies, the rise of the ascetic-wisdom culture and cosmological-monotheism producing philosophical, scientific and legal achievements. We saw how mainly Buddhist and Brahmin oral/textual discourse – the Great Traditions – competed with each other for hegemony. What should not be forgotten is that this elite development initially did not affect the lives of the masses of the rest of Indian sub-continent – the aboriginal non-Aryan population. The non-Aryan population of the rest of the sub-continent still lived in communities with almost no state formation – the Little Tradition. Most people lived in local communities in very isolated areas. This meant that their local culture would endure and follow its own pattern of mutations and mergers.

It is in such peripheral “provinces” that Tantric discourse arose. Many Tantric groups were small tribes or ethnic groups worshipping female gods. Most aborigines of India – now being subsumed by or forced to interact with feudal powers - belonged to such cultures. As these communities were incorporated into expanding kingdoms, their pantheon of gods - like *Devi, Kubjika, Kali, Parvati, Chandi, Kumari* etc - was slowly re-branded. We can follow these changes of deity names in the texts until they finally settled as the great gods we know today like Siva, Surya, Ganesha, and Kali (Flood 1996, Brighten 2001).

Like the tribal people in the Vedic culture of about thousand years earlier, the tribal “Tantric” communities also asserted that their rituals and practices – their religio-cultural institutions - gave them access to supernatural powers. Similarly, they were often variations of the anthropological [\*Shamanic Model\*](#) outlined earlier. By this I mean that in response to the pressure from surrounding societies, crystallised around Shamanic leaders, these tribes –Vedic or Tantric found their identity and resistance in communities relying on supernatural powers and leaders.

A simplified historico-sociological map for the whole sub-continent therefore would show *two cultural processes* developing and living in parallel and interacting: the civilised *states/kingdoms* of the Great Tradition around Northern rivers *and the community based life* of the Little Tradition spread over the rest of the sub-continent (Redfield 1956). The latter often consisted of forest hunters, fishermen, pastoral farmers, shifting cultivators or warrior groups. In Central and Southern India during the mediaeval times these ethnic groups and local farmers were sucked into kingdoms emerging and expanding along irrigated river plains settling around temple centres and trading centres. These new kingdoms initially reflected the culture of the Little Tradition, but the rulers also adapted the Great Tradition's political and social institutions. They built their kingdoms and dynasties implementing new political and social structures copied from the Great Tradition, the caste system. And in this way they also transformed themselves into emerging Great Traditions. So this is just another way of describing the process of Hinduisation.

### ***The social dynamics and conflicts conditioning Tantra***



Often the expanding king or local ruler invited loyal warlords and Brahmins to settle in his territory by offering them land grants and control of temples. The Great and Little Traditions merged with the effect that Little Tradition doctrines and institutions became reflected in mediaeval Tantric literature. However this Tantric discourse signifies momentous changes in culture (Freeman 2005). What we witness in the Tantric scriptures is the first literate registration and adaptation of the culture of the Little Tradition, which was undergoing dramatic change in this period of society building. It is a clash of cultures and institutions – the merger of discourses creating new discourses.

The new feudal kingdoms became strongly religious ritualised societies. Not only were most daily activities enveloped in rituals as described by Sanderson above. Very little new could happen without the involvement and blessing of holy people. However these holy people did not draw their power simply from discourses of ascetic-wisdom and monotheism but now

also from Tantric discourses.

As local tribes were brought together under feudalism and caste society, we see some of these communities transformed into religious cults. In this process, we also witness how their initial Siddhis and gurus became divinised: the Tantric professional holy man as community leader and divinity.

*In summary this chapter will show in detail how social conflict and power struggle between structural different societies created the conditions for fundamental institutional and interactional changes. Out of this clash evolved new religio-cultural institutions, interaction and discourses expressed in the Tantras. Integral to and tightly woven into this evolution of discourses and institutions was the emergence of new Tantric social identities and communities.*

*Modern readers may think that “religious” conflicts are only about rituals, rites, ceremonies, customs, behavioural restraints, consecration, legitimisation, what gods to worship, sectarianism and orthodoxy. On the contrary, this goes to the core of the social fabric. Religion and culture were hard to distinguish in pre-modern societies. What is at stake are fundamental issues like peoples’ social identity (who am I, to whom do I belong, what makes me different from other groups), their value and moral system, their sense of justice, who the local authorities and role models are, the establishment of social hierarchies.*

### **Insert: Social identity and Saivite ascetic groups**

*This insert gives an overview of religion and social identity building (“Who am I, to whom do I belong?”) in Tantric India. It focusses on ascetic Saivite communities where we find many traits of yoga culture and discourse. If the reader is not interested in this background information it may be skipped.*

### **Medieval communities and identities**

The Tantric period is characterised by its new rich diversity of cults and communities evolving from the new social conditions and conflicts just outlined. Many emerging medieval communities were identified - by themselves and others - through “religious” beliefs, rituals and institutions like *Kaula*, *Krama* and *Trika*. So for them writing a Tantra describing their rituals was a way of defining themselves in relation to the surrounding society.<sup>280</sup> Another way was to associate with a Tantric guru and his lineage.<sup>281</sup> Overall we can see from the Tantras that *ritual, guru lineage and deity* were seen as important defining factors.

So why did communities suddenly find it crucial to define themselves in this way? This is where Hinduisation comes in. Identity building was often an act of opposition. Some groups distanced themselves strongly from surrounding caste

societies. Hence their Tantric ritual identity should be understood in relation to that dynamic. Other groups came into being by resisting the inclusion into hegemonic monotheistic discourses (Siva, Vishnu). Some groups refused to be politically incorporated. Instead they rallied around their existing institutions, rituals, gurus and often female gods.<sup>282</sup>

Many of the groups we are discussing, were in fact huge traditional self-sufficient communities based on households and clans. But some mediaeval communities lived in ways which at first glance looked similar to Brahmin renouncers and Sramanic ascetics. They also lived in cults often in symbiotic relationship with the wider community of householders. Some performed austerities and lived as itinerants at the margins of society. Some even practised yoga. Other cults performed subversive Tantric rituals of possession and ecstasy.

It was a wide spectrum of cults but it would be a mistake to see them as a linear outgrowth of the cultural field of liberation. Many of these groups were also conditioned by the dynamic of Hinduisaion. Some were clear Tantric cults performing sexually based rituals unthinkable among Sramanas and Brahmins. On one side of the spectrum were such Tantric ecstasy cults and on the other side were more “traditional” monotheistic Saivite ascetic groups - with considerable overlap between the polarities of the spectrum. It was among such groups that Saivite yoga discourse became signified by Tantric ideas and practices. We will start on the Siva side of the spectrum.

### The Saivite ascetic cults

Among the Saivite communities there were cults which remind us strongly of the renouncers. Some of them - like the Sramanas and renouncers - were small clans/cults/orders of holy professionals living in economic and political transactions with the surrounding societies. Among the more cult oriented Saivite groups there were names like the *Pasupata*, *Kapalikas*, *Kalamukhas*, *Dasanami Samnyasis* - some of them with origins way back in time (Lorenzen 1972, Clark 2004, Dyczkowski 1988, Flood 1996).

They worshipped Siva as the warrior god of destruction and of Yogic asceticism. Some of the Saivite ascetic cults, like the *Aghori Samnyasis*, indulged in very provocative behaviour: dressed in deerskin, hair covered in mud, body smeared with ashes, living on cremation grounds, wild dancing and laughing in public, and shouting insults. They imitated Siva or Rudra – the god of destruction and death - who they conceived as living beyond caste rules and norms.<sup>283</sup>

But how should we classify them, what was their background? At first glance such people could be confused with the original Sramanas and renouncers – but those were never so provocative. If we instead recall the description of the *Munis* in the *Vedas*, we can see that these Saivites remind us of the ancient Shamanic-like ascetics: should we see them (or some of them) as monotheistic offshoots of old Shamanic institution? Or did some of these oldest Saivite antinomian cults represent

a parallel (maybe non-elite) theistic tradition competing with the ascetic-meditative Ways of Liberation? There is very little historico-sociological research into the origins of these Saivite groups. All we can see is that some of the Saivite cults were involved in yoga discourse and they had many of the trademarks of asceticism. They seem to represent a social group of specialists overlooked within the cultural field of liberation.

M. Clark in *The Dasanami Samnyasis* (2004), his historical overview of ascetic Saivite cults, finds them first mentioned in Brahmin literature from about 100 AD. Compared to the Sramanas, like Buddhism and Jainism founded 500-600 years earlier, the Saivite cults are latecomers to the field of liberation. They indicate that monotheistic discourses had entered the field of liberation. They are new competing symbolic specialists.

The *Pasupatas* are generally seen as one of the oldest of these groups. They are mentioned from around 200 AD, but archaeological findings (coins, *linga* symbols of Siva) indicate that early prototypes can be dated back to maybe 200 BC, which, we recall, was a period of emerging monotheism and caste society. The earliest text belonging to these early Saivites – the *Pasupata Sutra* - dates to 400-600 AD. Here yoga is described as a *union* between the soul (*pasu*) and god (*pata*) (Hara 1999). So it is possible that the meaning of *yoga* as *union* comes from these groups. The membership of the Pasupata was restricted to Brahmins. Most of the Pasupata groupings seem to have disappeared around 1400 AD as Turkic Muslims settled in Northern India.

The Saivite ascetic cults often lived an antinomian lifestyle, transgressing Vedic injunctions. So some Saivite groups could be imagined as counter-hegemonic groups rejecting Brahmin rules and regulations – the caste society. From the Saivite groups emerged major factions who totally disregarded all norms of (most) societies: the *Kapalikas* (the “skull bearers”, emerged around 5-600 AD, many Tantric rituals), the *Kalamukhas* (flourishing around 900-1300 AD) and the *Lakulas* (who totally rejected the Vedic injunctions).

### **The discourse background – the DNA - of the Saivite groups**

Most of the Saivite ascetic communities shared a common institutional platform of rituals, *mandala*, *linga* worships and offerings. They were all strongly monotheistic relying heavily on initiation, ritual and knowledge (*jnana*). They, like the Sramanas, subscribed to liberation discourses. Liberation meant to them a kind of union with Siva (Brunner 1992). Liberation-and religious fields are merging and groups and individuals are difficult to categorise sociologically.

During the medieval period most of these antinomian Saivite groups came under the strong influence of Tantric discourse. In this period the Tantric discourses of the Kula, Krama, Trika and (some northern) Saiva-Siddhanta communities surfaced.<sup>284</sup> Many of them were not Saivite- but Sakti-worshipping groups often comparable to ecstatic cults of possession or Non-

Aryan tribal clans.

The groups carried identities like *Kula* (renowned for sexual fluids, *Kundalini*), *Krama* (renowned for their “sequence” of rituals; emerging 8-900AD); *Kali* worshippers (often managed by *Kapalika* gurus) and *Trika* (offering blood, flesh, wine; emerging around 900AD). Some of these groups – defined by a mixture of Saivist and Tantric “DNA discourse” – began to write Tantric texts - the *Saivagamas*. Some few of those texts discussed yoga in detail.

At the end of the Tantric period – about 1200 AD - further new social identities emerged in the field of liberation. They were called the *Nath*, sometimes labelled *Nath Siddhas* or *Nath Jogis*. They emerged from such Saivite and Tantric cult communities. Some of them were closely connected to the Tantric *Kula* clans. They were worshippers of *Siva* and *Sakti* but they were primarily renowned for their alchemical and magical skills. It was in this milieu *hatha-yoga* emerged.

Let us now investigate how this Tantric-Saivite movement engaged with the yoga discourse in their *Tantras*.

### 3. The Saivite yoga discourse

#### Saivite yoga and Tantric Saivism

There is not much research on yoga within the Saivite *Tantras*, sometimes called the *Saivagamas* or just the *Agamas* <sup>285</sup>. H. Brunner (1992, 1994) observes that within the *Agamas* the notion of yoga has many meanings, as we have seen within most texts on yoga. The *Agamas* are mainly (80%) about temple *rituals* (*kriya*) and yoga plays just a minor part of those. So once more in this study we encounter texts which only in passing mention yoga. The *sadhana* – the practice of these Saivites – was aimed at winning over god’s grace. Practice consisted typically of meditation (*dhyana*), ritual (*puja*), fire sacrifice (*homas*) and *mantra* recitations (*japa*). In some cults these practices would be combined with asceticism. Initiation (*diksa*) by a guru was absolutely critical in these circles. So in many respects the *Agamas* repeat our impressions of monotheistic yoga in an earlier chapter: yoga signified as a subservient ritual incorporated into a wider set of theistic rites.

The main purpose of the Tantric text was not so much to educate and instruct – especially not in yoga. Rather the texts were mainly used for recitation in rituals, where the words in themselves had powerful effects by just being chanted. The words of texts would vibrate the consciousness into such intense ecstatic oscillations that it would finally reach *Siva* levels.

Brunner concludes that it is not clear what yoga actually consists of in the *Agamas*, as it is so closely integrated with *puja* (“ritual worship”). Sometimes yoga seems to be about

manipulating *prana* within the subtle body, at other times about using meditative visualisation techniques, he says.

But then S. Vasudeva (2000) discovered that two Tantras from about 900 AD - the *Netra-tantra* and *Malini-vijayottara-tantra* – actually gave yoga a far greater role. Vasudeva compared these two Tantras with a range of other Saivite texts dealing with yoga. Vasudeva chose as a starting point the *Malini-vijayottara-tantra*, because this text summarises and includes earlier yoga forms, and at the same time had great influence on later Saivite Tantra. Let us have a look at Vasudeva's findings.

### The six-limb yoga of *Malini-vijayottara-tantra* (*Malini*)

The *Malini-vijayottara-tantra* (hereafter: *Malini*) is a Tantra belonging to the Kulas. It is addressed to the Goddess *Malini* – hence the title – and the text tries to bring together several yoga concepts from Kaula and Siddhanta Saivists, according to Vasudeva. The yoga discussed in the *Malini* is a six-limb yoga. Among those limbs *dharana* is critical. *Dharana* has the meaning of 'introspection', which is different from Patanjali's 'concentration' or 'fixation'. *Dharana* consists of 15 levels of complex introspections using a range of visualisation techniques. Through this process, where different ontological (the structure of being) and epistemological (the structure of perceiving) categories are analysed, the adept moves his consciousness closer and closer to that of Siva's, so that eventually he will perceive as Siva does.

This very philosophically based analysis of the fundamentals of being and our conceptual apparatus is similar to what we found within Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra* and the Buddhist approach. But one should not stretch the comparison too far because as soon as one starts to look into the exact meaning of shared concepts they have different meanings and purposes.

As we recall Patanjali used an eight-step ladder (*ashtanga*) culminating in *samadhi*. Below follows the *Malini*'s six-step system, as extracted by Vasudeva. We should note, however, that diverse Saivite six-limb systems vary between them – different notions; different sub-divisions of a notion; and different priorities and successions of limbs. However as the *Malini* is a relatively late text synthesising a range of Saivite yoga styles, it gives a good summary of Saivite *six-limbs* yoga – *sadanga-yoga*:

<i>pranayama</i>	Six types of inhalation, five types of retention, six types of exhalation, translocation and relocation
<i>dharana</i>	Instructed as fixations on Fire, Water, Sovereign, Ambrosia – all localised in the body
<i>tarka</i>	Judgment about what is to be cultivated and what is to be rejected
<i>dhyana</i>	Attentive contemplation of Siva
<i>samadhi</i>	The absorption arising from prolonged meditation ( <i>dhyana</i> )
<i>pratyahara</i>	A withdrawal - which resembles non-existence (due to complete identification with the object of contemplation).

Our first observation is that unlike the *Ashtanga-yoga* module of the *Yoga Sutra* this yoga starts with *pranayama*, not the ethical lifestyle of Patanjali's *yama* and *niyama*. Gone is the notion that an ethical life provides the foundation for liberation. *Pranayama*, here the first step to liberation, was a shared and central concept among Saivists. It was claimed that there was a close connection between breath and mind, so that *sadanga-yoga* - and many other systems - naturally began with *pranayama*, the manipulation of breath in order to calm the mind. Overall, meditation seems central in this Saivite yoga. Many of its limbs have strong affinities to mindful-meditation – i.e. the mixture of contemplation and meditation. With the *Yoga Sutra* in mind we also realise that this yoga does not culminate in *samadhi* but in *pratyahara*.

Our next observation is that we encounter here a style of yoga, which is grounded in the body-mind system. It provides an elaborated, complex, and visualised map of the body – for instance envisioned as colours or *mandalas* (complex diagrams) – on which the Yogi visually contemplate (*dharana*). Visualisation and *mandala* usage are typical Tantric techniques.

In this Saivite *sadanga-yoga* there are many other Tantric notions present - explicit or implicit – referring to the subtle (that is “divine-energy”) body. However they do not seem to play a crucial and *physical* role as they do in the later *hatha-yoga*. In the *Malini* it seems to me that the priority of yoga, as in Buddhism is to de-construct the conceptual categories of the mind. This again is very similar to the *Yoga Sutra*.

Vasudeva also gives a short overview of a range of other Saivite Tantras discussing yoga. Even if there are significant differences between them (some are for instant eight-limb), they confirm the impression that we get from the *Malini* and the six limbs above: Saivite *sadanga-yoga* has many of the hall marks of a gnostic-monotheistic yoga discourse with its strong elements of – if not totally dominated by - conceptual self-reflective contemplation (*dharana* and *tarka*).

What is new here is that meditation has a strongly visual-cognitive character and that the final aim is the ‘realisation of Siva consciousness’ – the ‘ultimate’. However, as so often with such discourses, we are left wondering how the final release actually happens: does it happen through a meditative re-configuration of consciousness, where it increasingly becomes divine in character; or is it happening due to cognitive insights? Often the last option seems to be the answer. For instance is meditation signified as a *bhavana*, as “insight-contemplation”, which is a process of cognition. If so, there are many similarities to the Buddhist and Brahmin wisdom-liberation discourses.

### Saivite yoga – pointing back in time or forwards to *hatha-yoga*?

The overlap of Saivite yoga with the old ascetic-wisdom-liberation traditions is confirmed for instance by two historical earlier Buddhist Tantras instructing a six-limb yoga: the *Kalacakra*- and *Guhya-Samaja-Tantra* mentioned earlier. Here the limbs are: *pratyahara* – *dhyana* – *pranayama* – *dharana* – *anusmriti* (i.e. *tarka*) – *samadhi*. So we find exactly the same elements or limbs in the Buddhist discourse, but now in a different sequence. Hence the

Saivite yoga discourse seems to be similar to this Buddhist six-limb yoga. What cannot be excluded – and what is probable – is that the Buddhist Tantras copy from the Saivists as often happened at this time (Sanderson 2009).

The question remains: is *Malini*'s yoga an early sign of *hatha-yoga*? For me, this Saivite yoga discourse points much more *back* in time to wisdom-liberation discourses, than it points *forward* to *hatha-yoga*. The decisive point is the Tantric subtle body discourse. Saivite six-limb yoga is not, like the later *hatha-yoga*, about manipulating and releasing *physical* divine energies of the subtle body, as when the *hatha* yogi forces Kundalini to ascend through the subtle body. Like the *Yoga Sutra*, the yoga of the *Malini* uses the body as an anchor point loaded with *symbolic* power. *Hatha-yoga* is about physical work while the *Malini* is about mental work. The efforts of Saivite *Malini* yoga are aimed at consciousness and mind, while *hatha-yoga* is about activating physical divine energies. Hence I see *Malini* as a Gnostic borderline mystic yoga.

This – *Malini*'s strong element of Gnosticism; the emphasis on rationality and contemplation; the One as pure consciousness and the mystical realisation of it - leads further to the question of whether this Saivite yoga to a large extent was included and subsumed into Brahmin monotheistic discourse? Were the Saivite ascetic renouncing groups in reality Brahmins (or groups run by Brahmins) merging yoga and Tantra with monotheistic Siva worship<sup>286</sup>?

It seems to me that this yoga discourse is not very Tantric in character. Even if it surfaces in the Tantra genre, the content, discussions, and notions are all derived from Buddhist and Brahmin yoga discourses. So it would be misleading to call it a *Tantric* yoga, of which for instance *hatha-yoga* is a clear example. *Malini* is basically a *Saivite* yoga. It merges Saivite monotheism neatly with yoga forms reminding much about *Yoga Sutra* and Buddhist Gnostic liberation. These Saivite yoga forms are packaged and spun – to use a modern terminology – as a Tantra, which was the tendency of the period.

Vasudeva argues that the existence of *Malini* and a range of other texts is in fact an indication of a Saivite yoga “tradition”. This might be correct as the texts only add parts of Tantric discourse to a melting pot of ascetic-wisdom discourses and Saivite monotheism.

But to confirm that we need to look much more into the sociology of these texts: who wrote the texts and for what purpose and under which circumstances and conflicts?

### **Antinomian practices adopted to high caste discourses**

*Malini*'s basically *Gnostic* Saivite yoga discourse is alien and even hostile to central notions of the *hatha-yoga* discourse like body fluids and sexuality. In India at that time there also surfaced in rural areas an entirely new style of Tantra among Kula and Krama cults, where the sexuality of the body became a part of religious rituals. Some of the first scriptures, which focussed on sex as a part of the clan ritual, were the *Kula Tantra scriptures* (700-1000 AD). They described rituals taking place on cremation grounds where blood, semen and alcohol were offered to satisfy *kula* (“clan”) deities. In many of these Tantric cults the sexual ritual core was about bringing together male and female polarised god-energies or life-forces

represented by human fluids (White 1996). It is clear that these Tantric rituals of the Little Tradition are not to be compared to the liberation efforts of the ascetic-wisdom Yogi from the Great Tradition. The Kula and Krama practitioner did *not* seek liberation, *samadhi* or god-consciousness but searched for immortality and magic power.

The process of Hinduisisation constantly threw up new communal institutions, communities and cultural fields. Often they crystallised around female goddesses of the tribes. Kula communities surfaced worshipping the goddess *Kubjika* (who would later turn into *Kundalini*, who is central to *hatha-yoga*). Other groups adopted the goddess *Sakti* – documented in the *Saktatantras* - to such an extent that Siva for once had to step down from his dominant position.

Most of these groups emerged out of rural provincial interactional and institutional dynamics. They should not be classified as Sramanas or similar. They were not positioned within the cultural field of liberation, but as we shall see their culture/ religion came to transform and re-configure the field. This happened around 900 AD as Saivite cults - called *Trika* (meaning “triad” of goddesses) - embraced and domesticated the practices of Kula and Krama. What became significant was that Trika slowly turned these rural clan and low-caste practices into civilised, elite liberation practices for high-castes. In other words the antinomian clan institutions or practices had physically travelled from the Little Tradition into the Great Tradition.

Among the Trikas especially one Saivite theologian became very influential as he merged Saivite yoga known from the *Malini* with these new Tantric antinomian rituals. In that process he developed what many might call a Tantric yoga – a yoga employing Tantric practices in order to achieve Saivite release. He wrapped it all into a mystical non-dual philosophy very similar to the [Advaita Vedanta](#) philosophy of the Brahmins. This person was Abhinavagupta and his main work was *Tantraloka*.

## 4. High-caste Saivite Tantra and its ambivalence towards yoga

### Abhinavagupta and his *Tantraloka*

Around 1000-1100 AD the rural Tantric practices – ecstatic, bodily oriented, extreme taboo breaking – reached the conservative, rational and Gnostic circles in urban areas. This social upper class milieu could neither accept nor ignore the power of these rituals, so the problem was how to domesticate them. The Saivite Abhinavagupta, who had experience of these cults, accomplished their theological inclusion. He was especially influenced by the Saivite yoga Tantra, called the *Malini* discussed earlier. We recall that it was a six-limbed

yoga, which with a starting point in the divinised Tantric body, made a journey of insight and realisation into Siva consciousness. It was however a Saivite yoga configured for renouncers – full-time professionals dedicated to the worship of Siva – not for traditional householders.

Abhinavagupta in the text *Tantraloka* written about 1100 AD managed to turn these full-time practices into something relevant to high-caste householders. In this process he transformed and tamed the Tantric notions as he turned them into symbols. Here the ‘orgasm of the body’ became now an ‘expansion into God consciousness’; ‘sexual fluids’ now symbolised ‘divine polarities’, ‘coitus’ (external act between male and female) became ‘internalised techniques’ (White 1996, 2003).

Let us have a brief look at this manoeuvre, which became very influential (White 1996, 2003). Siva – who often represented pure consciousness – had now gained a new female dimension with Tantric origin: the Goddess Sakti. She was pure divine power and energy! Sakti was included in Saivite liberation discourse. As Siva was omnipresent, the goal of practice, according to Abhinavagupta, was to become Siva – *jivan-mukti* (“living liberated”). This could happen when due to divine grace Sakti descended (called *saktipata*) into the individual. But to prepare for this, the practitioner had to ascend a hierarchy of realisations of ‘insight’ (*tarka* – “perfected reason”) into the non-duality of existence – grasping that the world just consists of various manifestations of Siva consciousness.

We can see that liberation equalled a kind of Gnostic insight - *tarka*. As the adept gained increasing levels of mystical insight, it seems that consciousness changed in parallel. It became more and more ecstatic as it became ‘Siva-like’. It was the divine energies of Sakti, which drove the process.

Abhinavagupta claimed that yoga – and that was an eight-limb yoga (examples of limbs are for instance *pranayama* and *pratyahara*) – can only help to prepare for *tarka*. However, yoga could never on its own produce this Perfected Reason. The eight-limbs of yoga were - as they were situated in the ‘external planes of existence’ (i.e. physical reality) – restricted by their physical starting position and therefore could not lead to ultimate consciousness, according to Abhinavagupta. Unlike Patanjali, Abhinavagupta did not aim for *samadhi*. For Patanjali *samadhi* equated the isolation and release of *purusha* in deep absorption. For Abhinavagupta, the liberating goal was instead to become possessed by the deity (Smith 2006). On paper this seems to be a major difference in metaphysical signification. It is, however, unclear what were the practical consequences of such differences regarding methods and techniques.

In the end, all yoga efforts were dependent on the grace of Siva, according to Abhinavagupta. This claim is very similar to the monotheistic rhetoric of Krishna in the *Bhagavad-Gita* – the Yogi and his efforts are lost without the grace of god.

In best Saivite tradition, Abhinavagupta finally declared that awakening could happen spontaneously without any efforts if - and only if - Siva decided to take possession of the self and let Sakti in. So, with a single stroke, all yoga efforts were made redundant. This divine intervention - through the activation of Sakti energies - was a much faster way to realise the non-duality of Siva. In fact, said Abhinavagupta, yoga effort was based on a mistaken dualist assumption – yoga wrongly assumed that there was a difference between the adept and Siva as

there existed nothing but Siva (non-duality) (Vasudeva 2000).

We are here witnessing a traditional display of Indian theistic wisdom-salvation discourse. *Tantraloka* is fundamentally the rhetoric of a rational – and yet mystical – wisdom discourse, claiming to possess access to the ‘truth of truth’ (god), this time by the means of new ecstatic-symbolic technologies related to Sakti. Through the grace of god the worshipper became increasingly ‘god-like’ as his consciousness became ecstatically divine. The final release could happen in this life turning the person into a *jivan-mukti*. Release was no longer an after-death event, as it was in Krishna’s yoga in the *Gita*.

### Is there such thing as Tantric yoga?

It is no surprise that this discourse became very popular in Saivite elite and high caste circles (White 1996), especially among kings and local aristocrats. These aestheticised symbolic rituals – their anti-nominal sexual character had been muted – became a part of court life and temples. The Saivite householder had been enriched with new powerful Tantric rituals without having to give up old ideological positions regarding salvation. The Saivite urban elite, the king and the feudal landlord could now step forward into the world and claim with conviction that he was Siva – a liberated being.

Can we cautiously call this discourse the emergence of “Tantric yoga”? In other words is it a theistic yoga discourse - founded in symbolised Tantric rituals and god’s grace - leading to ecstatic consciousness by union of internal divine polarities? A yoga enmeshed in theistic rituals turning humans into god – a living God?

Alternatively, we could ask if Abhinavagupta and the Trika cult – by reducing the role and power of yoga - rather signalled the end of Saivite yoga as expressed in the *Malini*? As we recall, the Saivite yoga we found in the *Malini* written some hundred years earlier was also a theistic Gnostic (knowledge based) discourse. Yoga here played a central role. Now the *Tantraloka* of the Trika cults only paid lip service to yoga: salvation was a function of *initiation and grace* – not of Yogic *self-effort*.

Hence the Saivite Tantric monotheism of *Tantraloka* like the monotheism of Krishna (an early form of Vaishnavism we encountered in the [\*Bhagavad-Gita\*](#)) turns liberation into salvation – i.e. religion. In the end – despite their liberating yogic technologies – both of the two monotheistic systems disempower yogic self-efforts and make citizens dependent on external forces. They express hegemonic ideologies, where the faithful believer is caught in an interlinked social and divine world, a claustrophobic world where a person’s situation in the end only can be relieved through submission and external intervention, a world where the individual is dependent on the goodwill of social and religious authorities. We get a strong sense of how Indian monotheism was an intrinsic part of the hegemonic ideological apparatus of the state and its disciplining of its subjects.

*In the next chapter we will see that hatha-yoga’s originated among groups preoccupied by sexual fluids, chakras of the subtle body, divine polarities and goddesses like Kundalini and Kubjika.*

As humans became god in much Tantric rhetoric, the individual transformative meaning – the use-value - of “Tantric yoga” converged with the intersubjective symbolic meaning. This Tantric discourse constructed powerful god-beings on earth – *jivan-muktis*. Divine and worldly power was not a coincidental by-product of practice but a direct goal. This symbolic-value was the use-value. In this discourse – as in the yoga of Krishna in the Bhagavad-Gita – power moved to the centre, to which we now turn.

## 5. The unconcealed Tantric power discourse

### The importance of *bhukti* liberation

The high-caste Tantric category of liberation had two aspects to it – a worldly and an otherworldly aspect. We have discussed the otherworldly. In much of the Tantric tradition the worldly aspect was deliberately emphasised and targeted. Here it *empowered* the individual, implying that it pulls in the opposite direction to some monotheistic Saivite discourse. The logic was simple: if divine power was a part of the world, why not embrace and take advantage of this divine resource? There was nothing wrong with the power of this world *per se*, as it was seen as a part of the divine. Further, the good news was that those powers were readily available and accessible in the body.

The Tantric discourse then promised *fast* access to this divine power resource. It often ridiculed the ascetic and the Buddhist monk who would have to work for many re-incarnations to achieve their power through meditation. Instead Tantra promised perfection – *siddhi* - in this life. Tantra claimed it was often just a question of using the right techniques to release the female deities inhabiting the world and the body.

Tantra promised the practitioner access to the power of ferocious and violent female deities like for instance Kali. This was the *bhukti* (“worldly power”) aspect of practice. It was as good and as important as its twin *mukti* – the power of being a liberated soul: a *jivan-mukti*.

Combining *bhukti* and *mukti* was of course a very interesting proposition to kings, feudal rulers, Brahmin landlords and warriors.<sup>287</sup> By practising, they would not only obtain the respect of their own men by being a charismatic liberated person – a *jivan-mukti* – worth following. They would also get access to the power of ferocious gods. This would motivate their men in war and give the ruler ideological power. By putting pictures on banners of the goddess, whose power they possessed, they could scare away enemies and attract followers. In fact the power they had as rulers was already a sign of the blessing of the deities. It was no surprise that various Tantric practices became popular among the ruling classes as Tantra

charged them with symbolic capital.

Also the local provincial Brahmins – in different roles as priests, physicians, astrologers and landlords – had their interest in *bhukti*. It gave them personal power, as they could put evil spells on enemies and see the future. This brought them into close contact with the day-to-day life of ordinary people. It also gave them a critical role in developing new secret rituals and *mantras* for the kings – new secret ideological weapons. Once more, adapting Tantra meant quick access to increased power and influence.

Finally, the high-caste urbanite walking the long road of theistic Salvation supported by yoga meditation. We are all human and if there was a quicker road to achieving the same thing, you would be silly not to take it. So he also switched horses as the energetic and powerful Tantric deity bestowed something that the isolation of the absolute passive *purusha* could never deliver: *bhukti*!

The Tantrics were a discourse promising quick success, exactly what the world desires. As we shall see some rural based forms of Tantra were not preoccupied by the otherworldly goals. Their interest was of this world. They also wanted to manage ferocious deities, exorcise demons, heal the sick and tell the future. They even wanted immortality like the gods and to become the leaders of their local communities. Hence the Tantric discourse implied a significant increase in the power of holy men and their cultural fields. This is clearly seen within the guru institution.

### **The guru institution as the melting pot of economy, power and religion**

I would like to investigate further how the Tantric power discourse affected the social cohesion and control of the medieval society and finally show how this has relevance for the modern yoga student.

The Tantric discourse of *human divinity* significantly increased the power of the leaders of religious communities – the *gurus* and the *acaryas*. However the discourse had much wider implications. In the belligerent medieval society, where religion and social power became one, leaders like the king and the guru actually became living gods.

Everybody lived in a divine realm. Social hierarchies, inequalities, economic exploitation and power were divine manifestations that should be worshipped rather than resisted. This implied a strengthening of the local religious Tantric leader, the guru. There had always been teachers and gurus in India, but now they became something special. They were divine representations on earth, whom people and students worshipped.

I have identified one of the processes behind this: Hinduisations. Through the expansion of feudal states into tribal areas not only the tribal communities were transformed. The aggressors themselves – the Great Traditions – went through ruptures. We have already heard about the influx of the Kula and Krama traditions. Let me very briefly mention another tribal movement of the *Siddhas*, which in a similar way contributed to the divinisation of the ruling groups of kings, lords and religious leaders.

*Siddhas* were originally *semi-gods*, which had their origin in nature such as mountains or remote fields. Here there emerged Siddha cults worshipping these awe-inspiring natural sites (White 1996). These sites were perceived as supernatural and were called ‘*siddhi*’: the

“realised or perfected one”. Over time it was believed that some of the worshippers of the Siddhas had become semi-gods themselves – *a sadhaka*. The *sadhaka* was a person who through his practice had reached a level of semi-divinity with super human powers. He was seen as a free man who was not subject to or restricted by caste rules and taboos (Davidson 2002). After death, he was seen as having gone to “heaven” and was celebrated like a European saint. The *sadhaka* maintained that he had reached a level of immortality due to his special skills and know-how. These could be alchemical skills, body techniques or sexual rituals. His cult members would strive after the same semi-divine status by using his skills.

This veneration of the tribal religious leader would spill into the Great Tradition strengthening the social position and power of the religious professionals like the gurus. The Tantric guru was no longer just a teacher, he became super human; a semi-god or *siddhi*. Within Saivism the guru was thought to become “one” with Siva when dead.

In the Tantric tradition we therefore see intense worship of the guru, as he was seen as a representation of the god. The tradition would maintain that without the guidance and initiation of the guru one could never become perfected. The implication of this rhetoric, still found in India and among modern yogis, is a serious disciplining of the community. With this new guru power discourse a strong hierarchy of power was introduced in the local community. The religious leaders had become gods and made their community of adherents, students and worshippers deeply dependent on them.

It even strengthened the guru institution in relation to the king. Many kings took *diksa* – “initiation” – from the guru.<sup>288</sup> This implies an enormous increase in the status of the guru – even the king depended on him. Accordingly the guru was soon entitled *diksa-guru* or *raja-guru*. The *diksa-guru* stood in the powerful position of controlling the transmission of divine grace (von Stietencrom 2001). This implied that the *lineage* of guru teachers became an important mark of identification and legitimisation (Clark 2004, Gengnagel 2001). A community would identify itself with the lineage of the guru as mentioned earlier.

As Saivite cults began to organise as monasteries around 800 AD, and as these monasteries received vast royal land grants with tenant farmers, the monastic leaders became very powerful indeed (Clark 2004). Around 1100 AD some had magnificent titles like *pala* or *natha* and powers equivalent to the most potent feudal vassal. So here the power of religion, politics and economy had merged. Was the guru a local landlord, a local warlord or a religious leader? We could ask the king, the feudal lord, and the vassal the same question as through the Tantric discourse they had all become melting pots of economy, politics and religion.

The Tantric Saivite guru and the *sadhaka/ siddhi* are examples of new competitors shaking up and redefining the cultural fields of holy men. A large part of the field of liberation was actually absorbed by the religious field configured by Tantra and Indian monotheism. Many Tantric semi-divine religious specialists did not claim their authority and symbolic capital from asceticism, meditation or Gnosis, but from *ritual master-ship, lineage, initiation and divinity*. We can see here an example of how Tantra changed the underlying [codes, habitus and power discourses](#) : it changed the *conditions* for how the specialists accumulated symbolic capital; it changed the categorisation of symbolic capital and how it was attained.

In many ways this was a return to the power discourses of Archaic Vedic societies and the Brahmins. However when we think about it this should be of little surprise: Tantra was the return of the Little Tradition – Archaic aboriginal communities – into the Great Tradition. It signified the re-emergence of Archaic codes and power discourses – here embodied in the reconstructed guru identity.

*This genealogical deconstruction of the guru would be interesting reading for modern Yogis, Tantrics, Buddhist, and New Age spiritualists who venerate and gather in enthusiasm around their gurus. Yes, they seek liberation through their guru, but his rhetoric generates dependency and incapacity.*

*So far we have outlined the historio-sociology of Tantra, some of its key ideas and the strong power discourse of which it was an expression. We have also sketched two Tantric discourses relying on yoga: the ascetic Savite yoga and the Tantric householder yoga of Abhinavagupta. Let us finish with an overview of yoga within the Brahmin-Vedic discourse. How did they combine Yogic with Tantric discourse?*

## 6. How did the yoga discourse and holy men fare in medieval India?

### Brahmins combining yoga and Tantra in the *Yoga-Upanishads*

How was the yoga discourse of the Brahmins - claiming to stand in the tradition the *Vedas* and *Upanishads* - affected by Tantra? We have already seen how some Saivite Brahmins retired from *Patanjali-yoga* and adopted Tantric Trika. Still several texts deliberately stayed within Brahmin text genres and discourses, but there is not much research into it related to yoga.

If we look into the *Upanishad* genre of the medieval period, there is some research, and the following introduction builds mainly on J.C. Ruff (2012). As we recall, the *Upanishad* genre can be understood as a discourse about ‘hidden connections’ the revelation of which makes the knowing subject become one with his object as they both emerge into brahman. In this Tantric period, there emerged among countless other *Upanishads*, a group of texts later classified as the 21 *Yoga-Upanishads*. They are texts which freely combine symbols, metaphors, ideas and practices from various rituals, sectarian views, poems, philosophies, mythologies, and *Vedas*. They represent typical *Upanishad* theology exploring various methods to reveal the ‘hidden connections’.

The first group of these *yoga-Upanishads* appeared between 900 and 1300 in Northern India. They were relatively short, typically 20 verses. They reappeared in Southern India between 1300 and 1750 in much more systematised and expanded forms consisting often of hundred of verses. Most of the additions to the Southern version were lifted directly from other sources. About 50% of sources derived from Nath and *hatha-yoga* texts. These new ideas were then fitted into various versions of Brahmin religio-philosophy and monotheistic theology. We witness once more how Brahmin mediaeval theological discourse was re-configured and re-interpreted in the light of Tantra and *hatha-yoga* signs. Hence the texts were not conceived to explain yoga.

The yoga sign was overall often used as signifying *sadhana* or ‘ritual’. When the texts gave a description of yoga they often listed six limbs – not the eight of Patanjali. The Southern expansions add some system to the *Northern Upanishads’* flimsy yoga descriptions. They linked them to Tantric signs like *bindu*, subtle body, *chakra*, visualisations, *granthis* (“knots”), and new *mantras*.

The scholar and yoga-populariser G. Feuerstein (1998) subdivides the 21 *yoga-Upanishads* into 5 groups. The first group is called *The Five Bindu Upanishads: Amrita-bindu-, Amrita-nada-bindu-, Tejo-bindu-, Nada-bindu- and Dhyana-bindu-Upanishad*. They all have strong marks of Tantric discourse, not surprising as *bindu* was a central Tantric notion. Among these five *Upanishads*, it is the *Amrita-nada-bindu-Upanishad* which contributed most to yoga understanding. It described a six-limb-yoga, which commenced with *mantra* recitation; the text discusses the subtle winds (of the subtle body) and some esoteric seven gates.

The second group of the *Yoga-Upanishads* mainly deals with the significance of using and meditating on sound, which is typical of Tantra. They are the *Hamsa-, Brahma-Vidya-, Mahavakya- and Pashupata-brahma Upanishads*. Two yoga techniques – *dhyana* meditation and *pranayama* – were both signified by Tantric *mantra* discourse. It was claimed that through silent chanting of the *om mantra*, the soul would be released from the body. We could call this practice for ‘*mantra-yoga*’ or ‘*nada* (sound) *yoga*’. The texts do not add much to the technical yoga understanding of the *nada-yoga* we already encountered in the *Yoga Sutra* and the *upasana* practices of the Brahmins.

Neither does the third group, which mainly deals with *light* – a phenomenon of strong visual experiences often described in yoga. Here we find the *Advaya-taraka- and Mandala-ha-Upanishads* both dwelling on almost psychedelic inner light-space experiences typical of Tantra. In the first text *Taraka* (“deliverer”) yoga is described using Tantric signs (like *sushuma*, *mudra*, *Kundalini*) in usual Tantric esoteric metaphors – all enveloped in Vedanta philosophy. The second text delineated an eight-limb yoga, which however defined the limbs quite differently to Patanjali.

The rest of the late *Yoga-Upanishads* are strongly influenced by *hatha-yoga* discourse and will be investigated in [another chapter](#).

## The Jains and the high status of Tantra and yoga signs – the *Yoga-sastra*

The combination of Tantra and yoga also found its way into other ascetic-wisdom liberation discourses. We have until now focussed on Saivite and Brahmin discourses – let us now investigate briefly Vishnu and Jain discourses. Ascetic-meditative yoga did not seem to play a major role among the medieval Vishnu groups. Late Medieval [Vaishnavism](#) and [Bhakti](#) had become almost synonymous, and with the arrival of the Turkic Muslims, Bhakti became a major force. There surfaced a couple of *Samhitas* (i.e. Vaishnavite style Tantras) dealing with a six-limb yoga: the *Visnu-* and *Sanatkumara-Samhita* (Grönbold 1996).

Even the Jains found it necessary to send out signals about the need for knowledge of the combination of yoga and Tantra. As we recall the Jains traditionally employed the notion of yoga in a negative way. For them ‘yoga’ meant “activity”, which one should avoid, as it generated *karma*. If one instead considered actual Jain practice, which centred around ascetic ethical living, wisdom and meditation, then most people would probably conclude that the Jains practised yoga. But many Jains had until then declined to adopt this Kshatriya notion.

In the Tantric period some Jain texts surfaced mentioning yoga even in their titles. One we have already mentioned: the very influential Jain Haribhadra who in the 8 century wrote two Sanskrit works on (eight-limb) yoga – *Yoga-bindu* and [\*Yoga-dristi-amuccaya\*](#). As discussed earlier when Haribhadra was talking about *yoga*, it was a wider meaning of *sadhana*.

Later on the similarly influential Jain intellectual and monk Hemacandra (1089-1172) wrote the *Yoga-sastra*. It was written at the request of a Saivite king who considered living as a Jain. Hemacandra, like Haribhadra, chose to use the word ‘yoga’ in the wider meaning of a ‘*sadhana*’: that is as ‘a single minded practising of disciplines giving metaphysical benefits’ - a perception of yoga that corresponds to the original meaning of the Greek notion *askesis*. Hemacandra said that the Jain religion consisted of three pillars – he actually used the word ‘jewels’ – which constituted *Jain yoga*: ‘correct conduct, right belief, correct knowledge’. Meditation – being of both of still-mind and contemplative character – was an essential part of building these three pillars. So here we have an example of a Jain intellectual, who used the strongly negative loaded sign ‘yoga’ to inform the core of Jain discourse – the three jewels. Why this significant change? As Hemacandra’s purpose in writing was to convert his ruler – a Saivite king, who most probably had a high opinion of yoga – he was perhaps trying to make Jain discourse acceptable to the king, by saying: “*Look, it is no different from what you already believe in – Jain discourse is in fact a specific yoga discourse*”.

Hemacandra’s *Yoga-sastra* is one of the first texts on yoga to describe the technical meaning. The text is as long as a modern small academic book and it is written in a clear and systematic way. The first part of the book (CH. 1-6) gives a clear exposition of traditional Jain teaching – the three jewels etc. The middle part then gives details of a Tantric *sadhana* or yoga (Ch.7-10). It is a yoga very similar to the yoga of the *Malini Tantra* discussed [earlier](#) (Quarnstrom 2000, 2002, 2003). But as the *Yoga-sastra* - in contrast to the Tantric discourse - was clearly and precisely written, exempt from mystical experiences and flowery metaphors - we finally get a detailed insight into a Tantric yoga practice.

The Tantric yoga outlined by Hemacandra consists firstly of numerous *pranayama* techniques, guided by visualisation and focused meditation (*dharana*). This seems similar to the six-limb-yoga of the *Malini* but there is a significant difference. In this Jain discourse we

encounter emergent Tantric subtle body signs like the *nadis*, *ida*, *pingala*, *sushuma*, *chakra* (internal centres or *mandalas*), which inform the practice. So this yoga seems much more Tantric in character. But unlike much *hatha-yoga* discourse there is no mention at all of *Kundalini* and ecstatic Siva experiences.

Hemacandra adapts Jain discourse to and informs it by the new hegemonic Tantric discourse. A further part of his Tantric yoga consists of four forms of *dhyana* meditation, as *pranayama* according to Hemacandra, did not lead to liberation but mainly to a healthy body. He then describes some Tantric styles of *dhyana*. These are various meditation styles employing *mantras* and sounds, which are typical for Tantric *sadhana*. In similar typical Tantric style, we are then told about the supernatural powers – *siddhis* – generated by these *dhyana* styles.

Thus Hemacandra's Tantric yoga in summary consists of a range of *pranayama* techniques followed by meditations on sounds and Tantric signs. His detailed account leaves the impression of a kind of *nada-yoga* – sound yoga - informed by Tantric discourse. He claims that this yoga will lead to ‘happiness in heaven’ and the soul will ‘incarnate in excellent bodies,’ when it returns to this world. Here the adept - following Jain prescriptions – easily gains eternal liberation. We could say this Tantric yoga reduced the number of times an adept needed to be reborn in order to gain liberation. We notice however that this Tantric yoga does not on its own lead to liberation. It is clearly included in a hegemonic Jain discourse, as the adept must follow Jain prescription to achieve final liberation.

At the end of the book (CH.11-12) Hemacandra finally describes the traditional Jain fourfold pure meditation style – *sukla-dhyana* – and in the final chapter he adds his personal flavour of meditation. Hemacandra's personal meditation is very reminiscent of the [still-mind-or mortification meditation](#) that we encountered as early-yoga evolved as a branch of an underlying proto-yoga field. The no-mind condition created by this meditation however has nothing to do with the Brahmin mystical discourse, where non-duality was realised. Neither can Hemacandra's meditation be compared to (the dying moments?) of *samadhi*, where the meditator has realised and overcome the various distractions of the elements of *prakriti*.

This was probably Hemacandra's personal way of calming his mind to reduce the influx of *karma*, “a karmic clean up” so to speak. Often it is not clear in yoga texts whether the adept will return from the liberation happening in *samadhi*. Hemacandra's meditation is clear. It is a meditation from which one would return to normal life. There is no doubt that the adept achieves liberation while alive. But it is also clear that the adept uses this meditation as a part of his death ritual.

### **The need to fuse with a hegemonic intellectual Tantra discourse**

In summary, we can say that neither Vedanta nor Samkhya sign systems play a role in the final meditation styles outlined by Hemacandra. The *Yoga-sastra* seems to be an expression of Jainism under pressure and influence from competing discourses – especially Tantric Saivism - and hence trying to adjust (Peterson 1998, Davis 1998). The strategy chosen was that of inclusion the same as everybody else used. So the text informs its Saivite audience that they

can convert to Jainism with no worries. Jainism is also a kind of yoga – or *sadhana* – leading to liberation and supernatural powers.

Jainism did not embrace Tantra much more than this. Many parts of Jain core ideology were hard to fuse with Tantra. The Buddhists however embraced Tantra fully and even became a major force in its development. The Buddhists – who in certain rural parts of India had close connections with the Saivites – developed quite early in the Tantric period a couple of Tantras instructing a six-limb yoga: the *Kalacakra-* (about 1000 AD) and *Guhya-samaja-tantra* (4-8 century AD) (Grönbold 1996). The limbs are almost identical to most Saivite six-limb systems – only *tarka* – “thinking, judgement” – is here replaced with the Buddhist notion of *anusmriti*, which means almost the same thing. We will return to these Buddhists in next chapter.

Overall we can see that Tantra and yoga enjoyed such high status that discourses which were very remote and opposite in outlook had to align with them and signal that they also were a part of the discourse. It seems that an almost pan-Indian intellectual cultural field emerged, strongly influenced by a hegemonic Brahmin theological discourse, to which everybody – newcomer as well as ancient – had to submit; all rather similar to modern academic hegemony where, if you want to be taken seriously – be seen as an expert – you need to write in a specific style, apply certain methods, quote the right classics and use a given jargon.

## 7. The sociology of a yoga text in pre-modern India

### The lack of strong institutions

We are now in a position where we can draw up a cultural sociological sketch of the background of a text on yoga in most of Indian history. As we have seen most texts are theologically and politically motivated and contribute very little to the use-value of yoga. This was true for the previous Axial Age period and it has also shown to be true for the medieval Tantric period. One of the few exceptions was the text of the Jain Hemacandra; despite this it was also a politically-theologically motivated text.

Significant to understanding this trend within the [cultural field of yoga](#) – a sub-system in the general field of liberation – is to realise that the religious institutional framework in India overall was very weak indeed. India was a patchwork of local and regional religious communities. There was nothing that came even close to, say, the Catholic Church in Europe. Instead much of the organisation crystallised at the clan and personal level – or around a king or prince. However such groupings would not last very long. Lineages and dynasties would become extinct, toppled over or be torn apart by internal individual conflicts. Hence in such a decentralised institutional system, there will be a strong tendency to segmentation (Malinar

2007b). Divisions, fragmentation or even extinction were the norm rather than the exception. In Europe we saw this happen to the institutional weak Protestant culture as soon as it evolved: it became a rich and fertile jungle for rapid mutations of sects and cults.

India was in the same position and this shaped yoga as a cultural field in decisive ways. As we have seen, the Buddhists and Jains, who both had strong institutions, did not canonically adopt the yoga discourse. The Brahmins only reluctantly adopted the yoga discourse and it was quite late before yoga finally became a part of their canon. The adoption of the *Yoga Sutra* as a *darsana* only ignited theological based commentaries. In such an environment there is little probability of systematisation and standardisation of yoga *theoria* and *praxis*. Then there were the various monotheistic communities, who also suffered under the weak and fragmented institutionalism under discussion, so they did not provide much yoga discourse. Even their temples and medieval monastic movements seem not to have produced much technical yoga discourse.

We are left with the urban upper classes and warrior nobility. The yoga discourse most probably unfolded here in a heterogeneous and loose stratum of householders and itinerants. Hence we have seen within the yoga discourse that at any time numerous strains of yoga flowered with different methods and different goals within different social strata. It is not surprising that such a fragmented cultural field of yoga was unable to concentrate and standardise the yoga discourse into a coherent doctrine. Most styles would be local and short lived before they became extinct or amalgamated with other local yoga dialects.

In summary, the various groups did not have the social stamina – the institutional and organisational framework - to succeed. The lack of yoga institutions and organisations meant that any doctrinal refinement, storage and transmission of the [discourse's DNA](#) was a fragile process constantly under threat of becoming extinct. Hence it is of little surprise that the yoga discourse became such a heterogeneous cultural sub-system. New discourses would evolve and then quickly become extinct. This was due to two restrictions: time and geography. Time-wise such groups would quickly disintegrate and disappear and with that their yoga cultural memory – the yoga DNA. Geographically, the lack of organisations and institutions meant that a given discourse dialect would not have been able to break out of its locality and become supra-regional. To become supra-regionally established would have been a necessary condition for any *doctrine* to establish itself in history. Only a supra-regionally established and institutionally carried doctrine would have had a chance to withstand the erosion due to time and history.

### **Individualisation and authority**

In such a cultural field, segmentation becomes the norm and is often driven by individual idiosyncrasies. A charismatic person who for some reason – social, psychological or ideological - did not fit into existing structures and institutions would find it easy to break away. He would meet few and locally limited institutions to stop him. He could for instance study with as many teachers, sages, gurus, healers, hermits, and wizards in his region as he wanted. Medieval hagiographies show numerous examples of a novice adopting several, often

opposing, teachings. Many of these teachers would – like the novice – have their homespun and compiled version to teach due to the lack of institutions. This enabled the novice to pick and choose between an enormous bouquet of philosophies and practices as he pleased – no institution within the cultural field would be able to force its discipline and monopoly on him.<sup>289</sup> Hence a bit of Buddhism could easily be combined with some Brahmanism, Tantra, Saivism and some magical yoga tricks in whatever combination.

A critical part of this process was to build up authority and high status – cultural and symbolic capital. This is the lifeblood of any cultural field – not only the field of liberation of which yoga discourses formed a sub-system. In order to achieve this, several technologies and methods were available for the charismatic novice to choose between: various vows, styles of asceticism, Tantric possession, mendicant lifestyles, yoga techniques, ritual master-ship, reciting holy texts, gnostic rhetoric, and magic tricks. Such technologies, due to underlying power discourses, signalled authority to local people. This was critical for any success. So a religious entrepreneur’s interest in yoga would often also be motivated by its symbolic-value: the yoga discourse would endow the entrepreneur with authority and transform him into a holy man. This social differentiation was a critical pre-condition for any success in this field and yoga – unregulated and plastic - was an obvious choice of technology.

If a religious entrepreneur was sufficiently charismatic, he would at a certain point in time - after having maybe roamed the forests - have built up so much status (symbolic capital) – that due to his charisma, he would be able to gather a cult around him. The next step could then be to settle and build up a religious community affiliated to the cult – a *sampradaya*. The founder would now have reached the level of a local community leader. With some luck and talent his community would attract adherents and sponsors – maybe a community, which had recently lost its existing guru lineage due to, an epidemic - the cultural field of yoga as springboard for social and religio-political power within the religious field. The yoga field almost did not exist on its own but had been absorbed by the overall religious field where it contributed to the build up of religious capital.

### Finally – the intellectuals arrive at yoga

As the cult and *sampradaya* solidified, grew and institutionalised, it would have reached a point where it needed recognition by the ruling regional elites whose financial and political support could be crucial. This was often the moment to write a text on yoga or Tantra where the new and the old adapted to each other. Often there would be a hegemonic intellectual and ideological discourse to which the new cult needed to adapt. Hence the texts we encounter only give us some general information about their contribution to *theoria* and *praxis*. Instead they are occupied with sending out the right signals, enabling them to be taken seriously. Intellectuals – often Brahmins – became the scribal class who could produce the text in such a way that it would gain recognition. This was a central function of written yoga discourse: yoga was one among various instruments (discourses) for accumulation of religious symbolic capital and it was important to be seen to master it.

In the chapter on the materialisation of *hatha-yoga* we shall see that the sociological

model described above illuminates the *hatha-yoga* milieu and the appearance of the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*.

### Summary – real or paper differences in Tantric yoga

In the medieval period we witnessed how in urban elite circles “good old” general yoga signs like *dharana*, *dhyana* and *pranayama* (for instance in the *Malini* and the *Yoga-sastra*) were linked to Tantric signs. Take ‘meditation’ – often equated with yoga – as an example. In the Tantric period period meditation was *not* about ‘mortifying the body-mind system in order to gain release in death’. Now meditation was often signified as ‘guiding and visualising divine body forces’. Or it was signified as ‘vibrating consciousness into divine frequencies’. The signified - the purpose - of ‘meditation’ was clearly unstable and re-configured. But what about the physical practice the sign referred to – was this referent then stable and fixed? Most probably the referent underwent similar re-configurations.

When reading texts such as the *Tantraloka* of Abhinavagupta a reader could be tempted to conclude that Tantra introduced a new and significant different style of yogic meditation. High Tantric discourse, by the sound of it, seemed to frame meditation in ecstatic and orgiastic descriptions. Often the term ‘possession’ (*avesa* or *samavesa*) was directly used. Sometimes we encounter practitioners who at their initiation would collapse in rapturous spasms (Smith 2006). We have descriptions related to meditation, which associated it with talking in tongues, epileptic seizures, dissociated mind, and multiple personalities. If we compare that with the ascetic Yogi, who mortified his body-mind system with meditation, we clearly realise the difference.

As many Tantras were deliberately written in ambiguous, symbolic and mystic style, it is often hard to tell whether we are witnessing real differences or only rhetoric. For instance the *Tantraloka* displayed a conscious attempt to domesticate orgiastic Shaman-like Tantric practices into an inner world of symbolic experiences. Here we might encounter mind mortifying meditative practices (the referent), which from the outside would look unchanged, but now they were signified by signs belonging to ecstatic cults. So the difference in Tantric rhetoric did not necessarily reflect a real difference in the referent. An outside disinterested observer might not have registered any difference between a Samkhya Yogi following Patanjali and a Saivist Trika Yogi following Abhinavagupta.

Having said that, there definitely would have been Tantric rural cults like the Kulas and Kramas, where we as observers would have found their Tantric practices to have generated states of possession absolutely different from Yogic mind mortifying meditation. However, it is my impression that when such emotional practices - originating in non-Aryan low castes - were adopted and included in elite theological discourses, they were transformed into the opposite: to mortified body-mind system in deep absorption. Indian *inclusiveness* – the ideology of adapting and downgrading the other and the new as an integral but inferior part of itself – was sometimes able to produce public relations marvels. On paper the *Tantraloka*, the *Malini* and similar texts might look different and seem Tantric, but on closer inspection they were often not *practically* different to the old. What had changed was mainly the metaphysical

sign system and the configuration of methods.

*It is my impression that hatha-yoga represents a Tantric yoga which was not only metaphysically different to the old ascetic-wisdom types of yoga but also practically different. Both the referent and the signified of this yoga culture represented an epistemic rupture from previous examples. But like so many other systems, it would also suffer from being included in hegemonic elite theologies. This is the subject of the chapter on hatha-yoga.*

# **Chapter 10**

# **Hatha-yoga – The domestication of a Tantric yoga**

## Key Concepts

<u>Tantric goddesses</u>	<u>Mudra &amp; bandha</u>
<u>Siddha cults</u>	<u>Fluidity vs divine energy</u>
<u>Goraksa-sataka</u>	<u>Hatha vs raja</u>
<u>The serpent Kubjika</u>	<u>Siddhi vs jivan-mukti</u>
<u>Subtle body</u>	<u>Hatha Yoga Pradipika</u>
<u>Yogini kulas</u>	<u>Cultural field of immortality</u>
<u>Kula cults</u>	<u>Armtakunda</u>
<u>Shatkarma</u>	<u>Samadhi as raja-yoga</u>
<u>Pranayama</u>	<u>Asana</u>

*This chapter is central, seen from a modern yoga practitioner's point of view. Modern postural yoga is often seen to be an offspring of hatha-yoga – or even as identical with hatha-yoga. For a modern student or a yoga populariser interested in the detailed origin of their practice this chapter will probably be interesting and surprising reading.*

*The historico-sociological conditions of hatha-yoga are investigated in the Tantra chapter dealing with the feudal Indian society and the raise of the Tantric discourse. The hatha-yoga discourse emerged as this social formation declined in Northern India with the raids and final occupation of Turkic Muslims. My theory is that the emergence of hatha-yoga – heavily influenced by Tantric discourse – is directly connected to this decline.*

*Hatha-yoga in this chapter is not defined (as in most popular books) by its long-held poses but by its core doctrines about the subtle body – the energy body. The introduction of the subtle body as a significant notion to the yoga discourse seems to be unique to hatha-yoga. Based on this concept – the energy body as a central sign - the emergence of hatha-yoga discourse is investigated in detail. Then follows a deconstruction of a text which seems central to the hatha-yoga discourse – the Hatha Yoga Pradipika. I show how this text is a compilation of conflicting practices and theologies. Rather than being the bible of hatha-yoga, as it is acclaimed, it subsumes and incorporates the hatha-yoga discourse into existing elite Saivite theologies. What is thought to be the zenith of hatha-yoga seems*

instead turns out to be its ideological subjugation and imprisonment of Saivism.

Because *hatha-yoga* was the result of a mixture of very diverse, radical and obscure discourses the meaning and goals of its own practices are open to very different interpretations reflecting various social milieus of interactors. Are the goals of *hatha-yoga* an expression of urban elites' Tantric quest for transcendental consciousness - or are they an expression of rural low castes' thirst for immortality and semi-divine power? When studying the old scriptures there are many answers to the question "Why practise *hatha-yoga*?" . Most popular yoga books and instructors are not aware of this ambiguity as they introduce newcomers to the purpose of *hatha-yoga*.

Modern yoga practitioners after reading this chapter will probably wish to re-consider whether there are any similarities between why they practise yoga and why the original *hatha yogis* did so.

## 1. *Hatha-yoga* and the decline of elite Tantra

### The weakening of the Tantric ideology

Between 1400 and 1500 there surfaced a new text – the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (hereafter *HYP*) - which became very influential for the yoga discourse not only in India under foreign rule but also in Western contemporary society.

A close reading of the *HYP* will soon reveal that like most written Indian yoga discourse it is a compilation of a range of various ideas and practices. The text reflects and builds upon a loose genre of early *hatha* texts. This chapter will investigate whether this culture originated within or outside the existing [cultural field of liberation](#) .

Devastating Turkic Muslim raids commenced around 1000 AD culminating with the Delhi Sultanate established itself in Northern India about 1200 AD. It was at this point that Gorakhnath and his Kanphata yogis were founded – allegedly one of the main originators of *hatha-yoga*. So the emergence of *hatha-yoga* was probably conditioned by the Turkic Muslim invasion. How could this have happened?

In the first centuries the invaders raided and destroyed towns, palaces and temples where existing power and wealth was accumulated. The invaders settling in existing Northern Indian power centres forced surviving Tantric Saivites elites out of many temples and urban areas. Those fugitives were forced to settle in the countryside and provinces. This emigration meant new social interaction and habits for the elites. In this process they could have mixed with rural religious institutions and groups like the [Siddhas](#) and other Tantric and Saivite milieus.

The founding of a Kanphata yogi *order* (strict, almost militarily organised; yielding

protection in defendable monasteries) is probably related to such new social interactional patterns. It is my conjecture that Gorakhnath - who seems to be a symbolic figure representing several actual teachers - could represent displaced urban elite Saivites of this kind taking up and systematising rural ideas and practices. In short I believe that *hatha-yoga* and the social *Jogi* identity surfacing at this point of history evolved out of such a confluence of rural and urban interaction and discourses. Let me expand on this line of argument.

The new power elite of Turkic Muslims in Northern India must have had a tremendous impact on the hitherto ruling elites of princes and holy men (Brahmins, Buddhists, Saivites). These specialists within overlapping cultural fields of religion and liberation were an integral part of the political order of medieval India. As we recall such cultural and symbolic specialists were often directly working for and legitimising the local political rulers. Often holy men were local chiefs running feudal fiefs and temples controlling big areas of land. But with Turkic invasions and occupation, India's mediaeval power structure was broken at the top of society<sup>290</sup>. Kings and princes who either employed or protected holy men were suddenly displaced. Some temples were plundered and burned down. The elite of holy men in this way lost their former social habitat.

The religious specialists would often have been forced to leave the various power centres of India – cities, palaces, temples, monasteries, and regional manor houses now occupied by the new rulers. Here holy men had previously thrived and dominated under the umbrella of Tantric ideologies. The divine feudal society was in other words squeezed at its top levels, leaving only the provincial countryside or the immigration to the South as viable options for religious specialists entangled in the waning previous power structure and ideology<sup>291</sup>.

The arrival and settlement of the Turkic Muslims was followed by another blow to the power of the holy men. It was the arrival of [Vaishnavite Bhakti](#), which swept Northern India. Here the reigning ascetic wisdom discourses were fundamentally challenged and often ridiculed by an alternative power discourse, which promoted emotions and devotion. It was a hard time for many ascetic and Tantric milieus of holy men whose cultural field was under threat from the overall power field of society.

### **The change of yoga's interactional milieu**

Accordingly, in this period Buddhism totally disappeared from India. Many of the radical Saivite renouncer cults also disappeared: mud-clad people walking around half-naked obviously violating the norms of the new rulers might have had problems. Saivite worshipping icons of god (not allowed among Muslims) and *lingas* (penis symbols) would probably also have faced trouble. This time the urban cultural field of liberation and religion was under not ideological but *physical* attack.

Many of the Tantric cults thus vanished. The Kulas disappeared 11-1200 AD (White 2003). Kashmir Saivism – of which Trika and Abhinavagupta was a part – disappeared. In fact this was the end of the production of many elite Tantras, like the [Saivagamas](#)<sup>292</sup>. It must have been a kind of tsunami sweeping the *upper echelons* of Tantric medieval society. Anything

visible, centralised, institutionalised or being symbolic totems radiating resistance or power was crushed, leaving the countryside, the provinces and the South relatively untouched.

Some groups of holy men managed to adjust and survive<sup>293</sup>. Some could have joined a rural surplus population which was rising due to increased Muslim economic exploitation. Here such displaced elites of cultural specialists adopted existing rural identities or created new mixed breeds. These new social strata probably contributed to the rise of what should become the Nath *jogis* to whom the Kanphata yogis belonged.

In the countryside the emerging Nath *jogis* managed to build up good relations with the Turkic Muslim rulers, who had confidence in their magical powers (Vaudeville 1972, White 2009). Their symbolic capital and corresponding power discourses were still intact. So more horizontally organised rural cults often living in small bands as itinerants – not sticking their heads out too much, offering super-natural services - would probably have had a good chance of survival under the new social conditions. That seems to have been the case with the Kanphata yogis. Accordingly it might be in this period that the yoga discourse began to move from mainly urban elites to the kind of rural itinerants that we experience in India today. I will return to this question later.

### ***Early hatha-yoga – a melting pot of medieval ideas and practices***

The early *hatha-yoga* texts of this period tend to give much more detailed descriptions of techniques and signs than we are used to from previous yoga discourse. This might be because at this time the writings actually introduced genuinely novel techniques and understanding of the body. New techniques like *bandhas* and *mudras* were very physical in nature. Their purpose was to manipulate materially various parts and entities within what was called the *subtle body*. Sometimes they moved various types of fluids around, at other times they awakened and directed divine energies within the subtle body. Sometimes they brought together opposing forces, at other times they directed forces out through the skull of the adept. Some techniques in the early texts were very sexual in character – employing sexual fluids or sexual organs. At other times the techniques were almost alchemical in character as people wanted to transform their body into divinity - like metal being transmuted into gold.

The reader of the texts is left in no doubt that this was a style of yoga drastically different from the various styles of previous periods. First of all the signified of the yoga sign had changed. This yoga sign did *not* signify realisation of non-duality in deep absorption; nor the build up of supernatural powers; nor the Gnostic insight into underlying reality; nor the mortification of the body-mind system; nor the devotional submission to god. This yoga sign only appeared to share the word ‘yoga’ – the signifier - with the older styles. Not only the signified had changed, but also the physical practice – the referent of the sign – was entirely new. It was a practice utilising physical force to move around the ‘energies and fluids’ of the body.

When this new *hatha* discourse finally called itself ‘yoga’, it was probably in the general meaning of being a *sadhana* – a disciplined goal-oriented practice. Had the early *hatha* creators chosen the Indian word *sadhana* or the Greek word *ascesis* – both meaning practice,

exercise, single-mindedness – we might all today have been doing ‘*sadhana*’ or ‘*ascesis*’ instead of ‘*yoga*’.

The early *hatha-yoga* texts contained all kinds of discourse. Many of the new *hatha-yoga* signs were clearly rural Tantric in character. Especially so was the purpose of *hatha-yoga*, which was often very this-worldly, aiming for immortality and magical power. At other times, however, the goal was other-worldly and clearly belonged to urban elite discourses. Here people aimed for living liberation and release after death. The latter goals clearly belonged to non-Tantric discourses of ascetic wisdom and monotheism. Other aspects pointed further away from Tantra. Normally, Tantric *sadhana* was utterly dominated by *mantras*, *mandalas* and mystical experiences. But such topics were often totally left out of early *hatha-yoga* texts. The texts were down to earth, promising quick results, like marketing pamphlets. So this was social strata and a cultural system trying to distinguish themselves from typical Tantric discourse.

When reading the *HYP* – for many representing the zenith of *hatha-yoga* discourse - the reader can sense how the compiler tried to pull many of these diverting discourses together – highlighting some while muting others. Clearly some ideological positioning and categorisation was taking place.

*Before analysing the HYP we will first try to identify some of the social groups and discourses from which *hatha-yoga* finally emerged. Firstly the Kulas who represent the aspect of Archaic rituals and culture that we find within *hatha-yoga*.*

## 2. The Tantric genealogy of central *hatha-yoga* signs

### Tantric sexuality as a religious ritual

D. G. White has investigated the rural *Kula cults* (often termed *Kaula*), because it was here that the sexual aspect moved to the forefront of Tantric rituals.<sup>294</sup> Some of the first scriptures focussing on sex as a part of the clan ritual were the *Kula Tantra scriptures* (700-1000AD). They describe rituals taking place in cremation grounds where blood, semen and alcohol are offered to satisfy *kula* (“clan”) deities. These deities (sometimes clan ancestors) could cause deadly diseases by entering the human body, or they could even kidnap and consume clan members. The deities were often depicted as animals, birds or a combination of human and animal. The shamanic “priest” mastered the ritual sacrifice and if he survived this dangerous ritual encounter at the graveyard or at remote places, he was considered a *Viral Hero* (*vira*) and had a high social status in the clan. The deities were pacified with *mantras*

and human life-giving fluids (semen and blood) – fluids seen to be the manifestation of the life force of the goddess; the distilled living essence of a person.

Over time the rituals changed, says White, from being about the clan and the management of dark forces to become highly erotic-mystical practices. The female demon was slowly transformed into a *yogini* – a female goddess who carried the clan nectar – the life force of the group. The male practitioner – the hero – by sucking (drinking) the vaginal secretions or the menstrual blood from the *yogini*'s (the female clan member) vulva, would become immortal and induced with magical power<sup>295</sup>.

From a sociological point of view, the *kula* hero represents the emergence of a new variety of the holy man. He does not legitimise his power with elite *gnosis* about the One or through super-human ascetic efforts. He is a man of the clan who through his *ritual mastership* can master demons and goddesses. He does not aim for liberation or salvation but for immortality and magic powers.

White concludes from these early rural and low caste Tantrics - represented by the Kulas - that the sexual ritual core was about bringing together male and female polarised god-energies or life-forces represented by human fluids. Both 'divine energies' and 'fluids' of the Kulas should become key signs to *hatha-yoga*. Let us have a look at some of the background of the Kulas, who are central to the genealogy of the *hatha-yoga* discourse.

### The emergence of powerful female deities and *hatha-yoga*

The influential Kulas belonged to the aboriginal non-Aryan culture where the worship of Mother Earth in the form of a huge range of female deities – often called *yaksis*, *dakinis* and *yoginis* - was very common. First a short introduction to some of these Tantric goddesses, who played a major role among the Kulas and many other Tantric communities like the Kramas.

Many *yaksis* – local goddesses - were connected with good fortune and many cults sacrificed meat and blood to them. Such sacrifices became central to many Tantric practices. Then there were the *dakinis*, female Tantric demons worshipped by Tantric cults in physical environments formed like *mandalas*. Finally there were the *yoginis* – symbolising female magical powers – who became central not only to many Tantric temples but also to many Tantric practices. In Tantric meditation they became objects on which to focus in order to gain ultimate knowledge. Often – for instance among the Kulas – the *yoginis* were represented as *mandalas* or *chakras* visualised as part of the divine human body (Brighenti 2001).

The goddess Sakti signified a different league. She was one of the most widespread goddesses and over time she incorporated many minor goddesses. Often matching major male gods in power, she became a very strong female god forming independent religious communities. Sakti was perceived as primordial, omnipotent and omnipresent and was open to all castes. She managed to gain strong influence in the Saivite communities. Among the Kulas she became even stronger than Siva. Sakti in their *Sakta-tantras* came to signify powerful energy, while Siva represented passive consciousness.

Another common trait in aboriginal Indian culture was the worship of animals, especially the much feared snake. The serpent was often seen as a vital force and thought to be immortal.

Many widespread cults turned the serpent into a female goddess like *naga-mata* (“the mother serpent”) (Brighenti 2001). In the Kula cults worshipping Sakti, the serpent goddess found her way into the divinised human body. Here she slumbered, waiting to be awakened. Her activation and following ascent through the divine body had tremendous implications.

In the beginning she was called the Crooked One – *Kubjika* - but later took the name *Kundalini*, who became central to *hatha-yoga*. So in this fertile dynamic process of various non-Aryan goddess-worshipping religions and Tantric cults like the Kulas and Kramas, we discover many new signs which became central to *hatha-yoga*. As we can see this social dynamic and its accompanying sign systems – Sakti, *mandala*, Kundalini, blood sacrifices, *chakras*, embodied goddesses and the clan hero - had very little to do with the world of Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra*, the *Mahabharata* and the *Upanishads* of which many today believe *hatha-yoga* was a natural outgrowth. We have also seen how even the underlying [code or habitus](#) had altered: now the symbolic capital was legitimised more by rituals and sexual fluids than by *gnosis* or *ascesis*.

We discussed earlier how [Trika cults](#) as a part of the [Hinduisisation process](#) domesticated the discourses and practices of these ascetic rural Kula- and Krama cults. We saw how [Abhinavagupta](#) and the Trikas turned those antinomian notions and practices into a salvation religion directed at the needs of an elite householder. This Trika discourse blossomed for 3-400 years. Then under Muslim rule and the dominance of Vaishnavite Bhakti the production of new Tantric texts dried up in elite written discourse. The Trika discourse and milieu was coming to an end. Some scholars assume that *hatha-yoga* was a continuation of this dying Trika milieu as *hatha-yoga* emerged in this period.

However I do not believe that *hatha-yoga* directly evolved out of Trika’s elite monotheistic discourse, which lost its dynamic. The vigorous *hatha-yoga* discourse was mainly molded and nurtured by the *rural* Tantric [habitus](#) that I have described above. In other words the fundamental basic signs of the *hatha-yoga* discourse were configured and developed in rural Tantric strata and communities worshipping snakes and wild goddesses - like the Kulas and the Kramas. This Tantric milieu, with the arrival of Turkic Muslims, was now further enriched by the displaced urban elites fleeing the invaders. The incoming urban elites further fuelled and ignited the existing dynamic rural discourses and practices, which in turn led to the creation of the early *hatha-yoga* discourse.

However the Kulas, with their divine energies and fluids, represented only one branch of the genealogy of the early *hatha-yoga* discourse. There was a second one, to which we now turn; it evolved among the *Siddhas*.

### 3. The subtle body discourse – the inventive phase

## The Siddhas – a major source for *hatha-yoga*

Hatha discourse is more than *Kundalini*, the divinisation of the body and the utilisation of sexual fluids as a part of practice. Key to *hatha-yoga* discourse is the *subtle body* sign. The subtle body was originally imagined as a fluid system, but over the following pages we will see how the subtle body also became seen as a divine system.

In the emerging *hatha-yoga* discourse the subtle body had a very *physical* aspect to it. Here the subtle body was a very earthly and *corporeal body system of liquids*, which has to be pumped and moved up and down through some physical channels<sup>296</sup>. It was a *fluid system*. This subtle body sign did not figure in the Kula discourse of divine energies and sexual fluids.

So there is a source of *hatha-yoga* discourse not yet accounted for. It is to be found among groups who had a physically concrete approach to the body. Scholars suggest that we look among groups who were initially called *Siddhas* and later *Nath, Nath-Jogis or Nath-Siddhas*. These various *Siddha* groups were preoccupied by the physical body which they wanted to transform by material means. It is among the *Siddhas* that other key signs in the later *hatha-yoga* discourse were developed.

The *Siddhas* were also influenced by Saivism – they worshipped Siva and/or Buddha. We can see from their texts that they also became influenced by the Tantric Saivism of Kula and Krama discourses which flourished at the same time. Hence among the *Siddhas* two disparate imaginations of the subtle body system merged: the subtle body was constructed by both physical fluid and divine discourses.

This merger happened within an overall Saivite sign framework creating many conceptual tensions within what should become *hatha-yoga*. Hence some introductory remarks on the *Siddhas* are required.

### The pre-history of *hatha-yoga's* subtle body discourse

The discourse of *hatha-yoga* and the subtle body emerged around 11-1300 AD among new cults which belonged to the milieu of the *Nath Siddhas*. The *Nath Siddhas* were on their side a part of much wider Pan-Indian discourse of *Siddhas*.<sup>297</sup> We have briefly encountered the *Siddhas* in the chapter about Tantra. As we recall the Tantric movement flowered between 800-1200 AD. The *Siddhas* were worshipped by cults who perceived them as saints with superhuman powers – having the status of gods.. A ‘*siddha*’ in this discourse was constructed as being ‘*a realised*’ or ‘*perfected one*’.

Inspired by Chinese alchemy there arose in India about 800AD an alchemist discourse. The *Siddhas* also became inspired by alchemy and tried accordingly to attain immortality and perfection through developing alchemist skills. They already had a practice of *kaya-sadhana* – “body cultivation” – which fitted well with alchemy. Here the *Siddhas* cultivated the body into pure spirit<sup>298</sup>. Alchemy – a physical discourse - now became mixed with the *Siddhas*’ spiritual rituals of body cultivation. As an alchemist could transform metals into gold, so the *Siddhas* wanted to transform the body into divinity. Accordingly, they had a motto: “*as in metal so in body*” – the body could be transformed and refined as one could do with metal. Thus among

the Siddhas there was no sharp distinction between the physical and the divine.

By mastering the alchemical transforming skills, they believed that they could turn mercury, which was otherwise poisonous for humans, into *nectar* – life elixir – giving them immortality. It was well-established in India to visualise life as *fluids* – ‘life fluids’ (*rasa*): life was imagined as nectars streaming through the body keeping it alive. The Siddhas merged their alchemist discourse with this life fluid (*rasa*) discourse.<sup>299</sup>

So we can observe how the Siddhas amalgamated several discourses: body cultivation/transformation, alchemy, fluidity/nectar as images of life forces/vitality, divinisation of body forces/polarities, ecstatic god experiences etc. These ideas about vital fluid forces were expanded into a radical new discourse about the *subtle body as an instrument for “perfection”* (*siddhi*), says White. It was this subtle body – *subtle* but still physical and tangible – which would become the locus of the practices of *hatha-yoga*.

### The fluid subtle body

As mentioned many groups in India saw the body as a loan from the gods. Our human body was kept alive by “vital fluids” (*rasa*), but sadly these would run out like the sand in an egg timer. When there was no more *rasa* the physical body would die and return to the gods. So the trick of a long life was to avoid the loss of the life force – the *rasa* in the body (White 1996).

The *rasa* was in other words conceived as a *subtle body* – a subtle fluid system - within the physical body. The notion of the subtle body (often called the *astral body* in popular yoga books) can be traced back to about 600 BC in India, according to White.<sup>300</sup> The subtle body was the Indian way of explaining what life actually is. It was further conceived as working as an intermediary between the mind (often called the ‘causal body’) and the physical body. The subtle body played a pivotal role as an ‘energy body’ connecting and stimulating the physical body and the mind<sup>301</sup>.

The Siddhas adapted and assembled a very vivid and detailed map of the subtle body. From the head there was for instance seen to be an on-going dripping of nectar or semen into the stomach, where it would be consumed by fire. The result was disease, old age and death as the vital energies were slowly depleted. This new conceptual map could of course be intellectually interesting. But this was not what was driving them – especially not the alchemist inspired Siddhas. They came up with new techniques, which gave the subject an explosive interest.

### The subtle body techniques

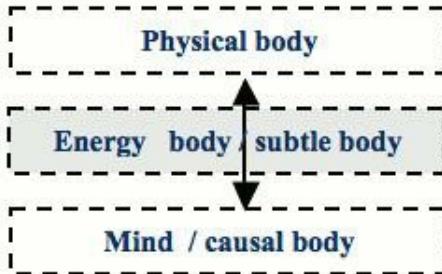
In the scriptures, according to White (1996), we witness over a period of 200 years – the period from 1100-1300 AD where Turkic Muslims raided and settled in Northern India and the incumbent elites fled to rural areas – a revolutionary breakthrough of specific subtle body techniques, designed to manipulate the subtle body thereby delivering ‘immortality’ and ‘perfection’ – *siddhi* - as it was called.

In this way the Siddhas established a cultural field of immortality charging them with the cultural capital of knowing how to become immortal. Immortality was achievable through certain techniques which manipulated and even reversed the depletion of the vital energies. Some Siddhas now maintained that they could reverse the flow of vital fluids from the head to the stomach (making semen flow upwards again) others maintained they could transform the fluids (semen being restored to its original condition in the head - called 'nectar'). The subtle body was no longer just a map of the erosion of life but rather a process which could be manipulated by efforts of specialists.

A parallel notion of the subtle body also emerged among the Buddhists (Samuel 2007, Dasgupta 1976, Schaeffer vol. 30).<sup>302</sup> Together Saivite Nath Siddhas and the so-called Siddhacarya Buddhists made further developments to this subtle body discourse. Thus a plethora of groups were involved in the subtle body discourse, some with rural Tantric backgrounds, some coming from cultural fields of liberation and salvation. In summary this cultural field of immortality was distinct to and not an outgrow of the cultural field of yoga.

### ***Central notions of the subtle body***

**Siddhas' construction of subtle body:**  
*Nectar/semen/Siva* drips down from head  
**Fluids** consumed in stomach by fire:  
 Result: *Disease, age and death*  
 New physiology: divine energy centres  
 Subtle body = divine energies!



### ***Merging the fluid with the divine***

This subtle body physiology represented a relatively clear and cohesive explanation of life and death. However some Tantrics and Siddhas went a significant step further as they established a whole new physiology, where invisible 'divine energy centres' - called *chakras* - and *Kundalini* appeared in the subtle body. The idea that the body was the locus of divine energies was borrowed from the Kulas. In other words the subtle body of fluidities - through this injection of Kula signs - became divine. This divine force materialised itself within the subtle body.

The implication of this was that the body hereafter became the locus of two conflicting sign systems, which merged in various confusing combinations. One sign system populated the

subtle body with fluids and was preoccupied by immortality. Another sign system constructed the subtle body as divine energies related to power and sometimes release.

Thus among the Siddhas the subtle body became associated with two disparate strong cultural symbols: one the one hand it was associated with immortality (through alchemy), on the other it was associated with divinity (through Tantric cults and Saivism). By utilising certain new techniques aimed at the subtle body the Siddha claimed that he could not only achieve *immortality* but also *divinity*.<sup>303</sup> It was against this background of strong and different promises that *hatha-yoga* emerged.

### Development of pre-*hatha-yoga* techniques

According to White: *The Kiss of the Yogini* (2003) there emerged out of the Siddha milieu a new branch or cult called the *Yogini Kula*. They claimed to be founded by the Siddha Matsyendra. Matsyendra became a legendary figure to whom many texts and tales are attributed. It is also claimed that Matsyendra wrote a text called *Kaula-jnana-nirnaya*.<sup>304</sup> Here Matsyendra described in poetic and symbolic forms innovative techniques which he related to the manipulation of *chakras* and Kundalini. We could call these techniques the early – if not the earliest – *hatha-yoga* techniques.

According to White's deciphering of its mystical texts, the yogini Kula discourse maintained that it was possible to force semen upward by utilising certain techniques. Their techniques consisted in the forceful channelling of subtle body fluids. For instance the yogini Kula would stand on his head for hours thereby reversing the dripping of nectar. Techniques like "muscle locks" (*bandhas*) and "seals" (*mudras*), which retained the nectar in the head, were also described by Matsyendra in mystical terms. Finally the technique of retaining the breath for a prolonged period – the *kumbhaka* of *pranayama* – was described as a powerful technique for manipulating and uniting energies in the subtle body. Assisted by vital breath (*pranayama*) the body fluids could be forced up the *sushuma* channel – a central energy channel of the subtle body. This would lead to a reversal of the death process of life and the rise of Kundalini.

So her Kundalini (divine energy) appears in the midst of a discourse of pumping fluids. We can here identify old (like *pranayama*) and new (like *bandha*) techniques signified by a variety of subtle body discourses – sometimes divine, sometimes fluid.

Others within the Tantric subtle body discourse, offering new techniques, were cults like the *Trika Kaulia*, who claimed they were able to prompt Sakti – i.e. Kundalini – to arise from the base of the spine to merge with Siva in the head. This was again achieved through and by the subtle body. These radical groups probably used various antinomian Tantric techniques to work on a subtle body seen to house divine entities.<sup>305</sup>

Inspired by this some Saivite Siddhas maintained that if the practitioner was able to master the subtle body with the new techniques, he would not only become immortal but also a second Siva – a *jivan-mukti* (a "living-liberated"). This was a significant re-construction of the alchemist sign of 'immortality'. A previous *physical sign* from the cultural field of immortality now in a religious field became signified by monotheism and salvation discourses.

The details of the process of ‘achieving Siva’ varied. One version claimed that utilising the subtle body there could be a ‘unification of divine polarities’. Specific techniques could produce a sexual union of Sakti (localised at the bottom of the spine as Kundalini) and Siva (localised in the head) leading to semi-divine status (Mallik 1953). This union would create a new high status identity belonging to liberation discourses – the *jivan-mukti*. The subtle body - in this clearly Tantric discourse - had become a locus of divine energies accessible to specialists through newly assembled techniques. This was a revolutionary claim immensely increasing the use- and symbolic-value of the subtle body discourse among elite strata: immortality and god-like power was now on offer! And who would not be interested in that?

*We have now followed two branches of the genealogy of hatha-yoga and its techniques. They both guided us to various Tantric social strata. The first was the Kula cults and now we have investigated the Siddha cults. We have followed how new Tantric signs later on moved into the cultural and religious fields of elite strata – especially Saivism. We have also had our first initial glimpse of how the early hatha signs changed as they became associated with liberation discourses: The physical ‘immortality’ of siddhi became the ‘liberated one’ - jivan-mukti.*

### ***Hatha and other signs of the subtle body***

Matsyendra and the Yogini Kaulas are a strong example of how two disparate discourses of the subtle body – a fluid system and a divine energy system –merged into one. On one side we find fluids like *bindu*, *rasa* and *armta* and on the other we find energy condensations like *Kundalini*, *Sakti*, *prana* and *chakras*.

An essential fluid was *armta*, which was the “nectar of life” leading to immortality. In the fluid discourse signs like *bindu* and *rasa* often represented male and female opposites, needing to be brought together. In the energy discourse there were often divine polarities like Siva and Sakti to be brought together.

The application of vigorous efforts – which later on would be called *hatha* - played a significant role in this context. The *hatha* signifier seems to have emerged among the Buddhists and Saivists. Recent research indicates namely that the development of some of the *hatha-yoga* signs also took place in other milieus than Siddhas and Kulas (Birch 2011, Mallinson 2012b). The Buddhists – especially in the *Kalacakra-tantra* tradition – seemed to be the first to use the notion of *hatha* as vigorous Tantric techniques supporting their existing practice, according to Birch. The energetic techniques of Tantric origin imported by the Buddhists seemed to pivot around *prana* and sexual fluids.

Further, there were early *hatha-yoga* discussions within some Saivite ascetic cults. Here – for instance in the *Armta-siddhi* from 11-12 century – we find some of the earliest discussions of new *hatha-yoga* techniques like *mudras* and *bandhas*, according to Mallinson. Some of the Saivite groups condensed later into the monastic order of the Dasanami Sampradaya. In this Saivite milieu the discourse of the subtle body as a liquid system

dominated. There was little discussion of Kundalini and *chakras*.<sup>306</sup>

In the end, according to Mallinson, it would become the Kundalini discourse which came to dominate the history of *hatha-yoga* after the publication of *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, not the liquid system discourse of the Saivites and Buddhists. The Kundalini discourse was especially developed in circles that later would become the *Naths yogis*. They claimed that Matsyendra (and Goraksanath) were their founding fathers and as we have seen, it was in this discourse that fluid and energy systems were merged.

The genealogy of the various and often contradictory notions of *hatha-yoga* have now been traced to mainly non-Aryan goddess and serpent worshipping religions, Tantric Kula clans' sexual rituals, Tantric Saivites talking about uniting divine polarities, new forceful techniques among Tantric Buddhists and alchemist Siddhas - all stirred up and mixed by the process of Hinduisations and Turkic Muslim invasions. Out of this field grew various sign systems, which slowly became linked: subtle body signified as both a fluid system and a divine energy system; the internalisations of various goddesses and Tantric symbols; new physical techniques; new detailed maps of the subtle body; the bringing together of female and male divine opposites; and the quest for immortality, magical power and living liberation. After a phase of creation and genealogy we have now reached a phase of systematisation.

*We will now investigate one of these milieus, which became very influential in systematising – but not creating – what we today understand as *hatha-yoga*. This intellectual systematisation was a part of *hatha-yoga* being included in the elite cultural field of liberation (of which yoga was a sub-system). Several groups instigated this process and the efforts of one of them outmanoeuvred the other – the Kanphata yogis – a Saivite Nath cult who claimed as their founder the famous Gorakhnath. As innovative Tantric signs now became systematised they also became strongly re-constructed, re-valued and re-orientated. And this is exactly a central aspect of what religious and cultural fields (like liberation) do, according to cultural sociology.*

## 4. The systematisation and inclusion of the *hatha-yoga* discourse

### The systematisation of the *hatha-yoga* discourse

*Hatha-yoga* – defined as a specific set of techniques explicitly designed to manipulate the subtle body with the effect of creating *siddhi* and *jivan-mukti* identities – emerged as we have

seen between 1100 and 1300 AD<sup>307</sup>. We have already mentioned the Siddha *Matsyendra* as being one of the creative conceptualisers. In the later Nath tradition it was claimed that it was the Siddha *Gorakhnath* – often claimed to be the founder of the Kanphata yogis - who brought *hatha-yoga* discourse to full fruition with concise and comprehensive descriptions of its notions and techniques. Both acclaimed cult founders – *Matsyendra* and *Gorakhnath* - are thought by many to have been leaders of early Nath cults worshipping Siva (Mallik 1953). Hence it seems that as *hatha-yoga* became systematised, it took place within a Saivite milieu importing various energetic Tantric techniques. This leads us to assume that *hatha-yoga* discourse in its final systematising phase became strongly enveloped in Saivite sign systems. As the *hatha-yoga* discourse moved into the upper classes there would also be further strong filtering of the original antinomian sexual character.

### **Gorakhnath and early *hatha-yoga* texts: *Goraksa-sataka***

*Gorakhnath* is often claimed to be the *systematiser* of *hatha-yoga*. To be a systematiser means that concepts are clarified, related and pointed to each other in order to produce a comprehensive doctrine with goals and purposes. It is also claimed that this mythical figure founded the Kanphata yogis – ‘*the split ear yogis*’ – who still exist. They are mainly itinerant monks roaming the countryside. Thus as *hatha-yoga* solidified in Saivite and Siddha milieus, it was a part of rural ascetic cult life.

*Gorakhnath* achieved god-like status among the Naths. Scholars assume that he lived around 1200 AD – at the time the Delhi Sultanate was established. Over time about 13 writings were attributed to *Gorakhnath*, but very few are actually his.<sup>308</sup> He is said to have written a treatise called *hatha-yoga* but it has disappeared. He is also said to have composed *Goraksa-sataka* and *Paddhati*, which were written down about 1400 AD.<sup>309</sup> Among the various early *hatha-yoga* texts the *Goraksa-sataka* became very influential. Major parts of the later *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* were directly lifted out of *Goraksa-sataka*. Many later texts describing *hatha-yoga* also borrowed from the *Goraksa-sataka*.<sup>310</sup> Hence a short introduction to this text.

Recent research by the *hatha-yoga* expert J. Mallinson reveals that there were two very different texts called *Goraksa-sataka* (Mallinson 2012). One version was originally called *Vivikamartanda* and had about 173 verses. The other version had 100 verses (*sata* meaning “hundred”). The 173-verse version was to become the most cited. Let us have an overview of the earlier hundred verse version to get an impression of a version of the *hatha-yoga* discourse which would come to dominate.

The first impression of the text is that it was not written like a typical Tantra. Its rhetoric is relatively clear and precise and not, like typical Tantric discourse, full of visions, symbols, encoded notions and incomprehensible mystique. The approach to the body was very physical and mundane in opposition to much Tantric discourse, which often used the body primarily as a screen for projections and visualisations. In fact the hundred verse version positioned itself deliberately in opposition to Tantric techniques of drinking wine, eating meat, having intercourse. Further, it did not employ crucial Tantric techniques like *mantras* and the usage of

*mandalas* (Mallinson 2012).

Overall the text seems to be a Saivite discourse which enveloped a range of Tantric Kula signs. Its goal was to attain ‘perfection’ and still mind, and to avoid recurring rebirths. It promised clues to success within a few days. Kundalini was at the centre of attention. Two techniques for stimulating Kundalini were instructed. One was about pulling the tongue from side to side – a form of a *mudra* - the other about restraining the breath - *pranayama*. This stimulated Kundalini to ascend through the body. It is not clear if Kundalini left the body or not as she finally ‘embraced Siva’ and then ‘disappeared’ - whatever that might mean. The fluids of the subtle body were briefly mentioned in relation to Kundalini as she consumed them.

The text, however, does not identify itself as either *yoga* or *hatha*. It remained a nameless practice described through a range of techniques related to notions of the subtle body, Kundalini and Siva. It reveals a self-contained practice drawing on a radical new sign universe very alien from previous yoga discourses. This was not about harnessing the human ‘senses’ but about stimulating divine energies located in the body. So there was no urgent etymological need to call this *sadhana* yoga. A novice modern reader could have labelled it an *ascesis* – the Greek expression for a single-minded practice or exercise giving some metaphysical benefits.

Later on this and similar practices became absorbed and were given the name *hatha-yoga*. Maybe they were called yoga in the meaning of *sadhana* – *sadhana* in the original meaning of ascesis. However, using the name ‘yoga’ of course generated associations and symbolic meaning in relation to the practice. The practice in this way became linked to the past and to an established and recognised genre. The label *yoga* signified the practice with authority and symbolic value and made it acceptable to the habitus of urban elites. What we do know is that history accepted the sign ‘yoga’ and hence made the practices an outgrowth on the “ancient tree of *yoga*”.

### **Nath canon and *Armtakunda***

Below follows a list of some of the texts ascribed to the Gorakhnath and made a part of the Nath canon of *hatha-yoga* texts.<sup>311</sup>

One of the earliest Nath canon texts – the *Armtakunda* - also became very influential. It was translated into Persian and found its way into Muslim upper classes, where it became very popular. In the Muslim introductions to the translation we are told that the text was also widely popular in India (Ernst 2003). The text is today known through this translation.

### ***Nath texts – outlining *hatha-yoga*’s subtle body discourse***

***Paddhati, Goraksa-sataka*** – Goraknath texts; copied in *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*

***Goraksa-siddhanta-samgraha, Yoga-yajnavalkya*** – repeating Gorakhnath

***Armtakunda*** – Nath canon, popular among Muslims

***Yoga-bija*** – the distinction btw *hatha-* and *raja-yoga*

The translated *Armtakunda* – despite the fact that it is totally submerged in Muslim religious discourse – gives an impression of early *Nath jogi* discourse – at a time where it was a part of Kula Tantric milieus. Hence we hear about the forceful alternate sun-moon breathing, some *mudras*, 5 *asanas*, visualisation techniques focusing on the body centres (*chakras*); Kundalini; Sakti; *mantras* to summon the yoginis; lists of supernatural powers; and subtle body descriptions. The goal of it all – which must also have fascinated its Muslim audience - seems to be personal divination and the ability to summon the yoginis (Ernst 2003). However the word *yoga* only appeared once.

The text does not seem to have any traces of Saivite themes and signs. So this text is much more Tantric in character than the *Goraksa-Sataka*. This supports the impression that in various milieus there were diverse *hatha-yoga* discourses with a very narrow common denominator (Birch 2011). Thus, even if both texts mentioned were later grouped together within the Nath canon – “the Gorakhnath genre” – it is clear that the texts reflected different social and religious groups. One gets the impression that the Nath community as it evolved appropriated a diverse textual past and reconstructed it as their single lineage as a part of building up symbolic capital.

### **The primacy of *pranayama* and the subtle body**

Many of the early *hatha-yoga* texts were occupied by descriptions of the subtle body – the energy body – and how to stimulate it. This seems to be the common denominator. The texts were full of technical expressions – dozens of them - in relation to the subtle body and its workings. The primary techniques taught in order to manipulate the subtle body were: *pranayama*, *mudra* and *bandha*. The term *hatha*, as it emerged, seemed mainly to be related to *pranayama* practices. Often *hatha-yoga* techniques – especially *pranayama* – were about uniting oppositional polarities and forces like *prana/apana*, sun/moon, *ida/pingala*, and *bindu/rasa* (Mallik 1953, Larson 2009). Success in this led to ‘perfection and release’. Surprisingly to many modern readers, *asana* – the main and often single limb of modern postural yoga - played no role worth mentioning in these early *hatha-yoga* texts. If *hatha-yoga* could be pinned down to a single technique in the early texts, it must be *pranayama*.

The early *hatha-yoga* texts often described practices aiming at perfecting the body physically. The first phase was about controlling the sense organs, the ‘vital winds’ and the bodily functions. This would result in a “purified or perfected body” (*kaya-siddhi*). The physically refined and prepared body was now ready for the next phase of work. In the next phase it was the subtle body that came into focus. The Siddha worked on the *maha-rasa*. *Rasa* was, as we recall, a fluid of the subtle body, which in some cases had to be forced up through six centres – *chakras* - facilitated by the awakening of Kundalini. As the yogi moved through these *chakras*, there were various experiences of consciousness as each *chakra* became activated energetically (Mahapatra 1972).

### **A new six-limb yoga crystallising**

As early *hatha-yoga* crystallised as a yoga style – indicating that it was moving into elite strata and their cultural field of liberation - it accordingly became re-constructed, subsumed and ranked. The text *Yoga-bija* forms an interesting example of early *hatha-yoga*'s incorporation into elite yoga discourse. It used a distinction which emerged at that time and which is often used today: '*hatha-yoga*' versus '*raja yoga*'. *Hatha-yoga* was linked with *pranayama* and the body, while *raja-yoga* was linked with *samadhi* and meditation. Together they formed *maha-yoga*. This definition would become the typical understanding of the distinction between *hatha* and *raja* (Gharote 1980, Birch 2011). The *Yoga-bija* was a clear example of how *hatha-yoga* became assimilated and subordinated traditional meditative yoga discourses: here *hatha-yoga* only prepared the body for the real significant meditative yoga work.

Thus in parallel with *hatha* and other Tantric techniques taking their form from about twelfth to fifteenth century, we can follow how they reverberated into elite Brahmin and Saivite discourses. In these circles the notion *raja-yoga* was popular and it was used as a synonym for *samadhi* meditation. We see in this *raja-yoga* discourse – for instance in the *Amanaskayoga* - how those elite milieus try to constrain the influx of tantric practices like *laya*, *mantra* and *hatha* and subsume them to their “superior” existing meditative practices (Birch 2011).

Yoga styles were often classified by how many limbs they contained. Some ‘later Gorakhnath texts’ talked about a four-limb yoga consisting of *mantra*-, *laya*-, *hatha*- and *raja-yoga*. However the yoga taught in one of the *Goraksa-sataka* versions was a six-limb yoga: *asana* – *pranasamrodha* (*pranayama*) – *prathyahara* – *dharana* – *dhyana* - *samadhi*. Most Saivite yoga styles were six limbs, and the text – reflecting a Saivite milieu - consciously stepped into their discourse. It is however noticeable that *tarka* (insight) is not listed here as a limb, because *tarka* figured in most Saivite six-limb yoga. Instead, the list followed closely the sequence of Patanjali’s eight-limb yoga in the *Yoga Sutra*. I will return to a more detailed analysis later.

We can conclude that the unnamed *hatha-yoga* practices slowly became integrated into a Saivite and elite yoga discourses. As we shall see, the more they were included in the cultural field of liberation and yoga, the more they lost their independence and Tantric low caste character.

### The goals and meanings of *hatha-yoga* (1) - *siddhi*

The *hatha-yoga* discourse – a cluster of various discourses - created new and dissimilar social identities. Let us investigate those categories further, as they reflected the numerous intentions and milieus behind *hatha-yoga*.

What was the purpose of *hatha-yoga* in the Gorakhnath Saivite milieu of systematisers? From reading some of the texts it is clear that immortality had moved to the forefront of attention of most scriptures<sup>312</sup>. The preoccupation with immortality is seen in the *Goraksa-vijaya* (ascribed to the founder Gorakhnath), which began with the words: "Why is it my Lord that thou art immortal and mortal am I? Advise me on the truth so that I also may be immortal for ages". The Lord was Siva

and the scripture turned out to be about Siva's revelation of the doctrines of *hatha-yoga*, enabling the student to achieve immortality like the gods.

When the *hatha-yoga* texts taught their techniques, they were told to 'conquer death' or 'destroy old age'. Most texts put techniques like *pranayama* and *mudras* at the forefront of practice; both were said to lead to immortality. Further, again and again health, purification of *nadis* (i.e. subtle body energy lines) and magical power were promised (Mallinson 2012b). Some texts directly suggested that the purpose or goal of practising was a *long (eternal) life with a healthy and strong body*. The word '*siddhi*' - "perfection" - was often used for this quest for immortality.

So without doubt a central aim of the *hatha-yoga* discourse was *physical* immortality which was equivalent to perfection (*siddhi*). Perfection sometimes also had a second aspect to it, which we know from older yoga discourses: a perfected person was a magical person, a kind of wizard, a person whose magical powers to transform the world were feared and yet still demanded by the public. So *hatha-yoga*'s *siddhi* or perfection was no doubt worldly, not otherworldly. Hence at first glance, it seems that this branch of *hatha-yoga* discourse – situated in the cultural field of immortality of the alchemist Siddhas and Tantric Kulas – defined new goals for practice. The striving for perfection/*siddhi* was definitely not about the liberation or salvation of the soul after death<sup>313</sup>.

### The goals and meanings of *hatha-yoga* (2) – *jivan-mukti*

However, there was a second concept related to the aims of *hatha-yoga*, which did not live easily with the goal of perfection: that was *jivan-mukti*. This social identity is often translated as "a dead man in life" – or a "living liberated". Eliade (1958) states that this means a person living among us who has reached a point where 'death is meaningless to him'. An example would be Buddha, who after his enlightenment decided to stay in this world to help other people to become liberated. In this line of argument the *jivan-mukti* lived among us, but when his physical body died, *then* his soul became immortal. This was a typical understanding of the notion of *jivan-mukti* identity: the adept was not physically immortal, but his soul was.

The sign *jivan-mukti* does not originally belong to the yoga discourse (Chapple 1996). Instead it is more likely that it was an import from Buddhist or Jain traditions (Mumme 1996). Later on it played an important role in the liberation discourses of Vedanta and Tantric Saivism<sup>314</sup>. *Jivan-mukti* of course has a very strong symbolic meaning and induced high status. In Tantric Saivism it would signify that the adept was 'co-equal' with Siva. Thus the *jivan-mukti* discourses belonged to the discourses of the field of liberation.

However the signification of *jivan-mukti* is very different from that of perfection /*siddhi*, which for the alchemist Siddhas signified physical immortality. So we have two conflicting goals stemming from *hatha-yoga*'s inclusion in liberation discourses: one was about *physical* immortality and the other was about the *soul*'s immortality.

Many have since then tried to gloss over the differences claiming the two identities actually were the same. In this line of argument the successful *hatha* yogi is constructed as a living person who has a divine body and consciousness (due to the subtle and physical body

being purified and energised). His soul then becomes pure god-consciousness after leaving the body at death.<sup>315</sup>

It seems that such an argument is a classical example of the ideology of inclusiveness: the new (*siddhi*) is incorporated in and submitted to the old (*jivan-mukti*). The end result is a confusing social identity – half dead, half alive, a person who, although his body is still alive, has lost all his involvement in this world because his soul now is focussed on the otherworld. This strange social identity confirms the traditional myth of the sage as a disinterested high status person. The adept and the religious specialist have been turned into a totem.

### The emergence of the sign ‘*hatha-yoga*’

Having identified the genealogy and tensions in the early *hatha-yoga* discourse it is now time to investigate the eclipse of this varied discourse field blossoming as Turkic Muslims entered Northern India.

The word ‘*hatha-yoga*’ as an *independent* branch of yoga appeared in Saivite and Goraksaka milieus in 1363 in a text called *Sarngadhara-paddhati*, but the discussions here do not contain any verses from the *Goraksa-sataka*, according to Mallinson (2012). As mentioned *hatha-yoga* seems to have solidified into a *named system of techniques* among a new group of *Kanphata yogis* who claimed Gorakhnath founded them. Where does the *hatha* sign come from and what did it signify?

The term ‘*hatha-yoga*’ according to J. Birch (2011) has a long history especially among the Buddhists – stretching several hundred years back in time. But here the sign did not refer to an independent style of yoga, but rather to a specific vigorous Tantric set of techniques supporting Buddhist practices. These techniques focussed on making *prana* flow and to arrest the drops of sexual fluids.

In Saivite Tantra the *hatha* sign figured far less and was used in connection with the word ‘*sadhana*’ – not with the word ‘yoga’ – again in the meaning of being an efficacious and forceful Tantric technique. *Hatha-sadhana* according to the *Brahmayamala-tantra* (and I am sure that the following quote will amuse most modern *hatha-yoga* students)

“refers to a practice where the Sadhaka digs a hole (*garta*) and fills it with five products of cow (*pancagavya*) (i.e. cow urine, cow dung, milk, purified ghee, and cow flesh), sexual fluids (*picu*), wine (*madya*), bits of sinew and bile (*snayupitta*) and human flesh. He covers the hole with a cow’s hide or elephant skin, assumes the eight mudras, salutes Bhirava, makes boisterous laughter (*attahasa*), and the howl of a jackal ((*sivarava*), plays a bell (*ghanta*) and drum (*damaru*), and waves about a tall-feather (*pincchakam*). He then enters the hole and meditates (*vicintayet*) .... “ (Quote taken from Birch 2011, footnote 93).

So the term ‘*hatha*’ had been in frequent use for centuries in various milieus giving it disparate meanings. It was not seen as an independent discipline but rather as a set of vigorous techniques. Mostly such energetic techniques were included and discussed as secondary and subordinate to existing techniques (Birch 2011) – which was typical of the strategies of inclusion practised among India’s holy men and theologians.

The first text to give a *comprehensive technical* overview of the *hatha-yoga* sign arrives late in this process. It is *Hatha-yoga Pradipika*, dated to the middle of the 15 century, if not later. So at this point in time a group of techniques is selected among various and numerous

practices – energetic and vigorous techniques (*hatha* like techniques) - and given the umbrella name *hatha-yoga*. This text became the bible of *hatha-yoga*. It marked the entrance and acceptance of subversive Tantric cultures into the prestigious cultural field of liberation. The *Hatha-yoga Pradipika* became very influential in Muslim India and was often quoted in later theological texts. As we shall see it made a compilation of some of the many various *hatha-yoga* signs and texts we have investigated. In this process it mainly drew on texts from the ‘Gorakhnath genre’, which already consisted of a mixture of various discourses.

## 5. *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* – A six/seven-limb yoga

### *Hatha Yoga Pradipika (HYP)* – a promotional pamphlet

The mid 15 century text *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (meaning “Light on Forceful yoga”) was written by *Svatmarama*. We do not know anything about him and what was the background for writing a treatise on *hatha-yoga*. It is a compilation of sectarian views drawing heavily on the Gorakhnath genre of the Naths.<sup>316</sup>

One should not assume that *HYP* and the texts following it were “textbooks” written by *Kanphata jogi* gurus for *Kanphata jogi* students. Many of these were probably illiterate rural itinerants maybe organised by displaced urban elites. *HYP* and the later *hatha-yoga* texts were all written in Sanskrit, so their audience was very narrow and small. Thus we see here various urban elite groups addressing each other - new elite formations trying to get recognition from their peers, protectors and patronage by publishing a text. Most probably the *HYP* had very little to do with the actual life and practice of the rural *Kanphata yogis*.

The *HYP* proposes a six-limb yoga – seven-limb, if we include ‘diet’ as a limb: *asana* (15 of them, most meditation poses), *shatkarma* (physical cleansing), *pranayama*, *mudra* (seals), *bandha* (locks) and *samadhi*. It presents *hatha-yoga* as a bodily oriented process of practices, which lead to and end up as *samadhi*, also called *raja-yoga*.

*HYP* is a long and detailed text satiated with instructions. It is easily read and is typical for its genre. It is full of inconsistencies and there is almost no argument supporting its postulates. After reading it, a modern student would have very little idea about what to do or how to combine and prioritise these techniques. The purpose of the text was clearly not to educate or replace oral training. It is better compared to a marketing pamphlet. One is just assured over and over that by doing this or that technique, ‘perfection’ will be achieved.

This text is no analytical textbook and manual for practice. However, many modern readers treat it as a textbook trying to define a consistent *hatha-yoga* doctrine. Despite its problems, the *HYP* was often quoted and extracted from as it became incorporated into various

sectarian worlds.

## Introducing the *HYP*

The *HYP* is grouped into 4 chapters. Chapter one (67 verses) is about *asana* and diet, chapter two (78 verses) about *shatkarma* and *pranayama*, chapter three (130 verses) about *mudra* and *bandha* and the final chapter four (114 verses) is about *samadhi*<sup>317</sup>. Most verses are short postulates or instructions unsupported by arguments. There is no build up of lines of argument.

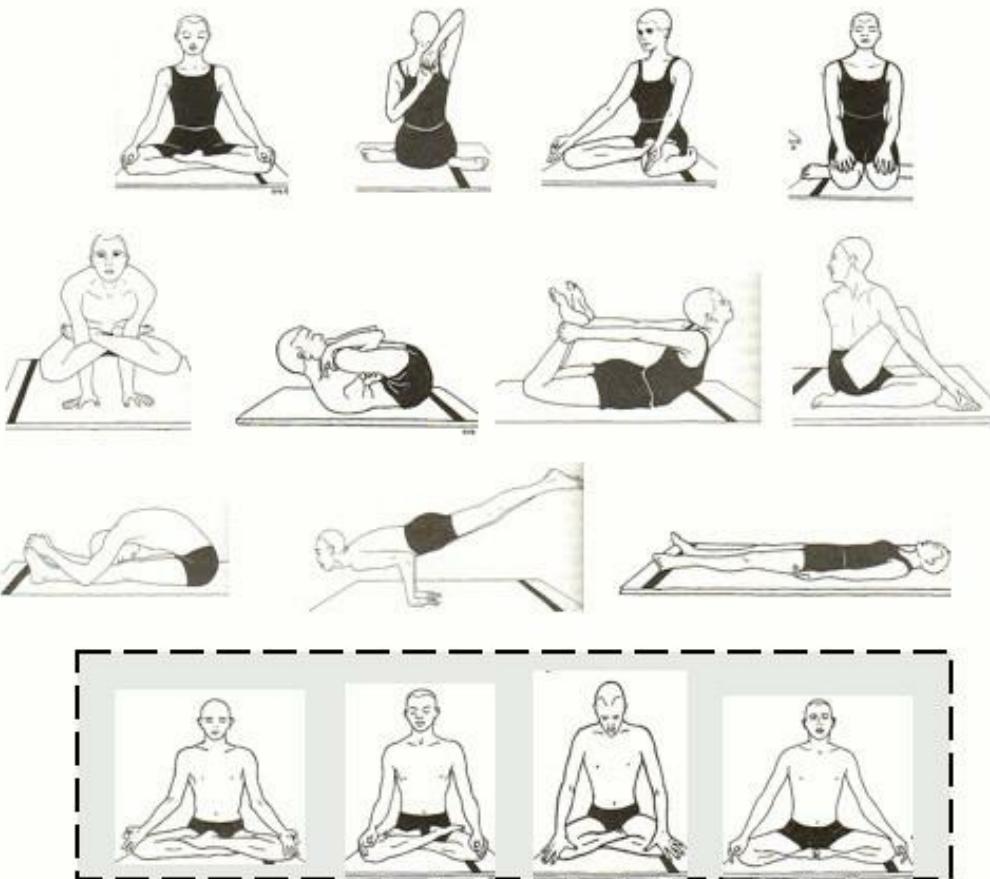
*HYP* is written in the ideological style of seeking authority by claiming that a god is behind the scripture. This can be seen from the opening verse: “*Salutations to the glorious original guru Sri Ardinath* (i.e. the god Siva) *who instructed the knowledge of hatha yoga ....*”. Hence there are only *instructions* in *HYP* – no supporting evidence is offered (gods do not need to document and reason). So very often the verses sound like a modern health magazine promoting different wonder products: “*if you do so and so then you will quickly achieve perfection*”, we are told repeatedly.

### 1<sup>st</sup> limb: The *asanas* of *HYP*

Below are the 15 poses of *HYP*.<sup>318</sup> Some of the illustrations are an interpretation of the instructions of *HYP* as these are often incomplete. *HYP* says that its selection of *asanas* belongs to a group of 84 *asanas* taught by Siva but it is not explained why the rest is not taught. If we look more closely we will see that many of the 15 poses are variations of the crossed legged sitting pose used by many meditation schools. *HYP* especially mentions four meditation-like poses – framed with dotted line - to be *the* important and main *asanas*. In fact only these four main *asanas* are described in detail. Most poses just receive a short outline. Some of the 15 poses are not even described but just mentioned by their often different names in a single verse.

Reading *HYP*, it is not clear if the poses should be practised as a series of poses and if they should be performed in the sequence in which they are mentioned. Only few of the *HYP* poses are similar to the demanding, almost acrobatic, poses for which modern postural yoga has become renowned.

## *The asanas of HYP*



Chapter one of *HYP* deals not only with *asana*. Several verses are also dedicated to a correct diet<sup>319</sup> – listing examples of what to eat and what not to eat. Some scholars claim that diet is a limb or ancillary on its own. In that case *HYP* would not be a six-limb but a seven-limb yoga. However, it is not clear why *asana* and dietary prescriptions are put in the same chapter. *HYP* says that the *combination* of dieting and especially the four main *asanas* lead to perfection. *HYP* even goes so far as to claim that perfection is then reached within 12 years, if one does *siddhasana* (the sitting meditation pose). So it could be assumed, that *HYP* sees the techniques of *asana* and diet as closely related but there is no argument for why it is so.

Some of the poses are taught in combination with the techniques of *mudra* and *bandha*. One verse (56) even mentions that the sequence of *asana*, *pranayama*, *mudra* and *mantra* is the sequence of *hatha-yoga* – but what this exactly means is not clear. This sequence could for instance be specific only for the *asana* (i.e. *bhadrasana*) described a few verses before.

Having read the first chapter, the reader is left with the impression of reading a compilation of different teachings compiled and put together in a single chapter with no effort made to integrate and combine the selections. Modern students looking for guidance on their *asana* practice will be disappointed.

***Asanas (and diet) – the purpose?***

To grasp the purpose of *asana* within Patanjali's eight-limb yoga is easy. First of all there is not much variety: *asana* is about finding a pose for meditation, so that the meditator can sit for hours undisturbed by bodily sensations. Some yoga popularisers have tried to import this purpose to contemporary yoga's almost acrobatic poses. However it then becomes difficult to understand the demanding poses of modern *asana*-driven yoga. In many of those poses, most people after a few minutes would definitely not feel calm and relaxed: modern *asana* are not designed for the purpose of hours of meditation.

But can *HYP* make sense and purpose of physical strenuous *asana*, as we know them today? To answer that we need to identify what is the purpose of *asana* in *HYP*? The purpose of *asana* is never defined. Yet *HYP* mentions in connection with most of its poses what benefits they have: they can have certain health effects, they can clear the *nadis* (energy channels), they can improve the flow of *prana* ("life energy"), calm the mind and sometimes they lead to perfection.

So there does not seem to be a common purpose of *asana*. Each *asana* has specific effects and as these effects are often of a physical nature, some do make sense to the modern reader: by twisting and stretching the body as described it is possible to imagine that some of the effects claimed can be achieved. However, it is hard to comprehend how sitting in lotus-like pose can have such dramatic effects as claimed.

We recall that *hatha-yoga* in the earliest scriptures was often described as the forceful manipulation of the body fluids. Some of the poses shown above could possibly have the effect of manipulating these body fluids – the *rasa* – as they clearly create pressure on certain regions of the body. However most of the poses point to another purpose – namely that of providing a calming and steady base for meditation. So on closer inspection there seems to be no single overarching understanding of *asana*. We are rather talking about different poses brought in from various contexts.

But if *hatha-yoga* is centred on the subtle body, how does *asana* relate to that? In the *hatha-yoga* physiology as presented by yoga popularisers, the body often consists of five *koshas* ("sheets"): *i.e.* material-, mind-, energy-, pure thinking-, transcendent bliss- body. The 'energy body' listed is the equivalent of the 'subtle body' – sometimes named 'prana body'. If we then look at the benefits of *asana*, it seems that the postures affect most of the five *koshas*, but it is not explained exactly how and why. In other words, the *HYP* does not manage to allow notions like *asana* and *koshas* to illuminate each other as one might expect.

However, as *asana* is discussed in the same chapter as the issues of a healthy diet, it could be argued that *HYP* overall sees *asana* connected with the material body – the first *kosha* - and its mortality. Many *asanas* are also said to lead to perfection – *siddhi*. If 'perfection' means 'physical perfection' and even 'immortality', then we have a line of argument connecting *asana* to the material body. This is what often happened in most of later *hatha-yoga* discourse, especially among modern yoga popularisers.

Most yoga popularisers tell their students that the purpose of *asana* in *HYP* is to perfect the material body (the first of the sheets/ *koshas*). This line of argument claims that the effect of *asana* on the material body is either indirect – through improved flow in the *kosha* of the energy body – or directly on the material body – by stretching and purifying it.

The same line of argument applies to two other *hatha-yoga* limbs: diet and cleansing techniques. Following the logic of this interpretation, perfection means ‘physical perfection’ of the material body. Hence a perfect body is flexible (relieved of tensions), healthy and well fed (relieved of toxins, nutritionally supported), and fit (activated and coordinated muscular system).

However, the downside of such an interpretation in relation to *asana* is that *any* sophisticated gymnastic system could also lead to perfection. What then makes *asana* different from stretching gymnastics? If we recall from previous chapters that perfection was also a claim about immortality, then one wonders how such physical efforts or poses can have such amazing consequences? Can Pilates and Calisthenics then also lead to immortality? Further, as most of the *asana* taught are passive, relaxed sitting meditation poses, how can they generate a flexible and fit body? The text gives no clue to the many problems that such interpretations generate.

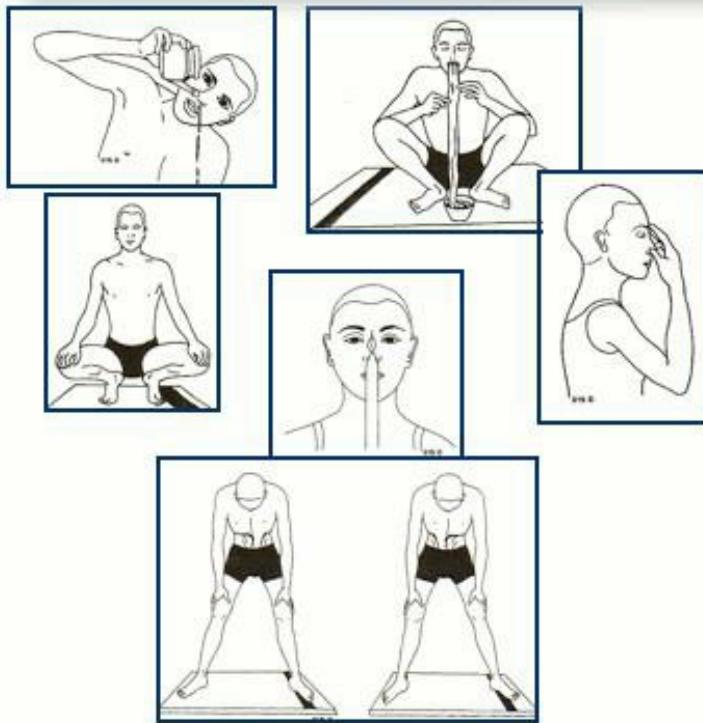
In other words, *HYP* brings little clarity and logical consistency regarding the purpose of *asana* in relation to either the doctrine of the subtle body or any of the other *koshas*. It raises the suspicion that *asana* is a foreign practice in relation to the subtle body doctrine, with which it was never properly integrated.

## **2<sup>nd</sup> limb: *shatkarma***

Chapter two of *HYP* – focusing on *pranayama* (extended breathing) and *shatkarma* (cleansing) techniques - starts with some verses on *pranayama*. It then changes topic and teaches 6 cleansing techniques, as they should be performed before the practitioner does *pranayama*. The chapter finally describes 8 techniques of *pranayama*. It is not explained why *pranayama* and *shatkarma* are put together in a single chapter. As with chapter one, there is a strong sense of the chapter being a compilation of different sources as it jumps from subject to subject. The reader is - as with *asana* and diet techniques - promised to be free from disease and old age and will achieve perfection by using the techniques of cleansing and breath.

*Shatkarma* means “the six actions” – understood as the six cleaning or purification exercises. The *shatkarmas* are about physical cleansing of the internal tracts of the body.

<b>Dhauti</b> -	internal cleansing (12 variants)
<b>Basti</b> -	colon cleansing (2 variants)
<b>Neti</b> -	nasal cleansing (4 variants)
<b>Trataka</b> -	eyes cleansing (2 variants)
<b>Nauli</b> -	abdominal massage
<b>Kapalbhati</b> -	skull cleansing (3 variants)



The six *shatkarmas* as described in *HYP* are actually six groups of techniques, where each group has its variants. *Dhauti* is internal cleansing (twelve variants) and is about cleansing the stomach for instance by swallowing a long cloth and then pulling it out again through the mouth. *Basti* (two variants) are the techniques of colon cleansing – enema. *Neti* (four variants) is nasal cleansing where for instance salt water is poured through the nostrils. *Trataka* is eye cleansing (two variants) performed for instance by concentrated gazing on a candle flame without blinking. *Kapalbhati* (three variants) is skull cleansing done by breathing fast and powerfully in and out of the nose. Finally *nauli* is abdominal massage.

The cleansing actions are clearly directed towards the internal ducts of the material body. Why cleanse those internal surfaces? As one answer *HYP* promises many cures for disease. However, it never promises that *shatkarma* leads to perfection. So in opposition to *asana*, only *shatkarma* seems to have a clear purpose for the material body. Such an interpretation will conform to modern perceptions. However we cannot exclude the possibility that the *shatkarmas* were originally developed for ‘spiritual’ and caste purposes – the cleansing of “spiritual pollution” - and then changed their symbolic value as they entered the *HYP* universe of signs.

This should not lead the student to believe that *shatkarma* is unimportant in *HYP*. Theos Bernard, who claimed to have trained with *hatha* yogi specialists in India in the 1930s,

reported in his book how most of the initial months of practice were dedicated to purification before other *hatha-yoga* instructions were revealed (Bernard 1950).

Today, however, most modern *hatha-yoga* instructors have very little experience, and then with only few of the *shatkarmas*. Contemporary *hatha-yoga* ignores or reduces the insignificance of *shatkarma*.

Some popularisers will tell their students that *shatkarma* should be considered as it purifies the body of ‘toxins’, which ‘block the flow of *prana*’. Their interpretation links *shatkarma* to the subtle body discourse. So from this point of view, it is right to put *shatkarma* and *pranayama* together in a chapter; the practitioner will struggle to get the ‘*prana* flowing’ if the body is ‘full of toxins’.

Once more, a modern reader should be aware that we signify ‘*prana*’ as something *physical*. The flow of this physical substance – *prana* - is inhibited by some other physical units called ‘toxins’. In a pre-modern system of signs on the other hand, ‘*prana*’ could signify something ‘meta-physical’, something beyond physics. In modern thought this raises the problem, how can physical matter restrict something ‘nonmaterial’? Further, we moderns associate the word ‘pure’ in its relation to the body with symbols like ‘hygiene’ and ‘no dirt and bacteria’. We then assume that this is what the *shatkarmas* purify – it takes away ‘physical objects out of place’. However the *HYP* does not make clear what it understands by ‘pure’. The reader is not told what is being cleansed away – something physical or metaphysical?

Despite such issues of interpretation, *pranayama* is often first seen as effective, when the body is purified - whatever that might signify. It is implicit in this interpretation that a central technique of *HYP* must be *pranayama*, as it works directly on the *prana-maya* – the energy body. There seems in other words to be a hierarchy among the techniques.

### 3<sup>rd</sup> limb: *pranayama*

The word ‘*pranayama*’ is a combination of two. *Prana* means the “life force” penetrating the whole universe and therefore the human body. The second part of *pranayama* can either be *yama* – meaning “control” – or *ayama* – meaning “extension or expansion”. Both translations are valid descriptions of what is happening: the breath is expanded and controlled by different techniques. Central to both is the holding of air – called *kumbhaka*.

*HYP* chapter 2 states initially that *pranayama* follows *shatkarma*, *asana* and diet. Those techniques must be in place before it makes sense to practise *pranayama*. In this chapter it seems that *asana* has the role of preparing the *nadis* and *chakras* of the *prana kosha/ body* for the more intensive work of *pranayama*. When this is accomplished, the main function of *pranayama* is to ‘cleanse’ the *nadis* of the subtle body.

*HYP* states that the *pranayama* technique of *nadi shodhana* (alternating breathing through left and right nostril) leads to the ‘purification’ of *nadis* and *chakras*. Later on it looks at eight additional *pranayama* techniques – the 8 *kumbhakas*; “the breath retentions”. Some of the *kumbhaka* techniques are to be used in combination with special locking techniques – the *bandhas*.

The various *pranayama* techniques are described rather vaguely. The instructions are not

precise enough to enable a student to practise. The verses describing the techniques seem more interested in informing about the benefits of *pranayama*. Let us now investigate the purpose of *pranayama* according to *HYP*

One of the basic purposes of *pranayama* is to ‘purify’ the *nadis* and *chakras* through which *prana* flows. But a modern reader again needs to read with care. The *nadis* and *chakras* are not situated in the material body but in the subtle body. The ‘impurities’ blocking the energy are sometimes called ‘knots’, but the idea of knots blocking the energy flow does not help us much in understanding what we are talking about. We are hence left with no understanding of what these ‘impurities’ actually are. In Western thinking we would wonder what their ontological status is: are we talking about physical or metaphysical knots and impurities?

We are told that the benefit of *pranayama* purifying the *nadis* and *chakras* is a long life and the disappearance of many diseases. This is clearly a very physical benefit. In this context the purification of the subtle body system through *pranayama* seems to have very physical consequences and benefits. But how does that make *pranayama* different to the other techniques discussed which all seemed to have the same physical benefits? Is *hatha-yoga* mainly about physical benefits, the reader wonders? He clearly senses the disparate discourse backgrounds from which the various verses must have been taken and where the techniques had different meanings and implications.

Then the text introduces some physio-psychological impacts of *pranayama*. *HYP* teaches that the eight *kumbhakas* also lead to a state of ‘spontaneous stopping of the breath’ called *kevala kumbhaka*. This means that the practitioner will suddenly realise that for a prolonged period there has been a spontaneous arrest of breathing combined with no awareness about this very situation. The observing mind had so to speak been stopped, emptied of awareness.

The *HYP* explains that this happens because breath and mind arrive and leave together. Now in this state of ‘no breath and no mind’, according to *HYP*, something extraordinary happens: Kundalini rises through the ‘purified’ energy body. So due to the purified *nadis* and the mind being absent, Kundalini can ascend.

Hence an entirely new entity has suddenly been introduced, generating further questions among modern readers. Is Kundalini a metaphor for energy, since she operates within the energy layer – the subtle body? Or is Kundalini an actual goddess inhabiting the body and moving around in the energy body when stimulated?

*HYP* does not of course clarify this clash of discourses and sign systems. Instead it tells us that the result of all this is the achievement of a ‘state of *raja-yoga*’. This is also described as the yogi attaining ‘perfection’. Once more this hazy notion of *siddhi* – perfection – is introduced. Earlier perfection was about physical fitness and immortality. Now it is related to Kundalini and states of *raja-yoga*. And anyway, the reader wonders, what is this ‘*raja-yoga* state’ all about? Why did we need this notion to be introduced? Why did the *HYP* not just say that Kundalini means the achievement of perfection?

### **The issue of *raja-yoga* and *samadhi* within *hatha-yoga***

Moving one step back, we can see that HYP has now drawn a map of the functioning of *pranayama*: (1) the ‘energy body is purified’, (2) which stimulates ‘Kundalini’, (3) which leads to a state of ‘*raja-yoga*’ and ‘perfection’.

Is *raja-yoga* the final and ultimate end purpose of *hatha-yoga*? Or is *raja-yoga* a state that an editor for theological reasons has added to include and subsume the power Kundalini? Does the *raja-yoga* notion logically fit? Let us investigate this, as it relates to the *kevala kumbhaka* of *pranayama* and, as *pranayama*, is the most central and crucial of the limbs.

First, what does perfection signify in relation to *pranayama*? Searching the chapter, confusion arises as perfection is for instance described as (Ch.2; verse 78): “when there is leanness of the body, tranquil countenance, manifestation of inner sound, clear eyes, diseaselessness, control of bindu, active digestive fire and purifications of nadis.”

But this description does not help our understanding much. It is a list of symptoms and phenomenological experiences. However, it associates ‘perfection’ with mainly physical and psychological attributes: tranquillity, leanness etc. This kind of perfection seems a rather profane outcome of Kundalini being activated. Is this sort of perfection really the purpose of *pranayama* and *hatha-yoga*?

What do other verses in this chapter say about ‘perfection’? In most verses, ‘perfection’ is identified as ‘*raja-yoga*’. Are we back to clarifying what ‘*raja-yoga*’ signifies? The sign is never explained, but some verses tell us that ‘*raja-yoga*’ is the same as ‘*samadhi*’. So here HYP clearly draws on the *raja-yoga* discourse mentioned earlier (Birch 2011). We recall that this discourse – trying to subordinate new Tantric techniques – defined *raja-yoga* as *samadhi*. But such integration of disparate discourses only generates more questions than answers. Does ‘perfection’ equal *raja-yoga*, which equals *samadhi*? Even if this is so, it does not help to clarify. *Samadhi* is a well-known sign from the yoga discourses of previous periods and from this we know that *samadhi* has a range of meanings. It can mean process and it can mean goal. It can be about mortification, Gnostic insight or the absorbed trance of *turya*. Even if we are not sure what *samadhi* means, the introduction of the sign *samadhi* in this chapter generates the question, if the purpose and effect of *pranayama* is to reach *samadhi*? Is the attainment of *samadhi*, what ‘perfection’ and ‘Kundalini rising’ ultimately signify? It seems so.

It is apparent that Svatmarama by compiling various sources ran into problems. The technique of *pranayama* is linked to different sign systems. One is based on Kundalini, the other on *samadhi*. Finally, the text confusingly links them all together. This creates inconsistencies. It was already a conceptual leap to link Kundalini to *pranayama* and subtle body discussions. But when we finally try to include and subordinate Kundalini and perfection in older liberation discourses of *samadhi* the whole house of cards tumbles.

In the end the purpose and meaning of practice in HYP is no longer, as in the early *hatha-yoga* scriptures, about ‘bodily perfection and immortality’ but about attaining *samadhi*. In the first chapter of the *HYP*, we found ourselves in the physical and metaphysical context of body and energies. But as the reader tries to find the detailed meaning of those physical and metaphysical signs later on in the *HYP*, we are here in chapter two transported into a different ecosystem of signs. The *hatha-yoga* signs – coming from diverse signs systems - are de-contextualised and then re-contextualised in a Saivite sign system. In this process ‘perfection’

changes signification as it becomes the hazy notion of *samadhi*.

In other words in chapter two the *HYP* subsumes *hatha-yoga*'s disjointed body techniques into a Saivite meditative discourse.

#### 4<sup>th</sup> limb: **bandhas**

*HYP* instructs *bandhas* and *mudras* in chapter 3 but does not define them. It appears that they are mainly related to the stimulation of Kundalini. So once more the reader is left with little improved theoretical understanding – merely a list of descriptions and benefits. Normally *bandhas*, according to yoga popularisers, are defined as locks, holds or arrest - bodily locks. More specifically, *bandhas* are techniques of releasing deep-seated core muscles close to anus, navel and throat. For an overall functional understanding of the *bandhas* we have to consult other texts; the *HYP* contributes very little.

Yoga popularisers state that *prana* is locked and contained in specific areas of the body by activating the *bandhas*. The *bandhas* further redirect the energy from moving in arbitrary directions. Instead *bandhas* guide *prana* into the *sushuma nadi*, a central channel in the energy body. From this line of argument we must conclude that *bandha* is directly connected to the *prana kosha* – the energy body. In other words the energies of the subtle body can be directly manipulated through muscular contraction.



*Maha bhanda – combining moola-, uddiyana- & jalandhara bhanda*

Other yoga popularisers maintain that *bandhas* work indirectly on the subtle body because they release physical tensions in the material body – the *granthis* (“knots”) – preventing free flow of *prana* fluids. So it is not clear whether the *bandhas* work directly or indirectly on the subtle body. Leaving this aside, the *bandhas* are activated around just three centres or *chakras*. For some reason the *HYP* does not use the word ‘*chakra*’, but this is not critical. The function of the *bandhas*, according to many yoga popularisers, is therefore to influence directly three centres of the subtle body system: the root-, stomach- and throat-*chakra*. This view supports the view that the *bandhas* have a direct impact on the energy body.

The main focus of chapter three of *HYP* is Kundalini. Two of the main techniques in relation to raising Kundalini are *mudras* and *bandhas*. *Bandhas* and *mudras* are not mentioned

in the older yoga discourse. They seem to be new to the yoga discourse. These two groups of techniques probably stem from the Little Tradition of India. As we saw earlier many of the aborigines' rites and rituals were adapted in the Tantras as for instance in the [Kula cults](#). The *bandhas* and *mudras* could be an example of this. Thus chapter three of *HYP* provides us with a historical look at early techniques and thoughts of non-Aryan India.

*HYP* instructs 4 *bandhas* and 7 *mudras*. Each time it states that these techniques lead to 'freedom from diseases, immortality, divine power and fearlessness of death'. *HYP* presents them as very strong techniques making Kundalini rise. This wakes up Sakti and she also rises. This is the rhetoric of Gorakhnath-genre that we hear here. In fact chapter three is to a large degree a re-writing of Gorakhnath's *Gorakasa-sataka* text.

*Bandhas* and *mudras* are not only related to Kundalini, but also to *bindu*, which is a fluid. Much of the chapter discusses how the techniques affect *bindu* – "the life secretion". The mastering of *bindu* is said to bring 'perfection and immortality'. How? Age and death happen because the *bindu* drips down from the head and is consumed by the 'fire of the stomach'. Stopping this drip has the effect of stopping the aging process – and this is what the seals and locks are doing.

The notion of *bindu* belongs to a discourse of the subtle body as a physical fluidity system. In this *HYP* chapter this discourse is mixed with notions like Kundalini, which constructs the subtle body as a divine energy system. Two different worlds and discourses. How exactly the notion of *bindu* (i.e. fluidity) is related to the notions of *nadis* and *Kundalini* (i.e. metaphysical energy channels and centres) is not clear. Do the *bandha* and *mudra* techniques have a double function of stimulating Kundalini (implying release) and stopping the drip of *bindu* (implying immortality)?

This impression of a clash of incompatible discourses is confirmed by further readings of chapter three. It seems that initially we are participating in a Tantric discourses of Kundalini and perfection. At the end of the chapter it seems that this discourse is suddenly enveloped in elite meditation and liberation discourses. Let me explain.

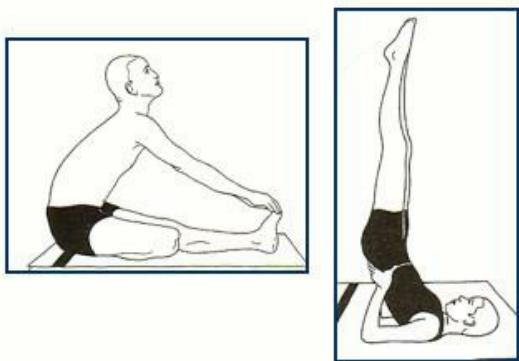
In chapter three *mudras* and *bandhas* are seen as crucial to achieving perfection. In some cases only 40 days of practice will bring results. This is surprising compared to other liberation discourses which often claim that final release cannot be achieved in a single life cycle but requires endless numbers of re-births. However, the reader should not get too carried away by the good news. It turns out that practice does not end with perfection, because in the closing verses of the chapter, it appears – once more – that this is not the end of practice. It is postulated that *raja-yoga* is further required. This is very surprising after initially reading about the power of the *hatha-yoga* techniques which are key to Kundalini, Sakti experience and perfection. The reader wonders, why do we need *raja-yoga* after having achieved perfection, Kundalini and Sakti? Why is this not the final and optimal goal of practice? How can one possibly attain more after this? Why should we enter *raja-yoga* and *samadhi*?

So chapter three like chapter two seems to reveal an attempt at incorporating and subsuming different Tantric body techniques and metaphysical rites into a Saivite meditative discourse: Kundalini and perfection are good – but not good enough!

## 5<sup>th</sup> limb: *mudra*

*HYP* is not concerned with definitions, so the *mudras* are not defined either. The *mudras* are such fundamentally different techniques that they have no commonality except their symbolic meaning. In general we can say that in *HYP*, *mudras* are seals for containing the sexual and vital fluids. We could perceive many of them as techniques where the yogi with his body creates a mirror of divine energies. Through this representation of divine energies the yogi is able to tap into those divine energies. This way of thinking is well known from the Tantric discourse on *mandalas* – graphical symbols of divine energy with which the adept - often through meditation and visualisation - merges.

### **Two mudras – or two asanas?**



One way of seeing a certain group of *mudras* is to perceive them as bodily symbols of divine energies – embodied *mandalas*. They seem to link into all kinds of aboriginal and Tantric esoteric rite and rituals.

In *HYP* half of the *mudras* - like the *maha-mudra* and *maha-vedha-mudra* - are mainly *poses* and they function as seals. Some of them are shown above and seem very connected to the notion of stopping the *bindu* from dripping down into the stomach. Most yoga students would at first glance believe that these *mudras* were *asanas*. The *mudra* poses are often strenuous arrangements of the body hold for prolonged time. It is easy to imagine that their purpose was to contain and re-direct body fluids. Maybe some modern *asanas* have their origin in *mudras*?

Some of the *mudras* like the *maha-mudra* have to be used in combination with other techniques in order for them to work: *pranayama*, visualisation and *bandhas* are often mentioned. So often the *mudras* are hybrid techniques combining a range of limbs.

Other *mudras* are not body poses at all. They seem to derive from various unrelated discourses and practices. This group of *mudras* could rather be described as Tantric rituals – many probably descending from the Kula tradition. One *mudra* – the *khechari* - for instance is about extending the tongue by slowly cutting it half-loose and then swallowing it. That will stop the *bindu* from dripping and secure immortality and perfection<sup>320</sup>. Others are about inverting semen (*vajroli-mudra*), or having sex and then inverting semen, or after having sex smearing the body with cow dung, ashes and semen (*sahajoli-mudra*). Finally, the *amaroli mudra* is about drinking urine.

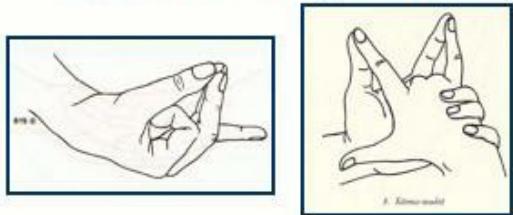
Many *mudras* seem at first glance to be linked to the subtle body as a system of fluidity.

But then Kundalini is introduced and we get the impression that what binds the *mudras* together is their ability to raise Kundalini. So once more the *mudras* seems to be given meaning by two opposing discourses of fluidity and divine energy. If we try to unite them we wonder if we should understand Kundalini as divine fluid? It is not easy to reconcile Kundalini with *bindu*.

These Tantric-like *mudras* – loaded with norm breaking behaviour - have not only quietly disappeared from later Indian *hatha-yoga* discourse but also from most Western yoga schools. They did not fit into the conservative habitus of most Indian elite and yoga popularisers' modernism. Most contemporary students are not even aware of the existence of these techniques.

Today, *mudras* are mainly restricted to ‘hand gestures’ by yoga popularisers, as shown in the two pictures. The meaning and intention of hand gestures may be purely symbolic: the gesture signifying a god or a divine energy field. By emulating a god through symbols one would attain his power. The hand gestures are often told by yoga popularisers to create a ‘gentle awareness and redirection of *prana* flow’. As the body is believed to be ‘enmeshed in a field of *prana*’ such gestures will influence this surrounding energy field.

### **Mudras as hand gestures**



Alternatively some say that gestures are there to stop *prana* from radiating from the body – the fingertips touching creates a closed circuit. Others maintain that the finger gestures are there to stop unconscious gestures. So there is little agreement among yoga popularisers, but their rhetoric often links the hand gesture *mudras* to Tantric *mandala* discourse.

The *mudras* of chapter three are closely connected to disparate *bindu* and *Kundalini* discourses indicating a Tantric background of this chapter. Many notions related to the subtle body are introduced and the purposes of the techniques seem often relatively clear and consistent. Fluids and life energies have to be stopped from ‘depleting’ as one ‘strives for immortality’. It all sounds promising. But then suddenly at the end of the chapter the rug is pulled away under our feet as we are told in verse 126 “...even the various mudras without raja-yoga are worthless ...”.

The surprised reader wonders why? It all sounded so fine – Kundalini rising, immortality, and health. Why are these wonders suddenly worthless without adding *raja-yoga*? Clearly *hatha-yoga* is once more subsumed into a Saivite elite discourse by this little insert.

### **6<sup>th</sup> limb: *samadhi***

In Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra* we recall, *samadhi* is both the final processes and the goal. At the last stage of *samadhi* – *dharma-megha samadhi* – there is final liberation - [\*kaivalya\*](#). The

last and fourth chapter of *HYP* is called *samadhi*.<sup>321</sup> Like the *Yoga Sutra*, *samadhi* is described here as process and a goal. So the texts share the same ambivalence. But this is the only thing *HYP* and *Yoga Sutra* have in common regarding *samadhi*.

Of the four chapters in *HYP* the last *samadhi* chapter is by far the most confusing. It apparently jumps from issue to issue often quoting gods and gurus for this and that. The chapter appears as a very fragmented compilation: Tantra, Siva, Vedanta, Patanjali-yoga and so on are referred to, as if paying respect to everybody. This is also confirmed in the beginning of the chapter where in verse 3 and 4 it states that there are many words for exactly the same state (CH4; verse 4): Raja yoga,.... samadhi, ..... manomani,..... laya, .....jivamukti ....turiya are all synonymous. Basically, it says, it is all about the soul's union with *atman*: there are just many ways of describing the same thing. In the rest of the chapter it seems that it sets out to show that all the different ways of talking about *samadhi* are basically the same.

Hence the chapter seems to be mainly about displaying the right jargon and quotations and proving acquaintance with “politically correct” classical knowledge in order to get peer high status recognition. This is a trait, common to much written discourse on yoga. The symbolic meaning is the message.

Here follows a short summary of some of the issues discussed in the *samadhi* chapter of *HYP*. The first part is mainly a Saivist (Siva) discussion of how *prana* is connected with mind: stilling *prana* stills the mind. The text then moves into Patanjali-yoga discourse; ‘stilling the mind’ is said to be the beginning of the *samadhi* process. *Samadhi* is in Saivite terms reported to be identical to *laya* (absorption), where after *laya yoga* is instructed. Then there are long Tantric instructions on *mudras* followed by a long sequence on *nada* (i.e. *mantra* based) yoga: further new techniques are introduced and discussed. It is not clear if those techniques of *laya*- and *nada-yoga* are thought to be a part of the *samadhi* process or just leading up to it. The chapter concludes with poetic praise of *samadhi*.

So what should the reader make of all this?

It seems to me that *HYP* says that the *hatha-yoga* techniques it teaches are very efficient and have many benefits. In many ways they offer a fast track to what is normally seen as hard to achieve – *samadhi*. This view is already stated in the first verse of chapter one (Ch.1; verse 1): “hatha yoga ..... a stairway to .... the highest stage of yoga – raja yoga”. This message is repeated several times. In the end the reader gathers that *hatha-yoga* despite its abilities is only an instrument – a stairway. *Hatha-yoga* cannot deliver the final goal. In the end *HYP* – the perceived bible of modern *hatha* yogis - reduces *hatha-yoga* to a set of powerful yet insufficient techniques: it is not a self-contained system.

This is expressed in even stronger terms in the *samadhi* chapter (Ch.4: verse 79): “There are practitioners of *hatha-yoga* who do not have knowledge of *raja yoga* ... (they receive) .. no fruits of their efforts”. This cannot be said more clearly: *hatha-yoga* does not lead to final liberation. *Hatha-yoga* has to be *supplemented* by *raja-yoga* – which is *samadhi* (being both process (meditation) and goal (union)).

## The two conflicting liberation discourses of *HYP*

We have seen in the previous chapters of the *HYP* that it is torn between various discourses creating confusion and inconsistencies. Similarly we have seen in the last chapter on *samadhi* that there is a clash between the goals of practice: *siddhi* (“immortality”) versus liberation in *samadhi* (the *jivan-mukti* aspect of the *hatha-yoga* discourse as discussed earlier).

The final chapter highlights that even within the notion of liberation there are discourse conflicts. There seem to be two conflicting sign systems or models giving various meanings to liberation. Reading this final chapter about *samadhi*, it is evident that the old ascetic-wisdom and monotheistic discourses are increasingly introduced to orientate and signify the goal of practice (as for instance in the medieval *raja-yoga* discourse). Here liberation is seen as happening in *samadhi*. We could translate *samadhi* in the context of *HYP* with ‘still mind’. ‘Still mind’ allows the ‘transcendent cosmic consciousness’ – for instance Siva – to emerge. We could label this the *samadhi discourse* of liberation.

If we return to the three first chapters of *HYP*, the word ‘perfection’ repeatedly springs to mind as the goal of practice. But perfection does not mean ‘still mind’, the goal of the *samadhi* discourse. *Samadhi* does not really fit into the context of the early chapters – it is redundant. Here perfection is often a part of what we could label the *koshas discourse*. Let me give an introduction to how this model is typically presented in popular *hatha-yoga* discourse.

In this discourse as we have seen in the *HYP* *prana* is constructed as either fluids or divine forces. It is in this second understanding of *prana* that the notion is connected with liberation discourses. Here *prana* is about transforming breath and life energies which awakens Kundalini. *Prana* is in other words an activator of Kundalini – or *prana* is in the end Kundalini.

As *prana* moves up through higher and higher *chakras* of the energy body,<sup>322</sup> it penetrates and energises higher and higher levels of the five *koshas* (“sheets”). Each *chakra* is in other words related to a layer (sheet). So as *prana* rises through higher *chakras*, it also moves through more and more subtle and refined *koshas*. First it energises the *citta*-body (*citta* means “mind”) in the *mano-kosha*, then the intellect *buddhi*-body (*buddhi* means “intellect”) in the *vijnna-kosha* and then finally hits *ananda*-body (*ananda* means “bliss”) in the *ananda-kosha*. As they are all energised, ‘perfection’ is achieved according to this discourse. According to this model, perfection is logically a state where all five *koshas* are energised. Together, in present day terms they “resonate and vibrate with divine frequencies”. Then there is ‘release’ – the awakening of Kundalini and Sakti energies.

Modern *hatha-yoga* discourse claims that this is the detailed model underlying the liberation discourse of Kundalini. *HYP* never dives into such details around the workings of Kundalini. If we assume that this is a fair representation of *HYP*’s implicit Kundalini understanding, we can see that the sign systems underlying this style of liberation come from upper caste Tantric-Saivite discourse (connecting liberation to the body which signifies a locus of divine energies), not from the *samadhi* model. A *siddha* – a *perfected One* – is signified as a powerful living person totally energised by divine energies. He is not an inactive (often dying) person with ‘still mind’.

The two liberation sign systems outlined above are incompatible. The processes are

different, the signs are different and their goals are different. The two liberation discourses belong to different ecosystem of signs. It is not feasible to compare the perfection and release of Tantra with the *kaivalya* and *moksha* of for instance Samkhya-yoga or monotheistic yoga!

This analysis of *HYP* confirms the hypothesis that Svatmarama wrote *HYP* with the intention of further lifting *hatha-yoga* techniques out of a (rural) cult lifestyle. His aim was to re-contextualise them within a (urban) high caste liberation discourse. The *HYP* is not, as most other texts in yoga a discourse about how to achieve yogic transformation. Instead it is a theological and symbolic treatise. It signals that urban elites now master new Tantric *hatha-yoga* techniques, which empower them to achieve more quickly the goals after which they have always striven. “Despite the change it is still the same” as the French would say.

## 6. The self-contained ‘*hatha*’ behind *hatha-yoga*

### Was *hatha* initially a self-contained Way of Liberation?

We know from Birch (2011) that long before *HYP* there were *hatha* and *hatha-yoga practices* but they were mainly seen as energetic *ancillary* techniques supporting existing practices. So when we encounter *hatha* in the various texts, it subsumed a certain milieu’s existing practices. But was it always like this? Did *hatha* never stand on its own independent feet free of the embrace of Buddhist, Saivist, *raja-yoga* and other elite discourses?

The above quotation (Ch.4: verse 79): “There are practitioners of *hatha-yoga* who do not have knowledge of *raja yoga* ... (they receive)... no fruits of their efforts” leads to a very interesting observation. The quotation implies that there are *hatha* yogis who are wasting their time. We can deduce that there were some original *hatha* practitioners who practised their “*hatha sadhana*” without knowledge of *samadhi* (*raja-yoga*). The text quoted clearly indicates the existence of *hatha* groups claiming that their *hatha* efforts were self-contained and could stand on their own feet in respect of final goals.

If we recall the reading of chapter three of *HYP* on *mudras* and *bandhas*, we also have the impression of a chapter which could stand alone; the addition of *raja-yoga* at the very end of the chapter was not necessary – it only created problems<sup>323</sup>. So the two observations – a chapter three scrapped for the final *raja-yoga* verses and the quotation above about the existence of *hatha* yogis not doing *raja-yoga* - both raise the suspicion that there was such a thing as a self-sufficient *hatha-yoga* liberation – for instance Kundalini rising and Sakti being released.

So there were probably groups *before HYP* who did not practise *samadhi* meditation, as their techniques by themselves delivered the final goals. Or they were perhaps not interested at

all in lofty liberation concepts, since they only wanted to become physically immortal? In order to find an answer to the question of a self-contained *hatha* discourse – practices which can lead to ultimate goals and which were not categorised as ‘yoga’ – let us return to one of the early scriptures on *hatha* – a version of *Goraksa-sataka* on which *HYP* so heavily relied.

### The *Goraksa-sataka* – revealing a Sakti yoga?

Reading the opening of the text *Goraksa-sataka*, we see in verse 7 that it clearly identifies *samadhi* as the final of six ancillaries.<sup>324</sup> So the opening at first glance seems to confirm the feeling that the ultimate goal of early *hatha* efforts was also *samadhi*. From the opening, we gather that Gorakhnath’s six-limb yoga is very similar to the last six of the eight limbs of Patanjali’s yoga – they are of a very meditative character. So the opening of the text clearly signals that it belongs to an established ascetic-wisdom liberation discourse of meditation to which yoga often belonged<sup>325</sup>. But does this assumption actually hold?

As one continues through the rest of the text, ascetic-meditative yoga however plays no role at all, and *samadhi* is not mentioned a single time. One could object that at the end of the text, visual contemplation/ meditation is mentioned a couple of times, which points in the direction of meditative discourses. But if we read more closely, we realise that this contemplation/meditation plays an inferior role. It is only there to support the crucial *pranayama* efforts of bringing opposites together.

Instead of meditation, *Goraksa-sataka* introduces the concepts of the subtle body: *sushuma*, the *chakras*, the *nadis*, the fluids, *ida*, *pingala*. Within the subtle body we are told about the various opposing polarities, which have to be brought together and channelled: sun and moon, menstrual blood (*rajas*) and semen (*bindu*), *prana* and *apana* etc. Techniques defined and orientated by their relation to the subtle body are introduced. It is their function to accomplish the task of channelling and uniting polarities: the *mudras*, *bandhas* and *pranayama* - and some *mantra* chanting. The subtle body has replaced ‘the senses’ (remember the chariot metaphor) as the vehicle of transformation.

The reader now might wonder if the purpose of practice – like the locus – has also changed? In the text there seem to be two purposes of the *sadhana*. The first is about the physical benefits almost identical to those of the *HYP*: ‘body becomes divine in appearance’, ‘all diseases are destroyed’, ‘process of aging is brought to halt’, ‘immunity to poisoning’, ‘old people will look young’. It is clear that these benefits are not treated as a side effect of practice, but as a centrepiece. Accordingly the last, and hence important, verse 101 finalises the treaty with these promising words: “By cleansing the nadis the prana is restrained as desired, the digestive fire is kindled, internal sound is heard and one becomes diseaseless.”

These are all the signs of, *immortality* as we have learned from the text, the earthly and this-worldly use-value of practice.

The second goal of practice is – by applying force (*hatha*) - to move Kundalini up through the *chakras* to the head (verse 51). Verse 52 teaches that by with some final *pranayama*, Sakti is finally awakened: the ultimate reward of effort. We notice here that it is not Siva but Sakti that is the ultimate goal. The benefit of Sakti being awakened is stated in

verse 56: the yogi is ‘released’. We can of course wonder what ‘release’ means in relation to Sakti (is it for instance the equivalent of *jivan-mukti*?), but we find no answer. However there is no doubt that the *sadhana* of *Goraksa-sataka* has its own ultimate aims and can stand on its own feet: it is not a practice requiring additional meditative *samadhi* work to achieve final release like the *HYP*.

Accordingly the following verse 57 confirms that release is indeed achieved by the new techniques that the text here makes public – the *mudras* and the *bandhas* :

“That yogi is ready for release who know mahamudra, nabhomudra, uddiyana, jalandhara and mulabandha.” That these new techniques have the power to bring release is supported by the text in other verses. By reading the text we can confirm that the techniques are designed to physically contain and pump divine energies and life fluids in the subtle body leading to release. It is a *self-contained* universe of techniques and goals mutually giving meaning to each other. The *Goraksa-sataka* in other words defines a Sakti centred liberation doctrine, which is basically independent of former ascetic-meditative liberation discourses. It provides an autonomous eco-system of signs within an overall discourse of release. We might here have a glimpse of a version of *hatha* before it became a *yoga*.

So why does the author in the beginning mention a six-limb yoga of meditation techniques culminating in *samadhi*? The answer is probably that the text was already a compiled collective text with many inserts. The introduction is then an insert including the *hatha* signs into a high caste *yoga* discourse. The text asks elite society to be taken seriously, as it positions itself with its introduction as a Patanjali-like *yoga* discourse. A century later or so Svatmarama in his *HYP* continues this process of inclusiveness of the *hatha* discourse – this time in Saivism - by further compiling the *Gorksa-sataka* with other texts.

It is not clear why the author found it important to state that he adhered to a six-limb *yoga* tradition bearing all the hallmarks of Patanjali eight-limb *yoga* and still rejecting the first two of the *Yoga Sutra*’s eight limbs. As the two first limbs of the *Yoga Sutra* – the *yama* and *niyama* - define an ascetic and ethical lifestyle, could we speculate that the text wants to distance such lifestyles?

This alleged six-limb *yoga* did not seem to belong to a traditional Saivite six-limb *yoga* tradition. The ultimate principle is Sakti – not Siva. So it is neither a Patanjali nor a Saivite *yoga* that we encounter. Thus the author introduces and envelopes a genuine new “*Sakta sadhana*” as we realise when we read the actual instructions. Behind the rhetoric of inclusiveness there is a practice system which seems to originate in a Tantric Sakti discourse. But this “original Sakti *yoga*” is hard to isolate in the texts as it is always enveloped in various elite discourses.

# **Chapter 11**

# **Yoga under foreign rule**

## **Key Concepts**

[Delhi Sultanate](#)

[Fakirs & jogis](#)

[Lumpen-proletariat](#)

[Nath jogi](#)

[Mughal jogi](#)

[Floating ascetic identity](#)

[Bhakti dominance](#)

[Militant Sadhus](#)

[Mughal Empire](#)

[Hatha-yoga's inclusion](#)

[Asana body traditions](#)

[Hatha-yoga text genre](#)

### **1916 account of yogis :**

Every rascally beggar who pretends to be able to tell fortunes or to practice astrological and necromantic arts, in however small degree, buys himself a drum and calls himself, and is called by others, a Jogi. ... They are thoroughly vagabond set, and wander about the country beating a drum and begging, practicing surgery and physics in a small way, writing charms, telling fortunes and practicing exorcism and divination; or sitting in the village, eke out their earnings from these occupations by the offerings made at the local shrines of the malevolent godlings....

Russell & Bahadur Hira: *The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India*

*This chapter investigates yoga culture under Muslim and the early British rule of the East Asian Company. What first springs to mind is the extraordinary change among the yoga interactors in this period. First of all in Muslim India there emerged the first social groups explicitly calling themselves yogis – or as it was often spelled: ‘jogis’. In the Hatha Yoga chapter we encountered the [Kanphata yogis](#) – who are claimed to have systematised hatha-yoga. They belonged to a larger community who later crystallised into the Nath yogis, a new religious community – a sampradaya – who will be introduced. Thus for the first time in pre-modern India we have some named yogis made of flesh and blood and we will try to draw a sketch of them.*

*Secondly, the social composition of the itinerant renouncers (who rightly or wrongly are often associated with yoga culture) underwent such dramatic changes that we wonder if we still are talking about the same notion when we talk about itinerant renouncers in various eras of India’s history. The lives of holy men roaming the countryside took some very serious turns under foreign rule. Many of them for instance turned into ascetic*

*warriors who sold their services to rulers and princes.*

*During this period both yoga and Tantra seriously lost recognition in many social circles and were retrenched to rural and provincial regions. In many strata their power discourses and underlying codes were fading. The devotional Bhakti saint often replaced the ascetic sage, mystic yogi and ecstatic Tantric Siddha. There are many indications that like the disappearance in this period of the Buddhist from Indian soil what remained of the yoga culture was in serious if not fatal retreat.*

*As the British in 1857 finally turned India into a part of their colonial Empire the landscape of holy men, yogis and yoga cultural practices changed dramatically. In the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century the elite yoga discourse had almost vanished and the knowledge of yoga in the rural mendicant strata of sadhus had almost become extinct.*

*Still we do find some text dealing especially with hatha-yoga. This cultural practice seems to have become a relatively popular yoga discourse despite the general decline. The hatha-yoga discourse today is given great attention and significance; hence we follow how the hatha-yoga discourse developed in this period. Or more precisely, we see how it did NOT develop and refine its theoria and praxis. If there was any refinement of the yoga poses we have to look outside the hatha-yoga culture and instead visit a range of other Indian body cultures. As the chapter ends we follow how asana – bodily poses which today are seen as central to hatha-yoga – slowly made its way into the hatha-yoga.*

*The chapter ends as Western modernism begins to set its distinctive marks of hybridisation on the yoga discourse and thereby finalises the history of India's pre-modern yoga cultures.*

## **1. Muslim and British rule – The militant jogi**

### **500 Years of ignored history**

The gradual settlement of the Turkic Muslim rulers influenced India's religious habitats. We know that Buddhism disappeared from India in this period and that "Hindu" temples were periodically smashed, as a part of the divine King's power structure.<sup>326</sup> This chapter will firstly look at how Muslim medieval society influenced the Sadhus, the professional holy men.

About 1500 AD, as the Mughals built up their Empire, Vasco Da Gama found a route round Africa. In the 16 century European traders started to settle and build up trading stations in India. The first Christian Jesuit missionaries arrived but had little success in converting the heathen. Over time the British East Indian Company became increasingly dominant and during the 19 century the British slowly converted the subcontinent into a colonial part of their

empire.<sup>327</sup> From the accounts of Muslim and European rulers and travellers we finally start to get more specific information about the *jogi* identity, sometimes called *Jogues*, *Gioghi*, *Jogues* and most of the time even *Fakirs*.

Here is an account from the British traveler John Fryers circa 1780:

“ At the heel of these [Fakiers] may be the reckoned Bengal Juglers, Mountebanks, and Conjures, as also the Dancing People; these are Vagrants, that travel to delude the Mobile [mob] by their hocus pocus tricks (living promiscuously like our Gypsies); among whom I saw one who swallowed a chain ... and made it clink in his stomach ...”

A bit later Fryer summarises his disdain for the *jogis*:

”of this order are many of the most dissolute, Licentious, and Prophane Persons in the World, committing Sodomy, will be drunk with Bang [a drink made from cannabis], and curse god and Mahomet .... These people beg up and down like our Bedlambs with an Horn and Bowl, so that they enter an House, take what likes them, even the Woman of the House; and when they have plaid their mad Pranks, away they go to repeat them elsewhere. Under this disguise many pass as Spies up and down, and reap the best intelligence for the benefit of the Prince that Employs them”<sup>328</sup>.

This account of the *jogi* would become the total opposite to that of many of the Orientalist writers of 19 Century, who often pictured him as a peace-loving monk occupied by piety and meditation. So who was this *jogi*?

It is not clear what impact global trade and British colonial rule had on the yoga discourse and its identities. We know that Tantrics and *jogis* were strongly repudiated by both British rulers and Indian urban elites in the 19 century – as witnessed by Fryers above. Mainstream Tantra had either already disappeared or did so under the British. But what happened to the yoga discourse?

Over a period of 400 years - from the origin of *hatha-yoga* 1400 AD to late 19 century - there is very little research on what happened to the yoga culture and its specialists, even if the subcontinent experienced extreme dramatic social and political changes. It is my impression that India's elite religio-philosophical discourse stagnated under Muslim ideological hegemony. In previous chapters we have seen how much of the yoga discourse in this period was rather about theological adjustment. No longer was yoga as in the *Mahabharata* discussed in connection with kings, aristocratic warriors and upper class intellectuals. It was as if the yoga discourse had become almost extinct in its former social upper class milieus. What survived of yoga discourse among the upper castes was conducted between Brahmin theologians. We can wonder if the yoga discourse - as “its sister discourse” Buddhism - was on the verge of extinction? As we saw in the *hatha-yoga* chapter, the remains of the yoga discourse seem, to have become a rural phenomenon. The dynamic of the yoga discourse had moved from urban elites to rural strata.

It is only at the end of the 19 century, when the conditions of modernity emerge that we start to get a picture of a vibrant elite yoga discourse again: Orientalists – initially and mainly European philologists and historians – undertook a lot of translation and historical research on yoga excavated from old texts. They began to talk about '[classical yoga](#)' [Appendix 2 with roots in an ancient wisdom tradition. The yoga discourse was brought back from the brink of extinction and revitalised by admiring European intellectuals, the new carriers of the yoga discourse.

Let us now investigate the pre-modern yoga identities of the Sultanates, the Mughal Empire and early British rule. As we investigate the history and sociology of these regimes -

ruling for more than 500 years - we will see how they changed dramatically the social strata of professional holy men where yoga often thrived. As we recall from the chapter on *hatha-yoga*, it was within that reconditioned cultural field of liberation that the cults of the Nath *jogis* emerged – the first recorded history of an actual and social yoga identity – and it was within a branch of these *jogis* – among the [Kanphata jogis](#) - that the *hatha-yoga* discourse was compiled.

### Sultanate Dynasties and Mughal Empires

The expansion and raids of the Mongols under Genghis Kahn created shock waves in both Europe and India. They pushed before them into India Turkic-Afghan warriors who had adapted the war skills of the Mongols. From 1200 AD a *Turkic* ([Wikipedia link](#)) Muslim ruling class – squeezed out of present day Pakistan and Afghanistan – settled in a sequence of waves in the whole area of Northern India especially along the Gangetic plains. Since 1000 AD there had regularly been devastating Muslim raids into Northern India, but this time they came to stay.

Today the term the *Delhi Sultanate* ([Wikipedia link](#)) is often used for the dynasties they established. From 1300 AD they spread further down the subcontinent (Eaton 2005, Kulke & Rothermund 2006). It was in this period that Tantra declined in Northern India among the elites. It was also in this period that *hatha-yoga* emerged as one of many new cults as we saw in previous chapters. Some sociologists, like me, suggest that the emergence of *hatha-yoga* was related to Muslim threats (Gross 1992, Ghurye 1953). In the previous chapters I suggested that the Turkic Muslim invasion of Northern India meant that Tantric high culture and much of urban elite culture was forced out into the provinces and rural areas – or into the south. Under the Delhi Sultanate, the yoga discourse probably lost much of its elite urban character and its centre of gravity moved to rural low-castes as the Nath *jogis*. Many of the traditional itinerant groups of the [cultural field of liberation](#) disappeared under the social turbulence, military raids and new ruling culture. But in many respects the fundamentally exploitative nature of Indian society did not change character, despite the changes in the military elites; it actually got worse (Asher & Talbot 2006, Eraly 2007).

The following period from 1526 to the end of 1700 witnessed the empire of the Mughals (Mongols) where a more coherent, centralised and bureaucratic state emerged and where more profound social and political-economical changes took place. Let us first look at the cultural impact of the Delhi Sultanate, which must have influenced the yoga discourse.

### Muslim and Hindu exchange

The military and economic institutions of the Delhi Sultanate were similar to what already was in place in India. What was new was that Northern India became a part of Muslim global system with intensive commercial and cultural contacts (Asher & Talbot 2006). The dynasties developed innovations in crop patterns and irrigation systems and new developments within law, politics, culture and religion.<sup>[329](#)</sup>

The Delhi Sultanate did not interfere directly in daily rural communal life, so many of them continued practising their often Tantric rituals. No forced religious mass conversions were attempted. Some rulers were religiously repressive, others not. The ruling elite language became Persian.

Different religio-cultural shades of Sufis, Muslims, Zoroastrians co-existed with the already existing multitude of local religious groups and cults of Northern India. There was a great interest among some Muslims in Indian religious-culture. Many writings – also about yoga – were translated into Persian, Arabic, Turkic, Ottoman and Urdu and some like the early Nath text [\*Armtakunda\*](#) (from the 13 Century) spread all over the Muslim cultural sphere (Ernst 2003).

Thus the new ruling class, like the Axial Age Indian Kshatriyas, showed some interest in yoga, but we should not be tempted to think that there was a thriving yoga milieu among them. The interest was driven by the curiosity for the unusual and enchanting that we typically find among the elites of the upper classes, elites bored by wealth and inactivity seeking impulses to stimulate and make them distinguished. Unlike the Kshatriyas of the *Mahabharata*, yoga was for the Muslim elite not an existential issue regarding *karma* and *samsara*.

### Sufis, jogis and Bhaktis and supernatural powers

The arrival of the devotional Sufis, functioning as advisers and spiritual patrons for the ruling class, meant a mutual stimulation of the Bhakti movement of Northern India.<sup>330</sup> [Bhakti](#) was about an emotional selfless love for the divine. By total immersion in the love of god, the Bhakti practitioner would be filled up with god and became released. Under the Sultanate the Bhakti movement flourished in Northern India, especially worshipping Vishnu. Bhakti- based Vaishnavism began to replace Saivism among the local ruling classes. It was a new way of salvation which was very critical to the ascetic elite way of achieving salvation. It claimed that yoga ironically only resulted in the build up of Ego. Thus [tapas](#) practice, instead of removing the ego and releasing *purusha/Siva/brahman*, just made the “ego problem” worse.<sup>331</sup>

The Bhakti movement was a serious threat to the cultural field of liberation like yoga and high caste Tantra. First of all it confronted and devalued yogic and Tantric self-efforts as impotent and even meaningless in respect of reaching god. They dismissed the underlying [codes and habitus](#), which enabled the symbolic capital of “the living liberated” – the liberation specialist. Secondly some Bhaktis also questioned the supernatural powers generated through yoga and Tantra. These were occasionally dismissed as empty tricks (Burchett 2012). The implication was that the underlying power discourse was challenged head-on as a hoax. Hence there could be no human build up of magical powers. For yoga and Tantra all this of course meant loss of status and symbolic capital. In this way many holy men’s underlying economical and political foundation was under threat.

Most Bhaktis did not deny the possibility of magical powers. They reconfigured the sign within their monotheistic sign system. The Bhaktis claimed that only they - by the grace of god - could be bestowed with magical power. However it was not their *personal* power – the

power was an expression of god's. So we witness here a typical struggle within a cultural field of who can enforce their categories, definitions and codes to become dominant. This ideological fight between holy specialists was reflected in much of the Bhakti and Sufi hagiographic literature emerging at that time. These hagiographies were full of anecdotes where holy men contested each other in the display and exercise of supernatural powers. The winners were of course always the Bhaktis and the Sufis displaying the power of god, while the vain *jogi* in the end had to admit defeat and convert to god (Ernst 2005, Burchett 2012). The very existence of such anecdotes about power struggles demonstrates that the underlying discourse of supernatural powers was still valid in the wider population.

Some of the Sufi orders became very interested in the Nath *jogis* who they found were somewhat similar to themselves. Both groups were strongly committed to a life as holy men and shared interests in similar psycho-physical ideas. The Sufis admired the *jogis* techniques and skills. So some Sufis and some Indian holy men often interacted peacefully and openly. Even if the cultural field of liberation could be cutthroat competitive, this shows us that there also could be constructive dialogue and cooperation.

It seems that around 1600 AD the Sufis branched out into different rural movements of *fakirs* and *dervishes* (Iranian-Persian notions for “poverty” and “mendicants”). These groups also learned from the Nath *jogis* and were even trained by them. The result of this was that a (Muslim) ‘*fakir*’ and a (Hindu) ‘*jogi*’ became synonymous for both the Indian population and the later arriving Europeans. From contemporary Muslim and European accounts we start to hear about extreme forms of self-mutilation, which prior sources to my knowledge had never observed. The *jogis* and *fakirs* did conjuring stunts such as walking on hot coals, laying on a bed of nails, eating fire, swallowing iron chains, sticking their hands in boiling 'oil', piercing their faces with long needles, putting large hooks through the flesh of their backs attached to heavy objects, which they pulled. These extreme forms are for instance witnessed by the French traveller Jean de Thevenot around 1666:

“Their penance consist in forbearing to eat for many day, to keep constantly standing upon a Stone for several weeks, or several months; to hold their arms a cross behind their head, as long as they live, or to bury themselves in Pits for a certain space of time”.

Maybe they were driven by competition; maybe they were driven by growing rural poverty forcing them to perform at marketplaces and temples; maybe it was a fashion fling brought by the new rulers? Or maybe it had always been like this, but never found worth writing down before foreigners arrived and were baffled? To me the arrival of the *fakirs* seems to have increased the austerities of asceticism to previously unheard of levels.

In the Muslim or Persian accounts of the *jogis*, they tended to be treated with more respect than in those of the Europeans. The Muslim rulers often interacted with the ascetics (White 2009, Ernst 2005). Here is an account from around 1600 from Badaunt, who wrote for the emperor:

“His majesty also called on some of the Jogis, and gave them at night private interviews, enquiring into abstract truths; their articles of faith; their occupation .... The power of being absent from the body; or into alchemy, physiognomy, and the power of omnipresence of the soul. His majesty even learned alchemy, and showed in public some of the gold made by him. .... The emperor ate and drank with the principal Jogis, who promised him that he should live three or four times as long as ordinary men.”<sup>332</sup>.

In short some of the Muslim rulers – like their Indian predecessors - seemed thrilled with the supernatural powers of the *jogis*.<sup>333</sup>

*However, what some historians registered in this period is a rise in militancy among the Sadhus, the holy specialist, which we will investigate next. The reader not interested in the relationship between militancy and religion may skip the insert below.*

### History of militant sadhus

As Europeans began to trade and travel in India they wrote about a continent which was militarised into its rural fibres. This is confirmed by Muslim sources. Travellers reported that they had to travel in small caravans, which hired 20-30 armed guards to protect them. As they travelled the countryside, they met everywhere peasants who even while cultivating their land were heavily armed. Many villages could in no time muster a significant army with all kinds of sophisticated weaponry. Often groups of farmers trained and exercised for warfare.<sup>334</sup> Many if not most of the reports – European and Muslim - are from the Mughal period, so it is not clear how far back in time this militancy reached.<sup>335</sup> But the itinerant holy men – now often called *jogis* and *fakirs* - wandering in such violent surroundings must have adapted to these circumstances in some way. Let us investigate this a bit further.

Research indicates that militancy among ascetics was widespread already under the Delhi Sultanate.<sup>336</sup> The *jogi* and *fakir* ascetics belonged to itinerant social-strata roaming the countryside. Such professional militant ascetics can be traced even further back to 700 AD. The question is whether they were ascetic *Sadhus* – professional holy men specialising in liberation and salvation – or they were a rural surplus population who due to their lifestyle and poverty were indistinguishable from itinerant ascetics striving for salvation. The local populace struggled to distinguish between them and probably perceived all of them as *Sadhus* and hence called them *jogis* and *fakirs*. I will return to this question but will now just treat them as the locals mostly did: as *Sadhus*.

It was frequently the case that ascetic *Sadhus* were bodyguards for local kings and that monasteries and holy orders had armed sections to protect themselves. Many *Sadhus* armed with swords, iron spears and sharp round throwing disks (*chakras*) wandered around offering their services. There is much evidence of groups of holy men fighting each other fiercely.

Some research indicates an further rise in militant asceticism around 12-1300 AD (Gross 1992, Ghurye 1953). The arrival of raiding Turkic Muslim warriors and later roaming armed Muslim *fakirs* might have escalated already existing inter-communal violence and armament<sup>337</sup>. Certainly from travellers' accounts we can see

that the *jogis* and *fakirs* often travelled in racketeering gangs. Here again is for instance de Thervenot. Clearly he was not pleased with these people as he continues:

“One may meet with some of them in the Country stark naked with Colours and Trumpets, who ask charity with Bow and Arrow in hand; and when they are the strongest, they leave it not to discretion of Travellers to give or refuse”<sup>338</sup>.

The Italian traveller Careri confirms this about 1695. He reports an Indian tradition of giving away children to religious groups in order to receive penance. He then observes:

“and for this reason there are so many thousand of Vagabonds Fachires throughout India. When the Fachires meet with Baraghis (...) they fight desperately. They never Marry, and Eat in the Houses of all sects (...). They go into the Kitchen, and take what they will, tho’ the master be not at Home. They come together like Swine by beat of a Tabor, or at the blowing of a Horn and march in companies with Banners, Lances and other Weapons ... . These vagabonds ... are look’d upon as saints and Live a loose Life, with the priviledge of committing any Crime their Brutality suggests”<sup>339</sup>.

Of course not all ascetic groups would have behaved like this. But the difference is striking: we are not here witnessing the humble *jogi* monk begging to have his bowl filled up, but instead encountering roaming violent gangs taking what they want. Here there is no peaceful transaction of symbolic capital with economical goods – for instance a monk exchanging merits for millet. Force and violence had taken over. Had it always been like this? Was this just something unaccustomed to European eyes which the Indians did not bother to report as they just saw it as a trivial fact of daily life? Or are we talking about dramatic changes within the strata of rural Sadhus – specialists in liberation and salvation? Or is it that ascetic itinerant social strata of Sadhus had become infiltrated by a new rural *Lumpen-proletariat* (German; “an unemployed under-class”)? A new surplus population created by increased Mughal economical exploitation, marginalised strata finding new ways of living by adopting the high status ascetic social-identities of Sadhus, *jogis* and *fakirs*? This is certainly my conjecture and I will try to argue it in this chapter.

What about Southern India, which did not feel the Muslim occupation initially; can we also here find social processes generating marginalised strata? Historically we know that Southern India (from where many new religious movements originated) in this period experienced social turbulence - intensive phases of kingdom building, construction of irrigation systems in river deltas, expansion of wet agriculture into de-forested areas and dry agricultural areas, strong urbanisation, Hinduisation (enforcement of caste) and endless numbers of wars and feuds. All this could certainly have led to an increased surplus population.

We know that this was a good time for the Brahmins in Southern India, where their social position was considerably enforced and many of them became local landlords. We also know that Buddhist, Jain and “*jogi*” orders totally lost ground in the South to Saivite orders. Often there were violent clashes. In the North *jogi* orders were pushed back to Bengal by Vishnu orders and Muslims. Here we also witness turbulence among the holy men and escalation of conflicts.

Thus there was significant religio-ideological fighting between *all* religious groupings all over India. Gone were the days of ‘peaceful philosophical contests’ – if they ever existed outside the courts. The emergence of belligerent and violent monastic orders was just a part of this process. A record from about 1500 AD shows ‘Gorakhnath jogis’ involved in armed fighting with Siva ascetics. The fight was about who could occupy a specific location at the annual festival which would attract maximum alms.

So we are witnessing an Indian subcontinent plagued by increasing militancy and economical exploitation. Probably the North was worst hit. The various strata and cults within the cultural fields of liberation and salvation also had to survive under such circumstances. In order to do this they had to be involved in everyday politics, economics and violence and they had somehow to relate their lifestyles, doctrines and practices to those circumstances. Some groups would become extinct, some existing groups would thrive, and other new groups would emerge under these new conditions.

We will investigate how Mughal Empire escalated this situation of the Delhi Sultanate.

### Ascetic warriors in the Mughal Empire

The *Mughal Empire* ([Wikipedia link](#)) is often labelled one of ‘the four gunpowder empires’. These were empires built upon much-improved firearms and cannon combined with new levels of bureaucratic control of this military technology. They were forerunners of the modern state form and were a part of global processes transforming Eurasia.<sup>340</sup> The Mughals relied on a Muslim military culture of hiring professional soldiers and using slave soldiers.<sup>341</sup> This is our link to the *warrior ascetic* and from these sources it becomes clear that the ascetic was clearly categorised as a *Sadhu*: a holy specialist defined by his capacity to produce, accumulate and transact his symbolic and cultural capital – his association with and knowledge about liberation and salvation. However this interactor seems to be a strange entrant into this cultural field, because this warrior Sadhu did not transact his intellectual *knowledge* skills, but his *fighting* skills. Let us investigate whether we can justify classifying him as a Sadhu.

There is a huge gap in research covering this period. Thanks to research from the historian W. Pinch, we have some important insights about the yoga discourse in the Mughal Empire. So I will follow Pinch’s research into militant asceticism to throw some light on what happened to the *jogi* identity in this period<sup>342</sup>.

Many Persian sources document the emergence and growth of warrior ascetics in Northern India. These fighting ascetics became a critical part of a huge market of professional soldiers – mercenaries – who sold themselves to the different warring sections of Mughal warrior elites. Around 1600 the Mughal emperor alone employed 4.5 million soldiers. From 1500 the first reports about the warrior ascetics described them as having rather simple

weapons like stones, swords and bows. This changed dramatically. At the decline of the Mughal Empire (200 years later) warrior ascetics like *Gosains* and *Bairagis* – various groups of monotheistic monks - are reported as being able to deliver armies of up to 20,000 soldiers with modern weapons like musketry, artillery and material for sieges against well fortified locations. They were able to supply the backbone of an army and they were seen to be loyal and fearless fighters. The traveller Tavernier met some of them in 1640. It was “a party of 75 fakirs or Muhammadan dervishes” and Tavernier gives a good description of their weapons:

“They were all armed, the majority with bows and arrows, some with muskets, and the remainder with short pikes, and a kind of weapon which we have not got in Europe. It is a sharp iron, made like the border of a plate which has no centre, and they pass eight or ten over the head carrying them on the neck like a ruff. ... Each of them had also had a sort of hunting horn, which he sounds, and make a great noise with when he arrives anywhere ... During the same evening, after they had supped, the Governor of the town came to pay his respect to the principal Dervishes”<sup>343</sup>.

The term *Gosain* – a Siva monk - meant “control of senses” and the term *Bairagi* – a Vishnu monk – meant “bereft of emotions”, qualities essential for a warrior. These monks could even turn up naked on the battlefield without any defensive armour, to show their opponents their power and fearlessness. Therefore they were often called *naga* – “naked” - ascetic warrior. In battle they were notorious for their fighting capabilities and their obedience to their guru-commander.

According to Pinch these ascetic mercenaries were in fact categorised as Sadhus! This is both how they defined themselves and how other observers perceived them. For instance many of the ascetic warriors maintained that they were *Dasnamis* (Siva monks) directly descended from Sankara, the founder of Non-dual Vedanta and monasteries. Other groups of ascetic warriors were originally monastic (Siva) *Samnyasins* and *Gosains*. Even the ascetics *Bairagis* - who had a Vishnu monastic background, which is normally understood as being peaceful - also took up arms as a profession in the 17 century. Indeed some of the first groups to become ascetic warriors were the *Kanphata jogis* and *Nath jogis* – founded by Gorakhnath.<sup>344</sup>

*However it is one thing for a social stratum to link itself to high status monks. It is another thing if these ascetic warriors were actually members of monastic orders. However such a question presumes that we can clearly make distinctions between Sadhus and vagabonds, which the insert below clearly indicate that we cannot.*

### **Insert: Floating social identities**

The historian Kolff (1990) has shown in his study of the Mughal military market that many semi-nomad and peasant communities specialised in offering military services. Groups of young men would leave their village or community and start wandering to find opportunities. As they left their village they would change social identity and when they returned typically twelve years later, they would return to their old identity as a farmer. So as they wandered and served they would not be

seen as a peasant from this or that region, or a Saivite or Sudra. Rather they would take up identities of specialised wandering groups – often warrior-ascetics. This was particularly common among the Rajputs in their early formative years during this period. As they left home they became *jogis*. According to Kolff, an Indian chronicle legend describes such a Rajput seeking military employment:

”With a coil of matted hair on his head, and a musical horn (in his hand), and ashes of cow dung (smeared on his body)”.

This is very much a typical description of many roaming holy men. The Rajput – like some ascetic Sadhus - carried a battle axe, a trident and leather cloak and “by the powers of his asceticism” he defeated his foes.<sup>345</sup>

So social identities were very open categories which one could step into and out of depending on circumstances (Kolff 1990). This means that many people who started to roam as vagabonds to offer services – *naukari* – could assume the identities of monastic monks, or join their orders offering soldier services to feuding factions. So the boundaries between a ‘holy ascetic man’ and a ‘professional warrior’ were very fluid – if there was any difference at all. In this period most ascetics and warriors looked and behaved identically.

This indicates that the cultural fields of liberation and salvation had blurred boundaries. It was easy to get in and claim membership – who could tell the difference? It could easily be populated by social strata of similar social-identities: people not motivated by liberation and salvation at all.

### Monasteries as warrior brokers

We recall that the Mughal Empire was kept in power by a huge army of professional soldiers. We also know that rural India constantly produced a surplus population, as we witnessed above with the young wandering Rajputs. Under the Mughals the economical repression escalated increasing the surplus population. The Mughal Empire through its demand for soldiers created a solution for the very same surplus rural populations it had caused. The demand and the economic repression were so strong that many even peaceful religious communities moved into militancy as a profession. The Sikhs who were founded about 1500 AD on ideas of universal toleration and peace turned into a fraternity of mercenaries. Even god-loving Bhakti communities joined in.

The traveller Tavernier confirms this situation about 1650:

“You may see in India whole provinces like deserts, from which the peasant have fled on account of the oppression of the Governors. Under cover of the fact that they [the Governors] are themselves Muhammadans, they persecute these poor [Hindu] idolaters to the uttermost, and if any of the latter become Muhammadans it is in order not to work any more; they become soldiers of Fakirs, who are people who make profession of having renounced the world, and live upon alms; but in reality they are all great rascals”<sup>346</sup>

The monotheistic monastic communities were also sucked into this process of militarisation. Hence we see that many monastic orders earlier restricted to high castes, started to recruit orphans, slaves, low castes, and landless peasants who they turned into ascetic warriors. Many of these were enlisted in the already existing militant defence divisions of

those monastic orders. To get the job, the ‘rural *Lumpen-proletarian*’ had to dress like a Sadhu.

In this way we can see the gates of the fields of liberation and salvation being formally opened for the rural surplus population. It became impossible to tell who was elite liberator and who were marginalised peasants and nomads.

This is also supported by Tavernier, who saw the connection between surplus population and their transformation into religious groups:

“ It is estimated that there are in India 800,000 Muhammadan Fakirs and 1,200,000 among the idolaters, which is an enormous number. They are all vagabonds and idlers, who blind the eyes of the people with false zeal, ... <sup>347</sup> ..

We can conclude that monastic orders grabbed the opportunity and recruited low caste surplus population and turned them into warrior armies. They became, so to speak, brokers between the buyer (the warlord) and the seller (peasants, semi-nomads and surplus population). This process of admitting the rural surplus population into primary elite monastic institutions might have started hundreds of years earlier. The Mughals in my opinion dramatically escalated the militancy of these ascetic groups. It also meant that the rural strata of ascetic Sadhus lost its (last impressions of) elite character. The elite liberation specialist had become a minority within his own cultural field. The new ascetic warrior who profited from being identified with high status ascetic itinerants had turned the profession upside down. He was feared as a fighter because he was seen to be in possession of supernatural powers and was fearless in battles. This new professional did not trade cultural capital (like merit and fortune telling) but fearless violence.

In other words the rural part of the cultural fields of liberation and salvation had lost its elite character and had become a repository for India’s surplus population – the rural *Lumpenproletariat*. As we read European and Indian historical records about these *jogis* and *fakirs*, we learn that these groups were not always perceived with loving and accepting eyes.

<sup>348</sup>

### The Mughal *jogi*

This chapter has shown that the Mughal rural *jogi* identity is multi dimensional. Only a few are itinerant experts in liberation and salvation. The *jogi* became an ascetic warrior and a part of a roaming *Lumpen-proletariat*. The gates to the cultural field of liberation were partly opened up by monotheistic monastic orders themselves. The end result was that the poor landless peasant not only took over the clothings, habits, practices and supernatural powers of the itinerant ascetic *jogi*, but actually took over most of the field. So where the elite holy men had for centuries been able to a large degree to control and dominate the peasants, under the Muslims it seems that they lost control. So in this way the ‘menacing *jogi*’ we hear about in mediaeval tales – the fictional figure of a wizard with bad intentions who misused his supernatural powers – was actually slowly brought to real life under Muslim rule.

Or to put it another way, the fictional mediaeval *jogi* character was probably not pure fantasy but had always had some correspondence in reality. As the yoga discourse – similar to discourses of other holy men – had created the identity of the super human yogi, it should be no

surprise if mad men and criminals, impostors and opportunity seekers from all social ranks, landless peasants and despairing runaway teenagers, semi-nomads and warrior communities exploited this identity throughout history. That is, they found a way of living as a ‘mendicant holy man’ offering services and racketeering to the rural population. Until the Mughals these “outcasts in Sadhus’ clothing” might only have been relatively few in number and restricted to the countryside. However, under the new conditions of Muslim rule – increased exploitation, the displaced town elites, the market of professional soldiers, escalation of violence; increased Hinduisisation in the south, – we can surmise that these ranks of impoverished people exploded in numbers and found new opportunities as *jogis* and *fakirs* (and countless other identities) in the countryside.

We might here have an explanation as to what led to the emergence of a specific group of *jogis*. It is the *Nath jogis* who emerged under the Muslims; a whole new social community, class or even caste roaming the countryside offering services and trade. Some of them took over the identities of the alchemist Siddhas. Hence early sources from this period were fascinated by their magical and alchemical skills. Marco Polo travelling in India in the 13 Century marvelled about the *jogis*, who he calls *ciuigis*:

“I tell you that they take quicksilver and sulphur and mix them together with water and make drink out of it. Then they drink it and say it lengthens their life.”<sup>349</sup>

We will return to this special *jogi* group soon.

### **From warrior to wrestler and monk**

What happened to the warrior *jogi* as the Mughal Empire eventually crumbled? As market conditions changed, the social stratum of the warrior ascetics changed accordingly. Many of them did not just throw their weapons away. Some instead offered their services to local princes and aristocrats. Many ascetic communities branched out into new economic activities, where weapons and organised militancy could still play a significant role. Some became moneylenders, others offered protection to travelling caravans or directly plundered travellers (van der Veer 2001 & 2004; Clark 2004, White 2009). Some established themselves as local warlords and princes, other offered mafia-like protection rackets to local populations, and some took up trading.

These Vishnu, Siva, Sikh and Muslim strata of ascetics also started fighting for control of trading routes, festivals and territory. The pilgrimage centres to which they flocked became centres for trading horses and camels. Even if they were ascetics, they had big households of concubines (*tawaif*), slave wives, children, servants and slaves.

In early Indian colonial times – around 1750 - the British encountered to an increasing degree these militant ascetics. They became a thorn in the flesh of the British rulers as the latter slowly spread their control out over India. The warrior ascetics were often impossible to control due to their itinerant character and they embodied local competition to the British. And they were not just small fry. In fact these fighting ascetics now dominated trade and money lending in Northern India. They also dominated the religious market of festivals and travelling. Some of them – the Vaishnavite Bairagi monks – controlled religious festivals in the north

taxing the pilgrims. At one festival - the *kumbh* at Ujjain in 1850 – it is reported that the British had to step in and protect rival religious orders attending the festival from being slaughtered by the Bairagis (Pinch 1996).

As the British entered the power vacuum of the crumbling Mughal Empire, they had no intention of supporting this mercenary market of militant ascetics. They had their own ways to manage and recruit their armies. So as India came under full British control, the military labour market dried up for the armed *jogis* and *fakirs*. They could not find employment. Further the overall Indian religious sentiment changed towards Bhakti – god became a remote loving force. Personal divinity through asceticism was out (Pinch 2006). The symbolic power of asceticism was under retreat. That meant that the high status of the warrior ascetics was eroded.

Many of the new Indian urban elites now living in symbiosis with the booming British trade and state adopted the European disdain for ‘these rascals and joggers’. The British increasingly saw *jogis* as criminals only - disguised as monks and increasingly the new rulers felt they were an increasing menace.<sup>350</sup> As the English wanted to monopolise trade in India, they managed to destroy the remaining ascetic soldiers’ regime in the so-called *Sannyasi rebellion* ([Wikipedia link](#)) from 1770-1800.

The British then started a process of transforming these groups from soldiers and traders to pure wrestlers and martial arts fighters. Many - especially the Nath *jogis* - sank into a traditional *Lumpenproletariat* of mendicants frequenting market places. Here they would hold performances, offer their supernatural services or just beg. They joined India’s large poverty-stricken surplus rural population, who often frequented market places, fairs and sites of pilgrimage where people gathered. Here in such public places - like anywhere else in the world - some of these ‘*jogis* and *fakirs*’ would display the acrobatic poses of contortionism. Contortionism – the dramatic bending and flexing of the body – had always attracted the public. The performing contortionist *jogi* of the marketplace became in the public mind conflated with the ‘*hatha jogi*’. Why this happened is not clear, as *hatha-yoga* – despite using some body postures - was not particularly preoccupied with contortionism.<sup>351</sup>

Other smaller groups of Sadhus returned to monasteries and here conformed to the Christian expectation of a monk: a peaceful saintly person living in contemplation striving for salvation. It seems that the remains of yoga as a cult lifestyle and a discourse became almost extinct during the 19 century.

### **Myth and reality of the *jogi***

In summary the history and sociology of the millions of itinerant sadhus that we witness today, wandering all over India is mainly a product of the conditions of British colonial rule. This milieu is not an expression of an old tradition of yogis, as many are led to believe. They represent, rather, a specific historical institution, where a mainly rural surplus population through an institution of professional holy men created a niche of survival. Through the Christian and British discourse they acquired a strongly negative image in European and connected Indian elite communities.

As the label *jogi* or *fakir* was often used as a common denominator for these groups, it meant that the yogi for a long period – maybe from the early 19 Century to about the 1920 yoga renaissance – became a heavily stigmatised label with which very few people liked to be identified. It became the task of this modernist yoga discourse to find the ‘real yoga’ – the ‘ancient classical yoga tradition’ – which ‘so sadly had degenerated’ with this itinerant ‘*jogi* impostor’ - to excavate what yoga *really was and ought to be* and isolate that from what it had actually become (Singleton 2010). In this way the only real *jogi* we have encountered was now defined as fake, while the yogi sage, made of myth, was defined as real.

### Cultural field of liberation under foreign rule

With the investigation of the *jogi* identity we have seen the rural part of the cultural fields of liberation and salvation fused with and almost disappeared into a swelling *Lumpenproletariat*. Due to floating social-identities and conscious recruitment policies it was impossible to tell the difference between a marginalised outcast and an itinerant ascetic. From the Mughal period it seems that the rural part of the field of liberation was in terminal decline. Under British rule it had turned into a strange social-religio institution, where India’s surplus population became seen as holy men. This decline is confirmed by the fact that the Jains and especially the Buddhists faced similar corrosion. At the end of the period the Buddhist had become extinct.

In this period of foreign rule the sense of decline is repeated within the urban liberation discourse. With Muslim and British rule the cultural and symbolic intelligentsia had lost their previous hegemonic alliance with the top political ruling strata of Indian society. They had been forced to retreat to the provinces where there was not much social or institutional basis for cultural refinements

However we have also seen how the rural part of the cultural field of liberation was revitalised for a period by the diaspora of the urban intelligentsia to the countryside as the Muslim invaders settled. We saw how this conditioned the materialisation of *hatha-yoga*, an entirely alien sign system within the field of liberation.

*After hatha-yoga’s compilation and systematisation in rural strata, it reverberated through the following centuries via elite religious fields of salvation until it slowly faded out. Neither the rural nor the urban elite segments of the fields of liberation and salvation contained the resources and dynamics to refine their theoria and praxis. It all became a question of including and linking the hatha-yoga totem with theological and ideological positioning.*

*This is the subject of the rest of the chapter. First a short look at the rural Nath jogis, to whom the Kanphata hatha-yogis belonged. It was this rural stratum with the power to turn hatha-yoga into a part of a textual canon that became recognised as such by the rest of society.*

## 2. The Nath *jogis* and their sociology

### The Naths and their *jogi* orders

The *Nath and their jogi orders* still exist. They are also called *Naths*, *Nath siddhas* and *Nath jogis*. Let us examine them in more detail.

Often orders, temples or cults formed the core and the historical beginning of an Indian religious community – a *sampradaya*. The [Kanphata yogis](#) and Gorakhnath could have been such an order. The surrounding population then supported this core of holy professional men economically. Often the core - due to its symbolic capital - provided leadership and social identity to the general population. The Nath yogis seemed to form such a religious community type – in part an order, in part a whole community. *Hatha-yoga* as we know it today was compiled in the Naths' early core orders.

There is very little known about the Naths and their history.

As the Naths are still extant, we have some ethnographic accounts of their lifestyle and ideas<sup>352</sup>. Based on modern day information we can get some glimpses of their sociology. The Naths are a rural based group and are a borderline “folk religion”.<sup>353</sup> Apparently they were often weavers and cultivators. They might have started as semi-nomads under pressure from Hinduisation and Muslim invasion. Many were (and still are) itinerant groups transacting with the rural population they were passing through. They offered services like hiring out horses and carts, recording of genealogies, selling manure, blacksmithing services, polishing cow horns. The itinerant aspect seems to have been strong among them as they are in the texts often described in deprecating words as ‘beggar *jogis*’. Some of them were known as snake charmers.

However, today many of them are householders. They occupy a caste position (like the Brahmins do) offering “religious” services to other groups. So with the Naths we have a rural semi-nomadic population that is hard to categorise: a mixture of a class, a religious group, an economic niche, a tribe, and a rural stratum.

With the emergent Naths we possibly witness a surge in rural surplus population creating new social identities. These impoverished peasants and displaced town dwellers carved out niches of survival, often in connection with trade and travelling occupations having no other possibilities. In that process many of them took up identities connected with itinerancy, as for instance the itinerant ascetic, known among the rural population as the *jogi*.

Some of the poverty-stricken masses made a fortune out of their initial repression and displacement. Some others survived by taking up identities of holy men. Some might be displaced urban elites seeking refuge in the countryside from Turkic Muslim invasion. It was in such groups that the Nath orders of renouncers – *Nath jogi* or *Nath siddha* - emerged. They sometimes carried names like *jogi*, *jat-jogi* and *samnyasa-yogi*. They merged with or grew out of Tantric and Saivite rural groups and sects who already practised alchemy and Tantric

rituals. It is probably in this cultural melting pot that we see the early Kanphata yogi order, who brought various *hatha-yoga* elements together in a systematic system.

From 16 century historical records we gather that some *Nath cults* shared many of the characteristics we see today among India's itinerant Sadhus (Pinch 2012). The Jesuit Xavier reported that some were dressed in rags and other were naked. They were smeared with ashes. Other sources described groups where members were dressed in long dresses and turbans, all dyed a strong red colour. Some groups allowed members to be married, others were ascetics. They lived a relatively ascetic life curtailing food and drink and abstaining from meat, according to one source. They had fixed settlements in remote places where 2-300 of them lived together. Many, were itinerants making pilgrimage to holy places. Once a year many of them, up to 5,000, would gather at special places. This was probably the environment of the Kanphata Yogis.

They worshipped ancient gurus and saints, whom they divinised. Every morning and evening they would gather and blow their horns towards the sun. According to one source, they believed that the breath in this way would expel their sins. It is not clear what they lived on, but several sources mentioned begging. All sources linked them closely to supernatural powers. That ability would also have been a source of income, for example as oracles. There were many stories linking these *jogis* to flying through air, scary spells, magic powers, and taking possessions of bodies. In their own stories, stored in present day folklore, they impressed the audience with accounts of how emperors and kings would have to pay them respect. This of course impressed and attracted people. The Jesuit Monseratte reports that he did not see them as religious teachers, but as magicians, and he concluded laconically:

"Many people did reverence to these naked ascetics and proclaimed their sanctity abroad. They are however extremely greedy of money. All their trickery and pretended sanctity is aimed at the acquisition of gain." (Pinch 2012, p. 281)

Among them, there were clear social divisions. There were lifetime leaders who were often said to be hundreds of years old. Sources do not allow us to identify the social background of the *jogis*, but some of their leaders must have been intellectually trained, as from time to time they conducted discussions with the Muslim elite. However the main body of the yogis was probably recruited from the rural surplus population of Muslim and British-ruled India.

Some of the Nath *jogis* even rose to the status of small Kings. Many of the Muslim rulers were deeply fascinated by these *jogis* – especially their alchemy and magic (Ernst 2003 & 2005). One of the Nath monasteries received protection from the Muslim emperor Aurangzeb (1659-1707) in exchange for treated quicksilver.

The yogis benefitted from the supernatural powers associated with their profession. This is confirmed by the following account by the Muslim traveller Ibn Battuta (1304-69), who visited a group of *jogis*:

"They were about fifty in number, and a subterranean cavern had been dug for them wherein they lived and would not come except to satisfy their needs. They have a kind of horn, which they blow at daybreak, at the close of the day and at nightfall. And their whole condition was extraordinary. One of them made pills for Sultan Ghiya-ud-din-al-Damghani, king of Ma'bar – pills which the latter was to take for strengthening his pleasure of love..." [354](#)

The early Nath orders were often highly respected, even by Muslim rulers, and seen as authorities on yoga and alchemy (Ernst 2005, Mallinson 2007, White 2009). Thus the Nath *jogi*

orders carried all the signs of a cultural field of liberation: a high status group transacting its [symbolic capital](#) with the surrounding society, especially the ruling upper strata. However when we scratch below this glorified surface we find evidence of the social rejection of Indian society.

The Nath elite built up a canon, which for a greater part relied on *hatha-yoga* and the Gorakhnath-genre. Gorakhnath was one their revered saints. However after its [compilation and systematisation](#) the written *hatha-yoga* discourse did not develop much further within their milieu. In fact it almost disappeared. When Briggs (1938) in the early part of the 20 Century explored the Kanphata and Gorakhnath *jogi* communities, he found very little knowledge of yoga. And so it had probably always been.

This is the deep irony of the yoga discourse. When we finally find, very late in its history, historical social groups actually being named *jogis*, only a tiny minority among them had any knowledge about yoga *theoria* and *praxis*. The countryside does not provide the institutional and cultural infrastructure and resources to keep such a liberation discourse alive.

### **3. *Hatha-yoga* among the elites in Muslim India**

*We now leave the countryside and investigate the fate of the written *hatha-yoga* discourse among the Indian elite after the publication of *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* in the mid 15<sup>th</sup> Century. As we shall see, there was very little further development of the *theoria* and *praxis* of *hatha-yoga*. Most writings were about including *hatha-yoga* in existing theological and religio-philosophical systems. Some few writings however tried to give a more comprehensive overview of the *hatha-yoga* signs, but on closer examination they mostly turn out to be a part of inclusive strategies. Here follows a short introduction to some of them.*

The *Gheranda-samhita* from the 18 century was written by Gheranda. He did not mention the word *hatha* but talked instead about *ghathasta-yoga* – meaning a ‘yoga based on the approach of the body’ (Gharote 1978). However the *Gheranda-samhita* drew clearly on the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (*HYP*) and added very little to it.<sup>355</sup> It did however introduce a few novel *asanas* which were more complex and strenuous than those of the *HYP*. But *asana* was still not a core concern of practice. Many scholars claim that this text is mainly about incorporating *hatha-yoga* signs into a Vaishnavite discourse. But the purpose of writing the text is not clear.

### *Some texts in the post-HYP discourse*

Mid 15th Cent.: **HYP** – later texts add little *theoria* and *praxis*

Mid 15-18th Cent.: **Siva-samhita** – *hatha* into Vedanta/Saivite discourse

15th-18 Cent.: **Late Yoga-Upanishads** – mainly Vedantic incorporations

Mid 17th Cent.: **Hatha-ratnavali** – mainly meditative poses

Mid 18th Cent.: **Gheranda-samhita** – domesticates *hatha*

Mid 18th Cent.: **Joga-pradipika** – mainly meditative poses

Mid 19th Cent.: **3 Commentaries**

The next scripture was called *Siva-samhita*. There is little agreement about the dating of this Saivite document. Some say 15 century and others 18 century. This text mentions that there exist 84 *asanas* but it describes only four. So this text pays even less attention to *asana* practice than *HYP*. This text – strongly reminiscent of *HYP* - is however largely coloured by Vedanta philosophy and, like *Gheranda-samhita*, adds nothing to *HYP*<sup>356</sup>.

These two quite well known texts were typical of the written post *HYP* discourse. However, they tell us very little about the transformative meaning of yoga, its technological content. Their purpose was clearly not to expand the *theoria* and *praxis* of *hatha-yoga*. *Gheranda* for instance seems very determined to exclude antinomian aspects of *hatha-yoga*, to domesticate it. So they are more about taming and linking the prestigious *hatha-yoga* totem to their monotheistic theological discourses.

There are two further texts worth mentioning, both strongly influenced by *HYP*<sup>357</sup>. What is special about them is that these two texts both listed a larger range of *asanas* (Bühnemann 2007). The first of them was *Hatha-ratnavali* dated between 1625 and 1695. Like so many other texts - a tradition stretching back to the Gorakhnath-genre - it states that Siva taught 84 *asana* - and then the text only mentions 36 of them.

The second text, the *Joga-pradipika*, was written by a Jayatarama in 1737. It also claims there are 84 *asanas*, but the names of the *asanas* differ from those of the *Hatha-ratnavali*. Most of them are more or less meditative sitting poses like in the *HYP*.<sup>358</sup> These two last documents might indicate that the numbers of *asanas* increased over time. However the texts mention very few of the strenuous body poses known from modernist postural yoga. We can see from these texts that the *asanas* in the written *hatha-yoga* discourse were mainly sitting poses (Bühnemann 2007).

Finally let us move forward in time to British Colonial India. About 1850 there appeared three commentaries on *HYP*.<sup>359</sup> They became very popular and they were later on printed and published as a part of the Orientalists project (i.e. the construction off the “classical yoga tradition”).

Based on these dedicated *hatha-yoga* writings, one can conclude that there seems to be no increased sophistication of the use-value of the *hatha-yoga* doctrine during all these years. The texts were clearly not about developing, scrutinising, refining and exploring the *hatha-yoga* technologies and doctrines. This was the same conclusion that we made about the *Yoga*

*Sutra* commentary tradition.

### ***Hatha-yoga in the late Yoga-Upanishads discourse***

Most texts dealing with *hatha-yoga* seem mainly interested in reflecting on its notions in relation to existing sign systems. This comes across clearly if we investigate the Brahmin *Upanishad* genre from this period. It appears that *hatha-yoga* discourse became relatively popular among some Brahmins. 108 *Upanishads* became compiled in India between 1700-1750. Many of them included material directly lifted from *HYP*. I have already in the Tantra chapter investigated some of the 20 *late Yoga-Upanishads*, which was a part of those 108.

Many of the 20 *Yoga-Upanishads* were directly written in response to the challenge of incorporating Tantra into Brahmin sign systems. Six of those 20 *yoga-Upanishads* incorporated *hatha-yoga* concepts. They drew especially on *HYP*<sup>360</sup>. The texts probably belong to the period between 1400 -1750.

It seems not surprising that these writings were primarily Vedantic in orientation, as Vedanta had become the dominating religio-philosophy of the Brahmins. So these *Upanishads* were about *hatha-yoga* being adopted in Brahmin milieus outside *hatha-yoga*'s traditional Saivite circles (Feuerstein 1998, Mallinson 2007). The purpose seem to be to integrate *jnana-yoga* – the ancient yoga liberation discourse of knowledge – with the new Tantric practices using sound, light and breath – including *hatha-yoga*.<sup>361</sup>

This *late Yoga-Upanishad discourse* was - once more - mainly an indication of various Brahmin ideological efforts to contain the new and protect the status of their heritage.

### **The spread and inclusion of *hatha-yoga* as a technique**

But the broad range of texts adopting the *hatha-yoga* discourse does tell us something. This rather impressive list of texts shows that *hatha-yoga* had high status and must have made some impact on a range of literate communities, since they found it necessary to write about it and become associated with it. These groups – many of them probably high caste householders - would not even have considered joining the order of the Kanphata jogis. Instead they adopted *hatha-yoga* as *technical yoga*, and integrated it into their own specific theologies. According to this theological strategy of inclusion, there is no independent *hatha-yoga philosophy* – there are only some physiological concepts and techniques, which can be incorporated into existing discourses. This is a common view even today.

As shown earlier, it was a typical ideological manoeuvre throughout Indian history to accept competitive rituals, ideas and practices by giving them an inferior status in one's own existing worldview and practices. This is how cultural and religious fields work. According to such an inclusive strategy, *hatha-yoga* by itself cannot bring liberation. It just sorted out some basic body issues very quickly. The real work was still left to the old practices and doctrines like meditation or Saivite rituals<sup>362</sup>.

The irony is that *HYP* of Svatmarama was itself an example of such an inclusion strategy. As *HYP* was written in Sanskrit its audience was the upper castes. The text showed the

audience that *hatha-yoga*'s techniques could be meaningfully integrated in existing theological discourse. With this manoeuvre *hatha-yoga* lost its power and independence.<sup>[363](#)</sup>

As *hatha-yoga* was adopted, many of its subversive Tantric sexual practices were weeded out of the discourse. For example in the *Gheranda-samhita* it can be observed that all the sexually loaded *mudras* either were removed or had different meanings. Most adopters perceived *hatha-yoga* as another set of techniques that could be used for different purposes: magical power, immortality, health, god reverence and so on.<sup>[364](#)</sup>

*Hatha-yoga* – and Patanjali-yoga - also found its way into Muslim elite culture. It was widely known among different Indian Sufi branches – like the Chishtis and Shattaris – and various translations were circulated in educated Muslim circles (Ernst 2003 & 2005). However, there never emerged a Sufi- or Muslim- yoga. The yoga texts – their mysticism and supernatural powers - intrigued and puzzled the Muslim elite audience, but had little effect on their religious practices.

The reader might wonder if some of the many other ascetic cults and orders - like the ascetic warrior cults or Saivite monastic orders - adopted the promising *hatha-yoga* techniques and integrated them into their life style? This might have been so among the leading cadres and intellectuals of those monastic orders, but probably not among the illiterate destitute majority. There might have been oral instructions, but until now few writings have been unearthed. Briggs' ethnographic studies of the Gorakhnath and Kanphata yogis in the early 20 Century reveal a milieu of Sadhus less conducive to yogic *theoria* and *praxis*. Jacobsen's (2012) and Lamb's (2012) more recent reports indicate much more dissemination of yoga in the daily life of monks and Sadhus. We witness here a milieu influenced by modernist expectations and orientations about the “correct” way to live a yogic life.

*Finally, we could speculate whether the *hatha-yoga* techniques were adopted and further developed outside yoga milieus, for instance among wrestlers, soldiers, acrobats and dancers who also had strong existing body disciplines? Maybe such milieus and institution could have been conducive to development and refinement of *hatha-yoga*? This will be discussed below.*

## 4. The puzzle of the refinements of *asana*

There are still remnants of the warrior ascetics in modern India. The tradition of the ascetic wrestlers still exists today as the so-called *nagas* – the naked ascetics. They are

‘fighting ascetics’ organised into armies. They live in fortified temples and are trained to fight. They – like other wrestlers - do *asana* (physical postures) and sun-salutations (a series of fluid linked stretching poses) as part of their training<sup>365</sup>. These *asanas* and sun-salutations are almost identical to the ones found in the *hatha-yoga* classes of modern Western gyms and yoga studios. Paradoxically enough these poses are not to be found anywhere in the documented *hatha-yoga* discourse. How come?

### **Is there a *yoga asana* tradition?**

Over a period of 400 years – from 1400 to 1800 – we can only recover very few treatises on *hatha-yoga* and *asanas*, according to Bühnemann, who researched the history of *asana*. The early *hatha-yoga* texts taught very few and mainly meditative-style sitting-poses: *Goraksa-sakata* (2 meditation *asanas*), *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (16 *asanas*), *Shiva-samhita* (4 *asanas* - although it postulated that endless numbers did exist). It is firstly when we look deeply into the era of the Mughal Empire that the number of *asanas* instructed increased and secondly that some of them started to look like the strenuous *asanas* known and practised today.

Examples of these texts were the late 17 century *Hatha-ratnavali* (instructing 36 *asanas*, but mentioning 84), the 17-18 century *Gheranda-samhita* (33 *asanas* – some advanced) and the *Joga-pradipika* (84 *asanas* – many advanced) from 1737. So, during the era of the Mughal Empire, it seems that *asanas* slightly increased in numbers and complexities. But *asanas* continued to have a minor overall function and without any of today’s primacy and complexity. There were no signs of the standing poses and sun-salutations which dominate modern practice.

As shown earlier the texts mainly repeated each other. We see no real refinement of *hatha-yoga asana* practice and theory. There was no evidence of an autonomous discourse undergoing change or being in progress. So these few scriptures seem *not* to indicate an ongoing *hatha yoga asana* tradition of writers who contemplated *hatha-yoga* philosophy and questioned why *asana* practice ought to have a primary position.

Hence we should expect innovation and refinement of *hatha-yoga asana* tradition to take place *outside* those groups who wrote about *hatha-yoga*.

### **The gap between *hatha-yoga asana* and modernist postural yoga**

What one can see from all the writings about *hatha-yoga* is that *pranayama* – not *asana* – was the core technique. All other sources describing the techniques of the *jogis* were similar in mentioning and focussing especially on breathing techniques. *Asanas* were clearly in the background of the written discourse of those 400 years. Many of the *asanas* were poses for sitting comfortably for prolonged periods. The description of them was so rudimentary that the writings could never have functioned as manuals.

If on the other hand we look at the styles of *asana-based* yoga, practised since the Second

World War, we get a very different picture. Now *asana* has moved to an all-dominating centrepiece of practice! However, many of the original *hatha-yoga* techniques are hardly practised anymore. Another significant difference is that *pranayama* has moved to the background of modern practice, often just practised briefly in the beginning of an *asana*-yoga session. Further, modernist *asanas* are endowed with a level of sophistication and detailed description not really occurring in the textual tradition.<sup>366</sup> So where does the change come from?

N.E. Sjoman in 1999 published a book *The yoga Tradition of the Mysore Palace*, which scrutinised this discrepancy between the written *hatha-yoga* discourse and the actual practice today. Sjoman wondered whether modernist postural yoga is related to the textual tradition at all? How could such changes possibly emerge within the meagre textual tradition or within an illiterate impoverished yogi order? Sjoman speculated that there might be an overseen milieu not paid attention to, which is the real source of modernist postural yoga.

### Body traditions of stretching

So when did the *asanas* develop into being refined and being differentiated, as we see them today? Sjoman's answer is that a range of other body-oriented institutions incorporated and refined *asana*. If we replace the word *asana* with 'stretching poses' it is clear that throughout history in most cultures people have, in connection with military training, sports and dance, cultivated their bodies through physical exercise, often including stretching. So stretching is not something as peculiar to yoga as many think today. Sjoman's idea was to investigate documentation of such exercises, which in India sometimes were stored in the libraries of royal palaces.<sup>367</sup> Sjoman accordingly looked into the royal libraries in Mysore and there found documentation of stretching poses bearing strong similarity to modern yoga poses.

Training programmes similar to military training are also found documented and developed within the different wrestling orders – the *garadi*.<sup>368</sup> Stretching poses would naturally have been included here for building up flexibility and mental power.

There were many other Indian body oriented institutions that could have used and refined *asana*. Like the ancient Greeks, the Indians also had gyms for bodily exercises – the *vyayamasalas*. Most probably they practised stretching poses as a part of a body regime. It is interesting that many of these events and places were run by ascetic orders. There was also the festival of the wandering ascetics – the *kumbhamela*. There people met and exchanged ideas and practices. Or *asana/stretching posture advances* might have happened within Indian medicine – *ayurveda*. Again, *asana* could have been refined into therapeutic and medical tools. Or the martial arts tradition of Kerala could have developed *asana* to increase their flexibility and strength. So Sjoman concludes that we can easily trace a range of interacting body oriented institutions having refined *asana*.

Later on, as British rule spread slowly over India, we know that British military training had a great influence on the indigenous soldier training systems, especially as Western gymnastics using ropes, parallel bars and trapezes started to emerge at the end of the period. British military gymnastics were a further strong input to all the Indian body traditions

inspiring them to re-develop their original techniques. Sjoman found this clearly documented in the Mysore libraries.

Amongst all these body-oriented institutions, there was an extensive exchange of ideas and practices. If new stretching postures were developed by any of these traditions, they would automatically become a part of the circuit of exchange – the discourse - and then become the target of sustained improvements and developments. So Sjoman conjectures that these body circuits could have been the true laboratories of what we today know as *asana* – specific yoga stretching poses.

There is some documentary evidence supporting this hypothesis further – especially from the Mysore palace. As it happened it was the [Mysore yoga tradition](#), which would be one of the main sources for modern Western *asana* centred yoga practice!

### Mysore palace tradition

By studying the libraries and history of the Mysore palace it became clear to Sjoman that the palace was a major site for developing *asana* to something far beyond the simple postures of the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*. Since 1700 the palace was under a strong British influence. It was a great admirer of British culture and science. The *Raja* and his soldiers were deliberately trying to learn from and copy their English rulers. So they merged the British soldiers' exercise systems with their own indigenous exercise systems. Later on they built a gym full of Western tools and equipment. Finally, in the best Western tradition, they created a huge library documenting their practices among others. In those libraries Sjoman found rich evidence of a long and old *asana* tradition, which was a central and integral part of the exercise regimen of the palace.

The oldest document is related to the wrestling orders, protected by the palace. The document entitled *Mallapurana* can be dated to 1640. It consists of 13 groups of exercises for wrestlers focussing on different body parts and their strength and flexibility. Chapter 8 describes 16 *asanas* in detail. One of them is the headstand, which today is seen as one of the most important *asanas* within modernist postural yoga. However the headstand never appeared in the *hatha-yoga* scriptures.

Another document describes and shows 122 *asanas*. It is the *Sritattvanidhi*, written down in the early 19 century. The document is a compilation of many different older *asana* traditions. Many of its descriptions are centred on the demanding flow of movements between poses. This flow is today called “*vinyasa*”. [369](#)

The final document of interest is another revival of old warrior exercises. This document – the *Vyayama dipika* - is from about 1900. The scripture tries to synthesise several older traditions. Of significant interest are the *danda* exercises. These are dynamic sequences of poses. Some are *sun-salutations* described in exactly the way they are used today. Others are push-up exercises, similar to *vinyasa* sequences used in modern *ashtanga* and Power yoga. [370](#) The document shows further how to get into backbends using support and help – all techniques used intensively in modernist yoga styles like Iyengar yoga.

## The Western ‘physical culture’ discourse

The British scholar Mark Singleton (2010) agrees to some extent – along with more and more scholars - that modern yoga poses originate *outside* the original *hatha-yoga* discourse. However Singleton expands the discourses of influence by implying that most of the late colonial Indian *asana* discourses mentioned by Sjoman were themselves outgrowths of European body discourses. So Singleton instead directs our focus towards modernist Western body discourses, as they emerged during the 19 century and moved into global culture circuits at the turn of the 20 century.

Around 1900 as bodybuilding, photography and cheap printing presses emerged they inspired Indian colonial elites. Bodybuilders like C.R.D. Naidu, P.K. Gupta, M.V. Krishna Rao, K.V. Iyer, Yogacarya Sundaram took up the challenge and kicked into action a new Indian health culture. Here, says Singleton, they combined the new with existing Indian body exercises. For instance, they developed the movement sequence that we today know as sun-salutation. Their aim was framed by the Western *physical culture* discourse – a holistic, healthy and strong body, mind and soul.

In order to achieve this, Indian and Western body builders and athletes drew on exercise regimes developed in Europe during the 19 Century. They drew on the German (employing tools like bars and trapezes) and Swedish (using the body as resistance combined with stretching) gymnastic discourses, as developed by F.L. Jahn and P.H. Ling. They also incorporated callisthenic exercises which had their origin back in Greco-Roman military training: lunges, jumping jack, crunches, push-ups, and squats. From their manuals with drawings and photos we can see that many of the stretching poses and the movements combining these poses were identical to what we today call *asana*-yoga exercises – but which never appeared in *hatha-yoga* texts.

Most contemporary yoga practitioners will immediately recognise the exercises of these Western manuals as certainly *asana* and *vinyasas*. In the chapters on [modernist yoga](#) we see it is in this hybrid culture that we find the roots of modern *asana* driven yoga – not in the *hatha-yoga* discourse.

With the arrival of modernist culture and institutions this chapter comes to an end. So far, we have mapped some of the genealogy of modernist *asana* discourse. We can confirm that it does not have its roots in the written *hatha-yoga* discourse, but is to be found in institutions outside *hatha-yoga*.

## Summary

The yoga discourse under foreign rule does not show much innovation or variation apart from the emergence and spread of the influential *hatha-yoga* discourse. The origins of this discourse had very little to do with previous yoga discourses. This novel discourse was mainly a Tantric discourse. Ironically it surfaced as Tantric culture came under pressure from Muslim rule and the re-ignition of Bhakti. *Hatha-yoga* as liberation discourse emerged in rural strata of the field of liberation. It appears that this cultural field did not have the capacity to

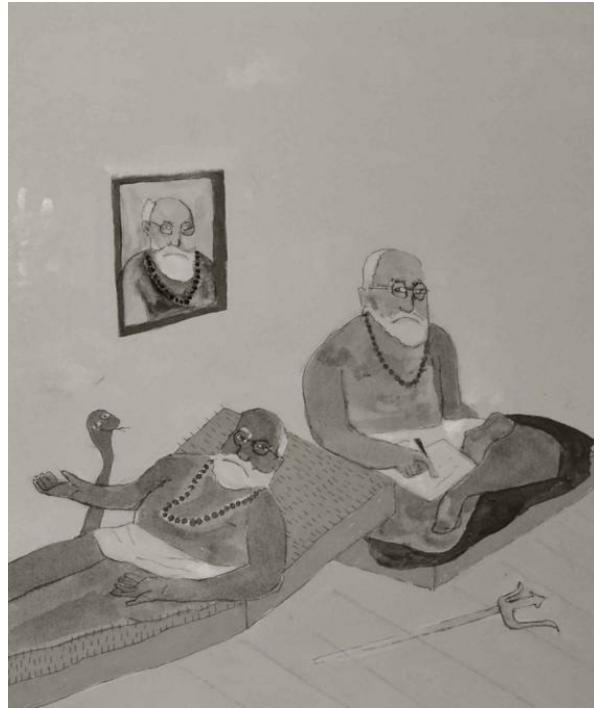
further develop the *hatha-yoga* discourse during the following centuries. Neither did the elite religious field of salvation. Both the rural and the elite cultural fields of liberation were in terminal decline each for its own reason. At the dawn of the British Empire in mid 19 Century the whole liberation discourse was close to collapse. The Buddhist had disappeared; the Jain monk was restricted to a few locations; the *jogi* was a rascal and a thief; the few Brahmin clans involved were provincial specialists occupied by intellectual ideological positioning. Asceticism and Gnosticism as [Technologies of the Self](#) had lost much of their symbolic power to the emotional ecstasy of Bhakti. In other words the underlying power discourses and habitus enabling the accumulation of symbolic capital in the field of liberation dwindled.

Today, modernist yoga popularisers imagine their *asana* driven yoga practice as being rooted in medieval *hatha-yoga*, which itself has its roots in an even further prehistoric yoga past. Often they name their practice '*hatha-yoga*' to honour and acknowledge their ancient tradition. However the modernist *asana*-centred yoga practice bears almost no relation to the Nath- and Kanphata *jogi* culture where the Tantric *hatha-yoga* discourse emerged. It is all wishful romanticist dreaming. When we look for a genealogy corresponding to the body practices for modernist *asana* yoga we encounter a totally different institutional environment: wrestlers, dancers, ascetic warriors, British soldiers, emerging fitness culture and modernist body gyms.

This period of India under foreign rule also reveals another irony. As the first named Saivite orders began to condense into monastic institutions and organisations, we see that they became entangled in the sociology and politics of the period. They became inseparable from the *jogis* and *fakirs* who roamed the countryside. With the Mughals, India's religious field of monotheistic monastic groups and religious communities became swamped by rural surplus populations. So as some of India's holy men finally became identifiable *jogi* identities, they also lost much of their symbolic status as they simultaneously became the detested itinerant *Lumpen-proletar*. This "dark side" of the double face of the *jogi* would be ignored later in the modernist yoga discourse.

# **Chapter 12**

# Conclusion – De-constructing yoga



*Post-modern yoga-analysis*

*Finally, some philosophical reflections and overall conclusions about yoga discourse and its social history. This concluding chapter returns to where the book began: what are we actually talking about? As the most of the written yoga discourse seems to be about turning use-value into symbolic value and vice versa, we return once more to the concept of Altered States of Consciousness (ASC). Not as something defining yoga, because we see ASC figuring in numerous discourses, but as something that gives us a more tangible platform from which we can unravel the yoga discourse.*

*This leads us to seven generalisations about the yoga discourse. Central notions here are: the dialectic of use-value and symbols in yoga; yoga as a discourse field; yoga's involvement with essentialism, mysticism and orthodoxy; and yoga as a power discourse.*

*Finally the contemporary modernist yoga milieus as such are encouraged to perform some Patanjali-yoga on yoga – to weed out delusions and investigate yoga's conditioning by society.*

*This book has been an attempt to perform yoga on yoga. Or as the Buddhists say: to realise yoga as impermanently and dependently originated (i.e. the Buddhist doctrine that nothing can exist on its own) -which is what I suggest should be labelled 'post-modern yoga'.*

# 1. Altered States of Consciousness (ASC) and yoga culture

## The heterogeneity of yoga

When the yoga discourse was about 600 years old, it was embraced by monotheistic groups and the [\*Bhagavad Gita\*](#) took a central place in their understanding and propagation of the god Krishna. The *Gita* was inserted in the huge [\*Mahabharata Epic\*](#) and both became popular then and throughout history. What we can see based on these writings, is that there was no agreement on the content and purpose of yoga. Yoga seems to be perceived as *single-minded, sustained and systematic endeavours yielding various metaphysical benefits*. Such benefits could be semi-divinity, supernatural powers, release from rebirth, god union, gnostic truth, divinisation, non-dual realisation, reconfiguration of mind-set, and eternal afterlife in heaven, to mention but a few.

However, Krishna worshippers stretched the yoga concept so far that they almost negated its hitherto central tenets. They did this by allowing the *self-efforts of yoga* – the individual's disciplined endeavours to overcome personal [\*karma\*](#) – to be overshadowed by the *grace of god*. Without the blessing and grace of Krishna, yoga efforts were deemed to be futile. In the yoga discourse of the *Gita* human self-reliance was overridden by theistic submission and dependency. Hence the *Gita* – turning the *raison d'être* of yoga on its head - is a good example of how difficult it is to identify a meaningful common denominator in the yoga discourse. Various groups throughout history have used the yoga word – the signifier - for whatever purpose they chose, creating numerous logical inconsistencies.

The yoga discourse in its first 500 years was probably a wide and heterogeneous but fertile discourse field such as we see in the *Mahabharata*, where new ideas and practices continuously emerged, mutated and then faded away again. In tracing the genealogy of the yoga signifier, I have focussed on one of these various sub-branches; I am well aware of the high probability that my selection may reflect my modernist pre-suppositions and filters, and not actual history.

## Yoga and Altered States of Consciousness (ASC)

In my selected genealogy of the yoga discourse, I ended with ancient [\*suicide rituals\*](#) as a major source of the early yoga discourse. Here people preparing for a ritual death mortified their body-mind systems by using a wide range of diverse techniques like fasting, breath retention, ethical conduct, metaphysical philosophy, sense withdrawal, and mind focussing. If successful, the calmed soul would be able to rest in death. It was released from karmic driven

samsara (rebirth).

I believe that in this ritual institution we can identify some underlying typical and significant constituents, which came to mark large parts – but of course not all - of the yoga discourse throughout history. The common component I have identified is the psychological term '*Altered States of Consciousness*' (hereafter ASC ). It is important to note that this concept is *not a definition of yoga*. Why not? Because many other practices, techniques and events produce similar states of consciousness. Yoga is just one of them. But it seems that most of the emerging techniques - which some groups at the time of Buddha labelled ‘yoga’ – produced states of consciousness that can today be labelled ASC.

By studying the ancient texts of the Sramanas and Brahmins through the lenses of the notion of ASC, we can see that yoga and similar discourses in the beginning were typically connected to this concept. These groups employed techniques that we can see today would lead to different variants of ASC. But does this hold true throughout history? The reader might for instance struggle to see how the *Bhagavad-Gita*’s jnana-yoga and buddhi-yoga - both relying on wisdom and insight – has anything to do with ASC? And further, what has *karma-yoga* – relying on a ritual based life following the prescribed laws of the universe – to do with it?

As we recall, however, Krishna’s various yoga forms were interrelated. Most important for Krishna were *karma-* and bhakti-yoga . In the love and devotion of Krishna (i.e. *bhakti*) the yogi lived or “acted out” (*karma* – “action”) Krishna’s will and *dharma* (“universal law”). But in order to do that, the yogi had to develop a phlegmatic and composed mind restrained from emotions and disinterested in action. Further the yogi through ascetic-meditative practices had to access specific parts of his mind-set, which was ‘the faculty of discrimination’ – the buddhi . By taking refuge in the *buddhi* (a state of ‘pure thinking awareness’) – and only by doing this – it was possible *from this ASC* to conduct *karma-* and *bhakti-yoga*. So traditional yoga techniques of stillness of mind and insight were required in order to live a yogic life in worship of Krishna. *Bhakti-* and *karma-yoga* presumed the ASC of *buddhi-yoga*. Thus the various forms of yoga of the *Bhagavad-Gita* – some of which at first glance seem not to have much to do with ASC - are on closer inspection actually linked to techniques producing ASCs.

If we recall Buddhist discourses , we see strong similarities. Here the Buddhist virtuoso would first of all transform his state of consciousness by using a range of methods like element meditation, moderate asceticism and ethical living. This would allow him to receive the final gnostic insight into his mental apparatus. This final re-configuration of the mind would turn the monk into an “awakened one” – a *buddha*. Here in this Buddhist “*jnana-yoga*” (knowledge-based yoga) we see that ASC is closely related to Buddhist methods.

The connection of gnosticism with ASC was specific to neither Buddhism nor *Krishna’s yoga*. In the theoretical section of the wisdom yoga of Vasishta , we encountered a linking of wisdom-based liberation to ASC. Finally this linkage of wisdom with ASC tended to happen in the pure gnostic schools of the Vedanta Brahmins . They included Samkhya-yoga into their wisdom discourse, even if it was conceptually problematic and even if their philosophical idealism basically did not require any yogic ASC to achieve atman/brahman realisation .

Yoga – although from its early days heavily influenced by wisdom discourses – rarely appears as *pure* wisdom discourse: it is rare to see liberation due solely to insight with no ASC involved in the process. In other words the pre-modern yoga sign was rarely signified within a pure wisdom discourse utterly discarding ASC.

Finally, if we contemplate for instance modern forms of yoga - often based on various body poses and movements - we realise that they also generate mild forms of ASC. This is also clearly emphasised and praised by practitioners and phenomenological scholars ("*yoga de-stresses and calms the mind*").

We could go further and conclude that the effect of ASC is a *typical* effect linked to the yoga sign – as it is of many other practices (like Tai-chi, relaxation techniques, sport forms, hypnosis, drugs). In other words, we could say that the *use-value of yoga* is *typically* – but not necessarily – a function of ASC. But this should *not* lead us to believe that ASC – and the specific use-value related to it – has throughout history been the primary concern of the written yoga discourse. I will return to this.

Finally this often seen link between yoga and ASC should not tempt us to generalise that this *always* was so. With this cautionary remark we can return to the discussion of yoga and ASC.

### **How important was ASC to the yoga discourse?**

As we have seen in this book, the modern Western mind-set - tainted by romanticism, individualism, Protestantism and so on – has been preoccupied by consciousness and ASC. This has distinguished the modernist yoga discourse of the last 200 years. For instance, orientated by this filtering (habitus), we have prioritised and moved the *Yoga Sutra* and the *Upanishads* – all focussing on ASCs – into the foreground. We have envisaged such texts to express the ‘core principles of yoga’. Hence other versions of yoga - like for instance contemporary forms - were classified as ‘secondary and satellites’. So does this book not repeat the 200-year-old modernist reconstruction of yoga by now highlighting ASC?

First of all, the fact that we are today biased in our pre-occupations due to our habitus does not imply that we are necessarily wrong in our identification of real historical trends - but there is of course a heightened risk. We cannot logically exclude - just because of our bias – the possibility that ASC might actually have been central in the mind-set of people who were engaged in yoga and many other similar discourses.

What is crucial to grasp is that even if many of the extant texts discuss yoga techniques in relation to ASC, this does not imply that this was why they wrote about yoga in the first place. The fact that ASC is most often implied in the yoga discourse should not lead us to conclude that it was crucial for what the text wanted to communicate. This book has shown that it was often other issues than ASC that motivated and drove the written yoga discourse. This is where the distinction *use-value* versus *social symbolic-value* enters. The thesis is that as yoga writers reflected on yoga’s use-value (that is they were ascribing use-value to its ASC), they instantaneously – willingly or unwillingly – produced symbolic-value. This is where yoga becomes *culture*, the subject of this book.

Secondly, the notion of ASC is *not* trying to define the core principles of yoga and what they signify. Rather, it tries to identify a theme that is common not just to most use of the yoga signifier (the word itself), but is also shared with a range of similar discourses like Buddhism, Jainism, Saivism, and Tantra. ASC is however a technical theme or category that we as readers and historians force upon yoga. ASC as a technical psychological notion was of course never a part of the yoga discourse itself, and it is much too broad a notion to be able to define any discourse. Still, it seems useful.

Firstly, the notion is carefully introduced in order to escape the notions which the yoga discourse – ancient or contemporary; practical or scholarly - itself has been using throughout history. Such discourses have typically signified the ‘experiences and outcomes produced by yoga techniques’ in religious, metaphysical, romanticist, and ideological and so on contexts. Such discourses were often part of and driven by various social symbolic disputes with other social groups. I wanted to avoid this mystical and religious enveloping of the yoga outcomes and experiences – hence I turned to modern psychology and found the notion ASC to be a good alternative.

Secondly the notion ASC seems to correspond with the yoga genealogy on which I have focussed. It is a genealogy of a specific yoga current, which I am convinced is *major and important* in the origins of the yoga sign. However deciding this is like finding the source of the Nile: in the end it is a subjective choice. The Nile is undoubtedly a river and its one of the longest in the world – but where does it begin? Many think the source of the Nile is Lake Victoria. However Lake Victoria is in its turn fed or sourced by a range of some very large rivers. Among those should we choose the longest river or the river with the significant largest volume of water as the source of the Nile – or should we just choose Lake Victoria, as most people do?

It is evident to me that my vision of yoga and choice of genealogy (as being related to ASC) steps into typical modernist filtering of yoga – modernity’s fascination and preoccupation with consciousness and ASC. However the difference is that I am *not* saying that the *utility* of ASC is the cause for the production of yoga culture. I see ASC as providing the basis for discourses about the use-values and symbolic-values of yoga, but I do not believe - as many modernist yoga writers do - that the use-value actually was at the centre of the purpose of written yoga discourse. Here we instead find symbolic-value. In short: ASC is a fine common denominator but it is not crucial to the purpose and dynamics of yoga as culture.

Thirdly ASC is a notion chosen because it is rooted in the biological human body – its psycho-physiology - and because we are increasingly capable of measuring indications of this state of mind. It has been very successfully used by for instance Kroll and Bachrach in their important cross-disciplinary research in *The Mystic Mind* (2005). By employing this notion we are able to summarise many conclusions of the book in a series of related statements, which follows below.

## 2. Seven generalisations capturing the yoga discourse

1. *A range of technologies and events is able to generate Altered States of Consciousness (ASC)*
2. *Some of these “ASC generators” have been labelled ‘yoga’ by various groups – other groups have given them different names*
3. *Numerous discourses have evolved to give meaning to the ASC and to define the associated technologies necessary to get there – yoga was one of them*
4. *The yoga discourse never solidified into institutional settings and hence remained a diversified and heterogeneous field unable to refine and develop further sophistications of its theoria and praxis*
5. *Central to the yoga discourse is its inherent ability to turn its use-value definitions into social symbols (and vice versa) thereby creating difference and power – metamorphosing yoga into a social totem.*
6. *The yoga totem provided the fuel and dynamic giving the yoga discourse enough historical persistence and stamina to compensate for its lack of institutional support*
7. *Due to yoga’s symbolic value and its close association to power discourses various groups intertwined it with essentialism, mysticism, and/or orthodoxy.*

*Ad 1.*

*A range of technologies and events are able to generate ASC*

According to Kroll and Bachrach (2005) there are no precise definitions of either our everyday *Normal Consciousness* (NC) or *Altered States of Consciousness* (ASC). NC is characterised by logical thinking; selective attention; reality orientation; constant variation in attention and intensity; a flux of consciousness; and a chattering mind. It is a moment-to-moment process of a continuous inner stream of thoughts and sensations some times related to outer events, sometimes inner scenarios like hopes, anxieties, grievances, plans and memories<sup>371</sup>.

Certain events and practices can bring us out of this mundane consciousness: a life

threatening event, drugs, starvation, pain, and meditation, to mention only a few. ASC is a gradual process into which we can move deeper and deeper. It can subjectively and objectively be registered as changes in perception, cognition, anticipation, emotional state and self-awareness. There is a decisively altered sense of self, of reality and of perceptual processes. There is a sense of unreality: the awareness of reality seems narrow and there is an altered / estranged perception and interpretation of incoming sensory stimuli as well as of internally generated stimuli (thought, emotions). The controlling logical capacity feels diminished as the inner stream of thought is less organised and reality directed. Sometimes there is a sense that the perpetual inner dialogue has stopped.

Most states of ASC can be measured by changes in hormonal level, basal temperature, immune system, brain physiology and functioning, blood pressure, pulse, pain control, anxiety reduction and so on. Repeated experiences of ASC often seem to be accompanied by changes in the shape of synaptic pathways, which can lead to addiction to the event or to changes in sensitivity levels (Kroll and Bachrach 2005, Kahneman 2011).

ASC can happen spontaneously but is mostly activated by special technologies or events. Various geographical and historical societies and cultures have knowledge of technologies producing ASC. Sometimes they are highly valued and integrated in central rites and rituals – attributed high positive use-value and symbolic value – at other times they are forbidden and repudiated. Drugs and alcohol are good examples of how cultural context varies in their acceptance and valuation. Around the time of Buddha, Northern India - unparalleled by almost any other civilisations - seems to have developed a wide and sophisticated range of ‘ascetic-meditative technologies’ leading to ASC. Some groups began to call some of these technologies ‘yoga’. This is where this book starts its story as it investigates the culture which surfaced in relation to yogic ASC.

ASC takes many forms and intensities. The ASC produced by rapidly drinking a glass of vodka cannot be compared to taking LSD, ecstatic orgasm or hypnosis. For more about ASC and its various types ('ASC generators'), see the Appendix on methodology where [ASC](#) is discussed.

#### *Ad 2.*

*Some of these “ASC generators” have been labelled ‘yoga’ by various groups – other groups have given them different names*

#### ***Tapas, yoga, vrata and upasana – related ASC generators***

The proto-yoga and early-yoga cultures I have identified all developed various new groundbreaking ASC generators and combined them with older established technologies. It seems that their technologies were primarily related to and signified by death rituals. The purpose was to calm the mind and body system. This would result in a quieting of the mind's perpetual chatter and lead to deep absorption. Now the soul of the person was deemed ready to die. At that time various names and labels were given to either a single technology or a

cluster of them. There was apparently no agreed and well-defined terminology.

Many of the new technologies produced ASCs similar to already established ascetic technologies – *tapas* – and shared many common characteristics with them. So often similar austerity techniques were described as either *tapas* or yoga. For instance *dhyana* (a style of meditation) could be classified as both ‘*tapas*’ and ‘yoga’. Hence we can easily imagine that someone practising what we would today call yoga technologies was known as a *tapasvin* (an ascetic virtuoso).

Some of the *tapas* technologies evolved out of Brahmin ritual practices. Amongst those there were techniques that brought about slightly different states of ASC compared to the new yogic meditative ways of stilling the mind. Such techniques were often based on monotonous repetition that “tranced” the mind. It could be the chanting of a holy word, the humming of a soundbite, repetitious prayers, or small rhythmic body movements – all numbing or paralysing the mind’s ability to function ordinarily. One example was the Brahmin *upasana* ritual – ‘worship-meditation’. As these ritual based technologies – often categorised as forms of *tapas* – became mixed with new ascetic-meditative technologies, they could have been categorised in many various ways – even as yoga. There was no agreed terminology.

Finally, there was also an ascetic institution of pledges and vows – *vrata*, rules of conduct. *Vrata* were often tightly integrated with various rituals and would often have been impossible to distinguish from *tapas* or yoga. However, the act of sitting next to a fireplace in the sun at the middle of the day in a mortified position would certainly have generated strong ASC, whatever you called it. It would then be up for discussion, context and *habitus* to give such an act a name – *tapas*, *vrata*, *upasana*, sacrifice or yoga. And it would be up to discourses to give such labelled acts meaning and purpose – use- and symbolic-value. Which is what *culture* is about.

## Later developments

Over time it seems that the sign ‘yoga’ - mainly coming from ascetic discourses – merged with the new [wisdom discourses](#) that materialised around the time of Buddha. In other words, certain ascetic-meditative technologies were mixed with gnostic philosophical discourses which also claimed they could cause release (*moksha*). As we know the endeavour of acquiring knowledge by itself does not generate ASC in our modern understanding. So seen through our lenses of ASC, the new wisdom discourses of the Axial Age - also promising release - were entirely different from the older ascetic meditative discourses. Some ingenious minds at the time of Buddha managed to bring these discourses together. At that time it was claimed that the new style of liberating wisdom was significantly different from traditional knowledge: when this type of insight was fully realised, it re-configured the mind, and created an altogether new consciousness of the world and the self. The mind became “re-programmed” so to speak and would hence function and perceive differently. Sometimes probably to justify this impressive achievement and convince the community, the claims of such particular liberating wisdom were preceded by and linked to ascetic-meditative technologies generating ASC - enter certain branches of Buddhism.

Over time we observe constant re-configurations of clusters of technologies demanding to be categorised as yoga. During the Tantric period there evolved many new technologies creating ecstatic and possessed ASCs. These techniques were entirely different from the calm-mind ASC generators. Often the Tantrics deliberately dismissed existing ascetic-meditative practices. Sometimes the new techniques were called yoga, but often not. Finally, there emerged mainly under modernity new technologies of stretching, moving and holding the body for prolonged periods. They also produced gentle states of ASC and soon they became incorporated under the yoga umbrella. Modernist postural yoga was born.

### *Ad 3.*

*Numerous discourses have evolved to give meaning to the ASC and to define the associated technologies necessary to get there – yoga was one of them*

### **Giving meaning to ASC**

The experiences of ASC do not have any meaning in themselves. They are usually - often after struggling efforts – experienced as pleasant states of being and can even have an addictive effect. At other times they lead to increased irritability, discomfort and hypersensitivity. However, it is the *cultural context* – the habitus and discourse in particular - which gives the experiences of ASC meaning and determines whether they are acceptable and worth striving after (Kroll and Bachrach 2005). Take as an example a young modern teenager who increasingly isolates herself socially from any contact with the outer world. She begins to fast, hardly sleeps at night and in the end embarks on cutting herself with razorblades. She finally reports that she hears voices. In a modern habitus (or context) of psychological sign systems, we would find that she was in need of psychological help. However, in a medieval European habitus (context) she might have been seen as a saint, who could hear the voices of angels - two very opposing attributions of meaning and valuation of the same event and person.

This is what discourses, habitus and culture do. I suggest in relation to yoga that a discourse in general gives signification and value to ASC and their related technologies. Discourses on their side are often guided and orientated by the prevailing habitus. A yoga discourse typically – but not always - defines the ASC generators it accepts and then defines the purpose and benefits of generating this state of consciousness. Over more than 2000 years we have encountered an impressive range of yoga discourses, all giving very diverse and opposing meanings and values to various ASCs and their associated technologies. Here are some of the purposes ascribed to yoga through ages:

The Soul's release after death; mystical realisation of the One (principle of universe); god contemplation; Siva-bhoga; peace of mind; ecstatic meeting of divine polarities; mental and physical healing; ontological and metaphysical gnosis; ritual worshipping; release of Kundalini; the isolation of purusha; achievement of semi-divinity or even divinity; physical immortality; beauty and energy re-charge; Sayujya (union); immortality of the soul; possession of worldly powers; insight into the

causes of suffering; mortification of the senses; metaphysical union; mental powers; purification; Brahmajana (brahman knowledge); still mind; energising the vital body; preparation and facilitation of Gnostic wisdom; Siva consciousness; perfection; physical flexibility; self-sacrifice; re-juvenation; Siva-anubhava (Siva experience); and preparation for peaceful death.

Further, there was never agreement within the numerous yoga discourses about defining crucial issues such as: what are the content, priority, numbers and purpose of the various yoga technologies (i.e. ancillaries/ limbs); when is a technique yogic and when not; is the purpose achieved through self effort or dependent on guru initiation or god's grace; and what is the final identity of the transformed person? All these issues are what yoga discourses traditionally deal with. Mostly but not always this *struggle for the power to categorise the yoga sign* took place between professional specialists giving rise to *yoga as a cultural field*. Within the wide yoga discourse there was from day one no agreement on these issues and the situation did not improve over time.

Throughout history we have seen within the general [cultural field of liberation](#) countless examples of how other discourses and groups have used similar or even the same techniques – i.e. ASC generators - as we find in the yoga discourse. So at any time in history we have found that the yoga discourse was an ill-defined sub-stratum of much wider cultural fields (often defined by liberation or salvation). Within those cultural and religious fields we find all kinds of strata and trends, often impossible to distinguish.

### The relative neutrality of the ASC notion

ASC is our modern way of getting a deliberately vague understanding of what seems to be a common trait in most yoga cultures. The ASC notion does not give any value and purpose to what we are talking about, but makes it into something that we can inter-subjectively measure without saying exactly what it is. If a yogi adept claims that when she “was in *samadhi*, there was an experience of non-duality”, then the notion of ASC has no opinion about this interpretation of an experience. It can only confirm from measurement if this person actually was or was not in an ASC.

The notion then allows us to envisage metaphorically the ASC as physical core - like a seed - around which discourses and culture like yoga solidify. The yoga sign has a *physical referent*. The various historical yoga discourses have then given different description, definition, meaning, purpose and value to the outcomes and experiences of ASC.

In other words, discourses assign use-value and social symbolic-value to certain technologies and their accompanying ASCs. The various yoga discourses never agreed upon a common sign system. The only thing they could agree upon was that the term ‘yoga’ – whatever it was and signified – indicated positive valuation and high status. And usually, when they described yoga, it was in one way or another related to ASC.

### Yoga notions as empty signs

What would probably surprise a modern yoga sympathiser, reading through the written yoga texts through the ages, is that they are not very specific. We do not get a clear picture of the various techniques. Neither do we get precise descriptions of the diverse cultural pre-conditions, which also often are required – like lifestyle, ethics, knowledge, experience, teaching, initiation and so on – in order to get “there”. Further the description of “there” is often mystified and deliberately held vague. In other words not even the use-value or purpose of yoga comes across clearly.

So seen from the point of a yoga novice, the texts have very little utility, if the purpose is to learn and understand – especially the practicalities of yoga. Clearly the texts were never written with the purpose of transmitting practical knowledge skills. Some few texts at first glance seem to put effort into describing what the yoga adept gets from practice – its use-value. But on closer inspection the reader will soon start to wonder whether the descriptions – philosophical signs like *samadhi*, Siva consciousness, Kundalini, *kaivalya*, non-dual realisation, *buddhi* - really are based on the actual experiences derived from yoga practice. These signs point towards other religio-philosophical signs rather than to actual meditative trance experiences. The suspicion arises that this highly philosophical discourse is instead about forcing pre-conceived religio-philosophical signs upon various ASC experiences. Such yoga discourse and its signs systems are in the words of Baudrillard a *simulation* – a fake – where signs in a circular way point towards each other and never towards a referent and reality.

Instead, the implicit ideological purpose of such discourse is to generate symbolic-value. The discourse is trying to establish itself and its skills as a *respectable knowledge system*. It tries to link itself to powerful established cultural signs (or establish new similar powerful signs). This ideological manoeuvre of symbolic linking creates social identities - the professional yogis – who become the specialist of this kind of knowledge and skills and who are charged with cultural and symbolic capital.

#### *Ad 4.*

*The yoga discourse never solidified into institutional settings  
and hence remained a diversified and heterogeneous field  
unable to refine and develop further sophistications of its theoria and praxis*

#### **Farms have traditions – not meadows**

Discourses evolve out of perpetually changing social interaction and discourses on their side generate new forms of interaction. Discourse and social interaction are dialectically connected and it has been a central issue of this book to show how.

Let us imagine various forms of social interaction plotted on a horizontal line with *randomness* on the left and *order* on the right. On the extreme left we find ‘new evolving interaction’ often adjusting to changes of circumstances. On the extreme right we find interaction solidified into ‘institutions, formal organisations, and legal rules’. Moving back

closer to the extreme left, we will find interaction like ‘inclinations, patterns, habits and pre-dispositions’ - while closer to the right, we will find ‘conventions, movements, customs, currents and practices’.

The yoga discourse has often – especially in modern times - presented itself as a ‘tradition’, a category that we would place close to the right side of the scale. Why? ‘Traditions’ are about ‘handing over’ the cultural DNA code of discourses. Tradition ensures that a discourse continues over generations. The concept of ‘tradition’ assumes a systematic and stable framework enabling the discourse - of which it is a dialectical part - to be reproduced. This implies that ‘tradition’ as a type of interaction would have to be placed close to the right side of the interactional dimension above. It assumes order.

This book however has not used the word ‘tradition’ to describe yoga and its [cultural memory](#). Instead the words ‘milieu’, ‘arena’, ‘space’, ‘discourse field’, ‘code’ and ‘habitus’ have been used. Code and habitus are about the unconscious dispositions – mental habits - guiding interactors. They create continuity and secure dominance. In this book I focussed on power discourses, to which I will return. A ‘discourse milieu’ or ‘discourse space’ indicates some vague continuity. To use a metaphor, by ‘discourse milieu/space’ I mean a wild natural habitat like a ‘meadow’. Here numerous flowers, bushes, weeds and other plants struggle for survival. In some years – depending on circumstances – some species dominate while in other years they become extinct. In this process the species continuously adapt to circumstances, sometimes even mutating. It is a chaotic and random process of change dictated by circumstances. There are no institutional settings trying to manage the cultural DNA. It is a pure Darwinian evolutionary process.

This meadow in my view represents the yoga discourse field. The word ‘tradition’ does not fit here. Words like ‘patterns, habits, evolution and trends’ fit better. However the word ‘tradition’ does fit better to a neighbouring piece of agricultural land. In my metaphor we here find the Buddhist and Jain farmers. But we need here to talk about many small traditions. Here many varieties of seeds are cared for, stored and planted by the region’s farmers. There is in other words an institutional setting for handling the cultural memory – the farm has its tradition. However, as we have seen, the crops of the farmland are not much more stable than the plants of the meadow. As we for instance have seen from Chan and Zen history, the cultural DNA is here also exposed to mutations and re-developments. Chronically – due to for instance geographical isolation, status competition between the interactors or changes in the policies of the state - the Buddhist and Jain farmers made changes and introduced new variants of staple crops. The result: a continual fragmentation of the cultural memories and the flaring up of relatively short-lived traditions.

Many of the seeds and crops we find on the yoga meadow we also find on the various Buddhist and Jain farms. We have seen in this book how the two tumultuous habitats – the meadow and the institutionalised farm land – have exchanged seeds within the overall cultural field of liberation. Often it is impossible to tell where change and innovation came from. Did it come from the random and chaotic evolution within the yoga meadow or from the status competition between farmers? Or did the meadow only survive because it was constantly pollinated with seeds from the farmers’ land?

### **Tradition construct ‘gurus’ – an exercise in *simulation***

We certainly saw that the yoga discourse field struggled to refine and sophisticate its *theoria* and *praxis*. Yoga clearly lacked the [institutional framework](#) allowing a tradition and what that entails to emerge. Instead of building on the back of the old – with which it constantly lost touch - it mutated like wildfire, when the circumstances changed. The [Tantric revolution](#), the [colonial renaissance](#) and [modernist commercialism](#) are clear examples of how the yoga discourse field was and is able to speed through significant processes of transformation and mutation. More conservative minded observers claim that these mutations of the [yoga DNA](#) are so significant that we should instead talk about new non-yogic species. However this leaves the contemporary yoga sympathiser to choose between an extinct past that cannot be reproduced and a present practice that cannot be approved by dogma.

Why has the yoga discourse maintained that it constituted a ‘tradition’? Inherent in the notion of the yoga tradition is the claim that the present is an exact clone of the past. This claim has then been advanced to gain authenticity, truth and authority. ‘Tradition’ is a sign loaded with ideology and power. In pre-modern, religious and romanticist discourses truth and value is most often placed in the past. Certain groups – the orthodox - then claim access to and monopoly of the past due to their inheritance of the ‘tradition’. The ‘tradition’ implicitly establishes them as experts in a high-valued past loaded with truth. In this way they – the yoga gurus - accumulate symbolic capital in the present. Due to the sign ‘tradition’, the gurus are perceived to embody the cultural memory of yoga. However, we realise that the ‘guru’ sign does not equal the ‘tradition’ sign – the ‘guru’ is in this respect a *simulation*: a sign which pretends to point to a given historical reality, but which instead only is pointing to another sign with no referent (no reality).

This has all the hallmarks of a power discourse. Yoga discourse through most of its history in one way or the other was a vivid power discourse.

This carries the unfortunate implication that the yoga discourse has tended to renounce constructive dialogue with competing sign systems having different opinions. Then as now, yoga practitioners and mystics disqualify alternative voices, because they do not have yoga experience or initiation from a yoga guru. You have to belong to the tradition in order to be participate in debate on yoga. The implication: for a true yogi only another yogi is worth debating with. Further, yoga pundits, Brahmins and some scholars dismiss cross-disciplinary input from intellectual peers for example because they do not master the ancient language of yoga - Sanskrit. The end result is that only narrowly defined circles are seen to be able to produce ‘yoga knowledge’. This, seen with the eyes of a post-Popperian epistemology, of course seriously limits the growth of knowledge that can take place within the yoga discourse field.

Let me finalise this discussion of the viability of a yoga tradition with a rather thought provoking historical example. As the Muslims established themselves in India and began to translate Sanskrit literature, they found it impossible in their own written language to directly express Hindu words and sounds. This became especially critical for them as they tried to

translate yoga texts like the *Armtakanda* (an early Nath work) which taught *mantra* and chanting. There was no way that these sounds could be captured by their translations and this frustrated them deeply, as they knew very well how important it was to utter the *mantra* exactly. However the translators in the end made up some translation constructions with the result that the *mantras in totally transformed modes* found their way into holy Sufi literature. In other words yoga *mantras* became a part of Sufi canon and their yogic origination was over time forgotten. This led to following situation for later generations of pious Muslims who studied what was basically a Muslim translation and incorporation of a yoga text:

"Thus when Mevlevi dervishes (Muslim ascetics) copied out the Ottoman Turkish version of this text (The *Armtakanda*) a hundred years ago, they thought of it as a familiar genre of Sufi text with some interesting occult application; they did not have the slightest notion that they were chanting garbled Sanskrit mantras addressed to Hindu goddesses". (C.W. Ernst 2003, p.226)

So, so much for 'tradition' – coming from the Latin 'tradere' - "to hand over".

### Ad 5.

*Central to the yoga discourse is its inherent ability to turn its use-value definitions  
into social symbols thereby creating difference and power  
– metamorphosing yoga into a social totem.*

### The fluidity between use- and symbolic-value

The distinction between use-value and symbolic-value is extremely fluid in the case of yoga, and this is no coincidence. We have frequently seen in this book how the social symbolic-value became the use-value of practising yoga. Further we can also see that what one cultural context perceives as a use-value, another cultural epoch will see as symbolic-value. Take the claim that yoga generates 'supernatural powers', which enables the yoga virtuoso to fly through the air. At the time of the *Puranas* this might very well have been the use-value the individual sought by practising yoga. As we recall, yoga's use-value was initially defined as the significant, individual and existential transformation gained through practice. However, in a modern worldview we do not accept such supernatural powers as "real" use-value, because we do not consider a flying yogi as a 'realistic achievement'. So we would say that the concept of 'a flying yogi' is instead a totem, generating power and symbolic capital. In the context of a modernist sign system this is "really" what is going on here. And to the yogi we would say that he is either lying (he knows very well he cannot fly), or he is hallucinating (because of the ASC) or he is deluded (he is still hoping that one day he will succeed). The middle ground between the ancient and the modern outlook is to say that as the ancients wrote about the use-value – learn how to fly – they *simultaneously* created upheaval in their society. This symbolic-value – the awe and fear - was maybe intended, maybe not. A post-modern sceptical mind would settle on intended.

The symbolic-value is about inter-subjectivity – general shared perceptions. 'High status' is a good example of this: it only exists in the eyes of the public. A much admired and

respected holy man in mediaeval India would not find much recognition if he turned up as an advisor in a modern global cooperative. Hence it is outside the individual, in his or her cultural context (*habitus*) – the inter-subjective shared sign and perceptual system – that we find whether or not values have symbolic significance

It is exactly this inter-subjective cultural context which is principally the target of the written yoga discourse. Either the yoga discourse attempts to address this context or it directly makes an effort to create it. Thus the written yoga discourse is often about turning yoga into power and difference: immortality, super-natural powers, semi-divinity, release, divinity, gnostic insight, and ontological transformation.

In this way the texts praise yoga for its marvellous power to make a person undergo astonishing transmutations – sometimes incomprehensible. This advertisement of yoga's power has significant public relational effects, to use modern jargon. The outcome is a symbolic message signalled to society with the implication that people *project* superiority, difference, status and power on the adept and yoga. This is symbolic-value – the creation of social difference. Thus the yoga professional who trades his cultural and symbolic capital with society is born.

If the symbolic-value is to be found in the *inter-subjective* perceptions of others, then we should try as far as possible to restrict the use-value of yoga to narrow *individual* utility: symbols are *inter-subjective* messages and use-values are *individual* outcomes. I suggest that the use-value of most yoga forms should be defined in relation to ASC - the individual's tangible physio-psychological benefits of entering ASC.

This leaves us with three interacting notions: individual *use-value* as proclaimed by the yoga text, *symbolic-value* as related to social context and *ASC* as tangible physio-psychological outcomes – a corporeal way to understand and restrict the notion ‘use-value’.

### **Yoga discourse: turning usage into symbols and symbols into usage**

Let me return to the issue of supernatural powers. Most of the yogic supernatural powers described in yoga texts clearly generate symbolic-value according to my definition: the idea of supernatural powers has a significant impact on society's perceptions of yoga. But we as moderns have to realise, in the mind of the yogi, the supernatural powers also might have had use-value. In fact it might be this aspect – the quest for power and distinction - that attracted a person to yoga.

We could as an example take the case of warrior and noble caste of the *Mahabharata* – the Kshatriyas - who seemed to be well advanced in their yoga knowledge. The *Mahabharata* was strongly preoccupied by supernatural powers – often called *bala*. Often yoga was presented as a path to *bala* and we should not be surprised if this was what attracted many Kshatriyas. *Any* warrior – that is the warrior class as such - would be interested in the powers of flying through air and having magical skills. This was the use-value of yoga, as perceived by the warrior class. But the act of flying was simultaneously also of symbolic-value to the warriors: it could be argued that the *image* of being in possession of magical powers would make the warrior noble to a fearsome authority, a totem loaded with symbolic capital. So from

this point of view the interest was also motivated by symbolic-value.

As the noble warrior yogi experienced the ASC and outcomes derived from asceticism and yoga – the measurable effects - , he might have found this very beneficial. Due to his yogic mental and physical condition, his fear of pain and sudden death might wane and he would find that he could much better endure the pain, hunger, tiredness and exhaustion so often connected to a life of battle. Or he might have found increasing comfort in the belief that he had escaped the forces of *karma*. This individually experienced tangible effect was maybe not what attracted him initially to yoga, but over time it was what kept some Kshatriyas engaged with yoga.

From the above we realise that it seems characteristic of the yoga discourse that use- and symbolic value flow seamlessly into each other. It turns usage into symbols and symbols into usage. Let me discuss another example to illustrate this. If the yogi claims that his practice has enabled him *in death* to achieve some metaphysical benefits (like not being re-born, non-dual realisation, union with a god) we have a case which is not easy to classify: is it use- or symbolic value? It certainly seems not very tangible as it all happens in death. For the yogi a union with god in death would of course be of high individual value even if neither he nor we were able to verify it.

Crucially however history shows us that as soon as a yoga virtuoso claimed to have achieved *jivan-mukti* (that is, he was a liberated person, who, when he chose to die, would achieve union with god in the afterlife) that process immediately gave him high status in society. A *jivan-mukti* was a powerful saint in the eyes of society. So seen *in context* this aim of yoga – that the adept is able to unite with god in the afterlife – clearly generates symbolic-value, but seen on the individual level the text promises individual use-value. The yoga discourse is a device for turning use-value into symbolic-value – and *vice versa*.

Hence, if we follow this line of investigation, we realise that most of the use-value attributed to yoga practices throughout history was connected with power discourses and symbolic-value – that is accumulation of symbolic capital. It is central to yoga discourse to let the two value forms flow into each other: making utility into symbols and symbols into utility. The yoga discourse almost automatically charges ASC with symbolic significance elevating the yoga virtuoso, his experiences and capabilities to a high status totem. To be associated with yoga was the path to political power, high status and holiness. As the yoga discourse almost by default tends to turn the use-value into symbolic-value, I have suggested that we treat the tangible physio-psychological outcomes of yoga as very limited and explained by non-yogic sign systems. If we instead – for instance as a yoga student - follow the various yogic use-value definitions, they tend to slip from our hands and rapidly turn into social symbols.

#### *Ad 6.*

*The yoga totem provided the fuel and dynamic giving the yoga discourse enough historical persistence and stamina to compensate for its lack of institutional support*

## **Symbolic-value as social fuel**

Let us now address the issue of the dynamic, circulation and popularity of yoga. The perspective of ASC and use-value as opposed to symbolic-value opens up a new way to approach yoga. For example we saw that modernist Western popular yoga forms attracted many women due to the symbolic-value that yoga radiated. But we also realised that when yoga amateurs first came into contact with these ASC generators, their motivation could gradually change. Many truly became fascinated by the effect the yoga ASC had on their individual well-being, self-perception, existential concerns and social functioning. Or they merely valued the ASC experiences as such as pleasant states of being – something to which the old Buddhist texts gave much consideration. Others found inspiration and comfort in the ethics and lifestyle that yoga philosophy offered them.

The public can and will primarily approach yoga based on the inter-subjective perception dominant at that moment in history. They are initially drawn in mainly by the social symbolic-value – by its promises of authority, difference and superiority. However, as people start to practise, some of the novices might be attracted to the ASC outcomes and the yoga philosophy. This sometimes becomes the basis for a yogic life committed to practice. Often – as in the case of Buddha – this turns into a missionary life and a profession, where the virtuoso – for instance the modernist yoga populariser - wants the world to gain the perceived benefits of the ASC *and its surrounding discourses* – in the case of Buddha: his teachings (*dharma*). The virtuoso then exchanges and trades his skills and knowledge – his cultural and symbolic capital – with society.

The thesis of this book has been to show how the dynamic of the yoga discourse and the attraction it had for certain social strata was fuelled by its social symbolic-value. In pre-modern societies yoga discourse was for the elites a route to power, cultural capital and high status. For many it was a way of solidifying existing power. It was this close connection to power that kept the yoga discourse alive and under way. As soon as the word yoga was uttered, hierarchy and power were implied. Yoga was a pure power discourse – hence its attraction and ability to survive. It is here in the symbolic-value that we find the *habitus* of yoga: the persistence and continuity created by disposition.

Had it been up to yoga's use-value alone – even if we define it more widely than I have done – then yoga would long since have become extinct. Had the yoga discourse been left to the Brahmins to develop, it would probably never even have taken off. If we look at discourses similar to yoga in the Axial Age Empires of southern Europe and Northern India, then such philosophical ways of living did often not last longer than at best a century or two. It seems that in the first many centuries of its existence, the survival and change of the yoga discourse depended on institutions outside the yoga milieu. I am thinking especially here of the tremendous dynamic *within* the Buddhist institutions during the main part of the Axial Age. Yoga's social and political interaction with the vigorous powerhouse of Buddhism kept it from fading away. It sometimes almost seems that yoga was adopted by social strata of yoga sympathisers, who could not accept Buddhist and Jain organisations and ethics but still appreciated their methods and liberation philosophies. They just made copies and called the

techniques something else.

### Accumulating symbolic capital

The yoga discourse – unlike the Buddhist and Jain discourses - never managed to acquire a strong institutional base. Instead it provided a wide and heterogeneous cultural sub-system. Initially it was probably driven by the enthusiasm of amateur yogis among the Indian elite – especially the Kshatriyas. Among them there would have been some yoga professionals who struggled to turn yoga into a professional cultural field. Some of them might have lived on providing support for old people and suicide rituals.

This “yoga meadow” was constantly under change, as any biological habitat or species would be. Yoga *locally* often would become extinct so that new generations – like us moderns –would have to start again from scratch. In the long run, however, this varied and mixed meadow had the advantage that its lack of structure enabled start-up (religious) entrepreneurs to wander around, picking and combining their own clusters of ASC generators and discourses (as we see today). This bouquet of techniques and discourses – assuming that a person had the necessary charisma and favourable conditions to succeed (as for example Vivekananda and Krishnamacharya) - would ignite new yoga milieus and branches. In other words the ASC-generating practices – some of them called yoga – were in pre-modern times a path to holiness (symbolic capital), power (cultural capital) and economical survival conditioned by the field of yoga. They enabled people to become professional holy men and even community leaders. This feature of spiritual entrepreneurship, eclecticism and sea change is not only found in pre-modern yoga culture but is particularly evident in modernist popular yoga strongly conditioned by commercialism.

In pre-modern India maybe one of the most important professions opened up by the cultural capital of yoga was to assist the dying and the dead. We saw for instance how this function was probably the origin of Jain practices and proto-yoga; we saw how many of the texts dealt with the last moments of a dying person’s life, often called *samadhi*; we saw how the texts claimed that ASC and yoga knowledge could guide the soul of the dead to final rest; and we saw much later in history how the Nath *jogi* assisted and guided the deceased with hymns and songs. Humanity’s fear of death is often seen as an existential constant and it seems that yoga through large parts of its history provided consolation in this predicament. We see how many of the yoga texts ponder on the fact of death. For many, yoga came up with a solution and this created the profession of the death ritual experts. One way to qualify as a professional “death consultant” was to claim yoga knowledge.

Was yoga as a death ritual widespread and did most people know of it this way? We have little knowledge as to whether any of the various and diverse yoga forms were more popular than others. Was yoga mostly known – and practised? – in the form of Krishna’s yoga in the *Bhagavad Gita* or was it better known and practised in the form of the popular Bhagavata Purana? Or were both these two forms washed away and replaced by the clever pedagogy of the Yoga-Vasishta ?

The only thing that seems obvious is that those who had actual yoga knowledge in pre-modern India most often came from the urban and political upper classes – the elites. But how

widespread was it among them and how much did it influence their daily lives? Was yoga just something they talked and wrote about but rarely practised? Was yoga only a theme for them in the final phase of their life? Was there any practical yoga movement worth mentioning among them or are we instead talking about short-lived outbursts of yoga driven by and limited to some few individual theologians and charismatic reformers?

*Ad 7.*

*Due to yoga's symbolic value and its close association to power discourses various groups intertwined it with essentialism, mysticism, and/or orthodoxy.*

*To address the issues of essentialism, mysticism and orthodoxy the rest of this chapter becomes more philosophical in character. Throughout history a wide and diverse range of social groups tended to mingle their yoga discourse with essentialism (a philosophy), mysticism (a religious outlook) and orthodoxy (an ideology). This was no coincidence. These three views interface easily with power discourses like yoga and actually function as amplifiers of social dominance. When combined the three outlooks typically crystallise into conservative political ideologies. Historically the Brahmins were probably the first social group to link yoga to essentialism, mysticism and orthodoxy. Their power position and associated caste society was solidified and reinforced by combining these three pillars into a religio-philosophical ideology. As we shall see, modernist yoga discourses – popular as scholarly – tend to reproduce this Brahmin ideology unwillingly.*

### **3. De-constructing the essence of yoga**

#### **The everlasting DNA of yoga**

A dictionary will tell us that ‘essence’ in philosophy is ‘a set of attributes that makes an entity what it fundamentally is, and which it has by necessity, and without which it loses its identity’. Even if an elephant was pink, had lost a leg and an eye, we would say that “essentially it is still an elephant”. The essence of an entity is by definition eternal and unalterable. ‘Essentialism’ is the belief in and the search for essence.

The philosophy guiding this book takes the opposite view. It is an evolutionary and process oriented outlook, found in [Darwinism, genealogy and population thinking](#). According to this thinking, the attributes which configure an entity undergo permanent change. In the end a given entity would have changed so much that we decide that it is qualitatively different from

the old entity. ‘Entities’ are conceptual snapshots that we humans take of ever-changing processes. Philosophically one could say that this view is shared with the Buddhists, who also deny the possibility of essence and instead talk about dependent origination.<sup>[372](#)</sup>

This book has argued against the current dominant view that yoga has an essence or some core principles that transcends India’s historical periods, different societies and changing worldviews. We have seen much evidence that the yoga sign has been in permanent evolution. We have seen that with significant changes in society the yoga DNA would each time undergo significant and speedy mutations. This is well summarised by McMahan who drew the same conclusions about Buddhist discourses:

“Texts and doctrines are never static but are repeatedly re-appropriated to deal with changing situations. Certain themes fall away into irrelevance, others emerge as salient, and both are given new meanings that arises in a dialectical relationship with changing political, economic, social, and material realities, as well as other traditions. The text or doctrine, then, is not a static reference point but a dynamic process whose meanings are always being reconstituted.” (McMahan 2008; p. 179)

But from whence comes the view that yoga has an a-historical meaning – an unchanging DNA?

We have seen that the idea of a permanent and stable ‘set of yoga core principles’ took its most salient expression in the modernist yoga discourses. It emerged in an explicit form among the Orientalists, who were trying to come to grips with this nebulous yoga notion. Orientated by romanticist and religio-cultural agendas, they strongly subscribed to essentialism. They believed that their historical excavations, philosophical comparisons and language studies would lead them to the essence of things - for instance ‘natural religion’, the essence of all religions. So when they looked at yoga it was ingrained in their research programme to look for the essence. We saw how essentialism blossomed in late colonial Indian yoga renaissance, where gurus and yoga pandits claimed they were the direct inheritors of yoga knowledge. They had direct access to the ancient core principles of yoga. Today their claims are generally accepted among yoga sympathisers and popularisers. Even some contemporary scholars claim that they can identify some eternal attributes in yoga – the yoga DNA - which are permanent and constant.

Moving back in time, the ancient Brahmins were known for their strong adherence to essentialism. They claimed that they knew the essence of reality. The immovable self – *atman* – was on closer inspection identical with the underlying essence or reality: non-dual *brahman*.<sup>[373](#)</sup> So for some of them yoga was a tool to become or realise this essence. However the Brahmins did not seem to be very engaged in defining the essence of yoga. Neither did other social groups nor practising milieus. Yoga was probably for most primarily a practical issue about learning some given techniques and then getting on with it – as sport is for most today. Yoga seems to have been a general notion that few found worth trying to define. It was probably more important to acknowledge that one mastered yoga. Some philosophically oriented intellectuals tried to define yoga, but it seems that their endeavours were not known or understood in detail outside narrow intellectual and theological circles.

So the main contributors to the idea of the existence of eternal stable yoga DNA seems to

come from various groups in modern times. It is easy to grasp why India's colonial middle classes subscribed to essentialism. This gave them national identity, self-worth, self-reliance, resistance and authority in relation to colonial humiliation and Christian evangelicalism. Some of these points probably also apply to many Western yoga popularisers, who often define themselves in opposition to modernity and Christianity. Their often romanticist and spiritual (religious) outlook encourages them to find the eternal truth in the unpolluted past. This assumption could also be valid for the Orientalists' quest for the essence of yoga.

Among academics anti-essential thinking is a relative newcomer. It gained strong momentum from the thirties with Karl R. Popper, neo-Darwinism, and population theory. It further spread with post-modernism, social constructionism and post-structuralism. Today, anti-essentialism orientates thinking in most social and humanist academies.

In summary, there are good reasons why we cannot reduce the signified of yoga to some essence – to its true nature – because the meaning and core principles of yoga techniques are defined and created by the surrounding sign configuration or discourses. Yoga discourses are a part of society and change when the overall society changes. Thus there are in my view no ‘authentic and inauthentic’ styles of yoga – there are only various historical forms and none of them can claim possession of essence and core principles.

This relational philosophical view of yoga – which I call ‘[genealogical](#)’ - is often called a ‘non-reductionist’ view as it rejects even the possibility of reducing things to their essence [374](#).

### ***Yoga and Philosophia Perennis***

A widespread variant of yoga essentialism acknowledges and admits that there are indeed divergent yoga forms. In fact just as there are many yoga forms, so there are also many religious and spiritual paths of which the yoga branch is just one. Here, yoga is envisaged as one among several different “spiritual or religious paths” (to me there is no difference between the two as ‘spirituality’ is an *individualised* variant of ‘religion’). leading to the same goal or essence. In this line of argument yoga’s essence is no longer thought to be found within its techniques. Instead it is thought to be found within the purpose of yoga: yoga as a general tool for ‘spiritual awakening’. This implies that the purpose of yoga is now defined within wider religious discourses So here yoga essentialism is being intertwined with - if not transplanted to - religious discourses. According to such discourses, the diversities and conflicts we find between various yoga forms are only apparent. It is a widespread viewpoint shared not by only many yoga popularisers, but is also found in most New Age spiritual milieus and numerous modernist adaptations of ‘Asian wisdom systems’.

The assumption of a common core to all religions – a ‘universal-’ or ‘natural religion’ - is not new in Europe and was widely shared by 19th Century Orientalists and romanticists. It is often called *Philosophia Perennis* ([Wikipedia link](#)).<sup>375</sup> It also gained hold of colonial India. For instance did Vivekananda believe that the religio-philosophy of Neo-Vedanta was a living example of this supposed ‘universal essence of all religions’? (Brekke 2002). If we look even

further back in Indian history, we see that most theologians shared similar views. It was agreed in principle that god had many names and explanations, but basically it was the same underlying essence about which everybody talked. Similarly, it was agreed in principle that there were many ways to serve god. But this acceptance and tolerance among holy men was only skin deep. This counted for both India and Europe. In the words of the scholar T. Mazusawa (2000):

“.... theologians confess and confirm the absoluteness of their own “tradition” when they are among their own kind and, when with others, they speak the language of ecumenical empathy, and everyone claims to believe in the authenticity of experience and in the deep unity of all religions in their universal yearning for spirituality and peace” (p.159).

In this book we have encountered how this “ecumenical” outlook was central to the politics of Hinduisation and the strategy of inclusiveness. The victorious king did not deny the existence of gods belonging to tribes who were being subjugated. These gods were instead given a place ranking below the expanding king’s god or told to be an ‘aspect’ of this superior god. We saw also how different theologians accordingly created complex hierarchies to establish how Brahman, Siva, Sakti, Vishnu, *purusha*, *prana*, female deities were related and ranked. Even the heretic Buddha was incorporated as an incarnation of Vishnu. The claims of shared essence in other words are shallow and often camouflage real differences or even conceal religious hegemony. The philosopher Herbert Marcuse’s notion of ‘repressive tolerance’ seems applicable here.

*Philosophia Perennis* is often closely linked to mysticism. Mystics throughout history typically claim that what unites all religions cannot be expressed in words. It is ineffable. They claim that various religions try in their own limited way to express what cannot be said.<sup>376</sup> We saw for instance how some Brahmin clans in the *Upanishads* claimed that yoga was one path among others realising this mystical essence, which was ‘not this, not that’. Throughout history it was not critical for Brahmin mystics if an adept followed this or that path – be it called yoga, Saivism, Tantra, Bhakti – to realise this essence (of course each of them would have their own preferred – and hence superior – way).

However, the notion of a shared essence of all mystical experiences has been criticised since the 1970s by what I will call constructionists (they sometimes refer to themselves as ‘non-reductionists’ to signal their anti-essentialist stance).<sup>377</sup> As many yoga popularisers have committed their lives to pursue this ineffable mystical experience, I thought they should be made aware of this constructionist critique. My personal experience – and reading the theoretical literature – is however that the discussion between essentialist mystics and constructionists tend to end in stalemate. My discussion will follow many of the arguments of the philosopher Katz (1978).

## 4. Mysticism – A radicalised Kant looking at yoga

### Yoga – an essence or a construction?

We are facing the issue that a range of more or less diverse styles of practice – sometimes called yoga, sometimes not – lead to experiences which when we compare them seem rather different. They are certainly given a wide range of names like *Brahmajana* (“*brahman* knowledge”), *Shiva-anubhava* (“*Siva* experience”), *Kundalini*, *Sayujya* (“union”) and *kaivalya* (“aloneness”) to mention a few. In most cases these experiences occur under circumstances that can be hard to comprehend; we are further told that the experiences are beyond concepts and words. They cannot be precisely communicated. This is why they are called ‘mystical experiences’. [378](#)

Despite this incommensurability, the mystics surprisingly enough *know* that these experiences are essentially the same. However, as mystics begin to discuss in depth and compare other forms of mystical experiences, they soon drop this relativism and adopt an absolutistic stance: it is only *their* path that fully leads to the ‘ultimate’ (Jones 1993).

Despite these problems, Katz suggests that we take the mystics at their word and call this stipulated sameness for the ‘essence X’. So when Buddhists talk about ‘*nirvana*’ and Samkhya yogis talk about ‘*kaivalya*’, they are actually talking about the same experience X, only using different words. Their situation is similar to us talking about apples, pears, bananas and oranges and then saying that what they have in common is ‘*fruit*’. Fruit is the “essence” of these different entities. This essence is actually to find out there in reality. The concept ‘*fruit*’ points to a fruit-essence in reality.

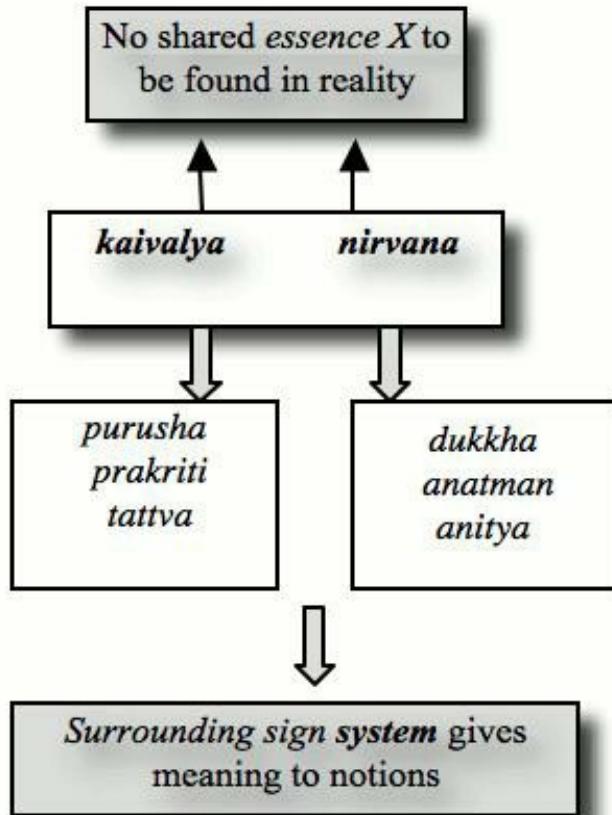
This view has been strongly challenged since WW2 by philosophy, social science, psychology and Mahayana Buddhism.[379](#) It is argued that our signs do not get their meaning from what they point to in reality. One of the reasons is that we cannot separate sign and reality as easily as we think. Words are not just words! They cannot be reduced to get their meaning from a piece of reality at which they point. According to Katz, this is where *constructionism* (non-reductionism in his words) comes in, saying that words – or language – actually *form* (*construct*) *our perception of reality* and that we cannot escape this imprisonment of language.[380](#)

Let us recall that constructionism is a crucial part of post-structuralist thinking. In this view signs like ‘yoga’ get their *meaning from the surrounding system of signs* – not from their inner essence to be found in reality. Constructionism is a relational view about how meaning comes about: the meaning of signs is created through *relations to other signs*, according to constructionism. Accordingly, a physical book will not have the same meaning for Stone Age man as for us today. We will understand ‘book’ in a context of signs like ‘reading’, ‘paper’, ‘letters’, ‘printing’, ‘spelling’, ‘alphabet’, ‘writing’ etc. We don’t know what Stone Age man would perceive – maybe a weird plant or a spirit – but certainly not a ‘book’ as he lacks the surrounding sign system defining it.

Such a relational view implies for instance, that the sign *kaivalya* (*aloneness*) is defined

by its relation to concepts within the Samkhya sign system (*purusha*, *prakriti*, *tattvas* etc), while *nirvana* (*blown out*) is related to and defined by Buddhist signs (suffering, wisdom, no-self, permanent change). So in this view *kaivalya* and *nirvana* – even if they seem very similar – do not get their meaning from a common shared *essence X* or so-called ‘mystical experience’ to be found in “reality”, according to Katz<sup>381</sup>. Instead they get their meaning from the discourses of which they are each part. In other words it is all the other core signs of the two different sign systems – Buddhism and Samkhya - which respectively give meaning to *nirvana* and *kaivalya*.

### ***Sign systems and meaning***



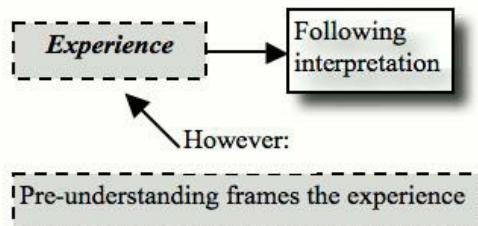
How does this apply to yoga and its ‘mystical’ experiences (*kaivalya*, *moksha*, *bhoga*, *jivan-mukti*, *siddhi*, Kundalini rising, Siva-Sakti union)? Katz claims that the implication of a constructionist view is that these signs cannot just be reduced to different interpretations (i.e. words) of the same universal ‘mystical experience’. Let us follow his line of argument.

### **Pre-understanding versus pure perception**

Throughout the book we have witnessed how ancient yoga writers and modernist popularisers have freely mixed and combined notions from different traditions and historical periods maintaining that these notions all are the same more or less – just different words. This is in conflict with the constructionist analysis above.

Pre-modern and modern yoga writers tend to assume the existence of a universal mystical experience – essence X - which can be separated from signs and language – that is, human interpretation. They assume that one can clearly distinguish between an experience and its following interpretation. However, in the view of constructionism any experience is penetrated by some pre-understanding or pre-interpretation – the language, culture and worldview within which we have grown up. This fusion happens in the early stages of the process of experiencing, according to cognitive psychology. We could say that the merger of experience and pre-understanding happens at lower levels of consciousness. On higher levels of consciousness, however, there is no experience per se.<sup>382</sup> There is only a fused conglomerate of experience and interpretation. Hence in our final perception of reality, we will not be able to separate fully the experience (the content) and its word/interpretation (the form)<sup>383</sup>.

#### *Essentialist view of perception*



#### *Versus constructionist view*



For yoga, says Katz, this means that crucial notions - defining the purpose of the practice - like *kaivalya*, *Kundalini*, *siddhi*, *jivan-mukti* and *Siva-anubhava* must be understood as such fused conglomerates of ‘experience-interpretation’. The notions mentioned are shaped by a wide range of concepts which the yogi brings to and uses to bring about the ‘mystical experience’.<sup>384</sup>

Here Katz is in direct disagreement with much yoga philosophy. In much of the yoga discourse notions like ‘*kaivalya*’ and ‘*brahman* realisation’ have been defined as experiences happening in ‘non-conceptual states of minds’, states where the mind is free of any interpretations. It is a state of ‘pure experience’, happening even before any pre-understanding kicks in. So following constructional views, the yogi virtuoso – absorbed in non-conceptual mind states - claims to have access to primitive centres of the brain which process input even before any pre-understanding has set in.

Constructionism denies the possibility of this. What does this kind of access to primitive brain centres really mean? What is the character of consciousness that is able to access pre-conscious non-conceptual states of mind? How can this be possible – consciousness observing parts of itself being unconscious?

Consciousness requires a subject and an object: it is about a subject being aware of

something (a stimulus related to an object). Consciousness is a search lantern or torch being directed towards an object. The consciousness is itself that light. What is there to see in absolute darkness when the light is switched off?

It is critical to notice that this light is a function of cultural conditioning – consciousness is fused by culture and language. When the awareness of a stimulus finally arises in the conscious mind – the light is switched on and directed towards the stimuli – then by definition this conscious awareness is orientated by the cultural conditioning of consciousness. So if the yogi wants an aware conscious representation of pre-conscious stimuli in lower brain centres, he is immediately deeply involved in the interpretations and sign systems that he is trying to short circuit.

### **Three controversial constructionist yoga assumptions**

Based on the constructionist line of argument we can draw three conclusions, which contemporary yoga popularisers may find controversial and even disturbing.

1. The first conclusion of Katz contradicts much yoga thinking as yoga is often envisaged as stilling of the mind, freeing it of its previous fetters: the idea that yoga generates ASC, which can be called ‘pure consciousness’ or ‘the self’ (*atman, purusha*). This view is opposed by following thesis:

*Yoga is NOT an un-conditioning or de-conditioning of consciousness, but rather it is a re-conditioning of yoga-consciousness.*

This implies that even the ‘ultimate experience’, the surfacing of the ‘ultimate self’ – the goal of many yoga forms – is conditioned and formed by these yoga discourses.<sup>385</sup> Hence it cannot be ‘pure consciousness’ (*purusha*) but ‘yogic consciousness’, which arises in the end.

This philosophical conclusion is supported by experiments in social psychology. Social psychologists like Simon and Trötschel (2007) for instance conclude that introspection – a part of most yoga practices - is not a process of emptying the mind but rather a constructive process of putting together a coherent and acceptable narrative about the ‘inner self’. By this they mean that yoga philosophy in this context provides (1) the tools for the construction and (2) the framework which defines what is acceptable and what is not acceptable to experience as a self. Thus the yogic consciousness of *samadhi* and *kaivalya* is perhaps more about self-manufacturing than self-revelation: the realisation of *purusha* (pure consciousness), *adhyatman* (deep-self) or *atman* (non-duality) is not revelation but expectation.

2. Following the constructionism of Katz a second conclusion can be deduced. The different styles of yoga are not just about a subjective choice between various paths. Yoga rhetoric mostly says that the different styles all lead to the same ‘ultimate experience’. However according to constructionism the rift between styles is deeper and more serious.

*The different forms of yoga discourse lead to different goals – or different mystical experiences.* This conclusion follows directly from the claim that stimuli and pre-understanding cannot be separated. Thus the different yoga discourses identified in this book represent competing discourses or sign systems leading to diverse experiences or goals. Thus there is no ‘pure ASC’ but various types of ASCs. Each version of ASC is configured by the

combination of techniques and discourses applied. In summary, various yoga discourses fundamentally perceive the world differently using different techniques to achieve different purposes and therefore construct different experiences.<sup>386</sup>

3. From this analysis follows a third controversial conclusion in relation to many contemporary yogis. Today many serious yoga practitioners believe that by stringently following a given yoga system – which often is a derivative of colonial modernist yoga forms – they can realise the experiences described in ancient scriptures! Some ambitious practitioners devote large parts of their lives to the achievement of these promising goals. However according to constructionism such yogis are – of necessity - enmeshed in modernist worldviews (i.e. pre-understandings). This leads Katz to the following conclusion, which might upset many dedicated modern yogis:

*Whatever “mystical experiences” they will achieve, it will never be the same as the ancient yogis experienced.*

The popular belief that one can import “Eastern mystical practices” and then through meticulous hermeneutical analysis reproduce the “original” goals and experiences of that discourse is in the constructional view impossible. This argument also applies to yoga students who are guided by an Indian yoga guru: these gurus do not - despite their ideology of direct transmission - have direct access to the ideas and practices of ancient time. The gurus’ interpretation is also conditioned, historical and situated. Nobody can jump out of their own language horizon, whether Western yogis nor Indian gurus.

### **Post-structuralism and the power discourse of mysticism**

Half a century ago when the influential [yoga scholar Eliade](#) defined the notion of the ‘sacred as *sui generis*’ (the sacred – often appearing in mystic experiences - can only be explained with its own words), it was implicit that in his mind the yoga experience belonged to such sacred experiences. In this way, with a single stroke he turned ‘yoga experiences’ into ‘mystical experiences’: suddenly they slipped out of the grasp of our normal language and concepts and required their own. This twist should be of no surprise to us as we know that Eliade was influenced by [Advaita Vedanta](#) – a mysticist religio-philosophy. We have seen many examples of Brahmin Vedanta writings on yoga where they constructed yoga experiences as something ineffable – *turya, brahman*, non-duality: ‘not this, not that’.

Many critical scholars believe that Eliade with this definition seriously set back our dialogue with religion, yoga, and mysticism (Jensen & Rothstein (eds.) 2000, Braun & McCutcheon (eds.) 2000). What Eliade precisely asserted was that

“To try to grasp the essence of such phenomena by means of physiology, psychology, sociology, economics, linguistics or any other study is false; it misses the one unique and irreducible element of it – the element of the sacred” (Eliade 1958b).

In other words: the essence of yoga experience – its purpose - is to experience the ‘sacred’, which is mystical. In this way Eliade gave hermeneutic-phenomenological scholars of religion and yoga a strong tool to reject *any critical* approach to the study of mysticism and yoga, as this could always be brushed aside as ‘reductionism’. Today, following [Foucault](#), we realise that it is a power discourse that Eliade established here. It seems to be a typical trait of

mysticism that it creates a kind of immunity to critical dialogue. Hence I suggest we treat mysticism as an ideology or power discourse and Eliade as an important propagator of this.

In my cultural history of yoga, I have rejected the hermeneutical-phenomenological approach and its inherent worldview, especially when it subscribes to essentialism and mysticism as Eliade above. Instead I have employed a genealogical methodology combined with conflict sociology. Through this methodology we have seen that throughout its entire history, the yoga discourses were not only internally but also externally in constant debate with competing discourses like Buddhism, conservative Brahmanism, Tantra, Vedanta, Bhaktism and Saivism about the content, the meaning and the means of achieving the ‘sacred’. As history shows us no limitations on the debate of the sacred, why should we accept any today?<sup>387</sup>

Hence the conclusion of my cultural history of yoga is that the post-structuralist and social-constructionist worldview underlying my methodology – both being radicalised versions of Kant - lives in a very uneasy relationship with large parts of the yoga discourse – also the scholarly part of it. Throughout history the sacred purposes of yoga have been by its adherents constructed as *eternal; unconditioned; having essential nature; being water-tight from history, politics and culture; historical transcendental*; etc. This yoga construction seems to fly directly in the face of post-structuralist genealogy and social-constructionist philosophical assumptions about *being historical, local, conditioned, and situated*. Foucault - as he commented on Nietzsche’s *Genealogy and History* - was very clear on this conflict:

“Behind things there is something very different: not the secret timeless essence but the secrecy that these things even do not have an essence but rather that essence piece by piece was constructed by fragments alien to them”<sup>388</sup>

There seems to me to be a head-to-head conflict between on the one side hermeneutical-phenomenology and theological orthodoxy and on the other side historical genealogy, discourse analysis and conflict sociology. It is an ontological philosophical conflict about what fundamentally *is*: unchangeable essence or historical genealogical processes. It is also a political conflict: a nostalgic policy legitimising and prescribing a divine past versus a critical philosophy questioning social hierarchies and power.

There have been many attempts to loosen the relationship between essentialism and genealogy – or between theology and critical philosophy - but none has to my opinion succeeded<sup>389</sup>: it is not easy (possible?) to get around a radicalised Kant.

### Criticising the phenomenology of yoga – “reducing” the sacred

By following the various yoga discourse debates in this book the reader has gained an insight into an array of critical evaluations of the ‘mystic sacred experiences’ of yoga – the so-called yoga phenomenology. We have for instance seen how some Buddhist schools had no problem in criticising the content of ‘the sacred experiences’ reported by yogis. Take for instance the yogic descriptions of deep absorbed meditation. These Buddhists declared such phenomenological reports to be delusional: *samatha* can be deep, pleasant and empowering, but it does not deliver liberation *even if it appears to do so*. Instead some Buddhists promoted a Gnostic construction of liberation: that the insight into suffering, impermanence and emptiness – a liberating insight - can be *facilitated* by yogic *samatha* (“tranquillity”)

meditation; but not *cause* it.

In order to understand and clarify the general term liberation (*moksha*) so often associated with yoga, I suggested three ideal types: *Meditative Absorption, Gnostic Realisation and Absorbed Realisation*. By discussing their background, underlying conflicts and symbolic meaning it was possible to understand why the notion of yogic liberation became so nebulous and confusing. However, I did not investigate the truth of liberation further except to pointing out that the sign might be empty. A thorough analysis requires a psychological investigation of yoga. My task was to demonstrate the importance of the symbolic meaning of yogic liberation, how this is a major part of yoga culture's social and intellectual dynamic.

However, it is clear to me that *if* we enter the discussion of the content and truth of the yoga experience, we could end up by reducing it to the functioning of human consciousness and biology, as Eliade feared. When scholars like A. Glucklich in *Sacred Pain*, J. Kroll and B. Bachrach in *The Mystic Mind* and D. Dennett in *Consciousness Explained* combines insights from a range of disciplines – neuropsychology, cybernetics, object relation psychology, constructionism, historiography – I believe we have strong ‘reductionist’ alternatives to reigning ‘spiritual’ and phenomenological discourses on liberation.

Take for instance Dennett. He by implication rejects the scientific validity of yogis' reports of experiences, because in general he rejects the phenomenological method – used by yogis and religious scholars - as a valid approach for studying states of consciousness. Why? Because the yogic experience is maybe not what it appears to be – and there is no way of finding out. Dennett shows that countless neuro-psychological experiments show that the brain can be easily triggered into delusions. For instances, two separate spots configured in a certain angle illuminated with specific light frequencies will appear to the observer as a single spot moving between two positions. Hence when the experiencing subject makes truthful phenomenological reports about her experiences of a spot moving, we as outside experimental observers know that these experiences are delusional. Similarly, when the yogi reports mystical experiences in deep meditation – for instance *turya* and *samadhi* - these might be of a similarly delusional nature.<sup>390</sup> Any textbook of social psychology will show that introspection can lead to self-fabrication as well as to self-revelation and it is impossible to tell the difference<sup>391</sup>. Hence according to the social psychologists Simon and Trötschel (2008):

Taken together introspection may be less a matter of excavating knowledge about oneself and more a constructive process of putting together a coherent and acceptable narrative of one's self and identity. (P.95)

It cannot be ruled out that a “meditative experiment” creates hallucinations; the experiment triggers the brain and consciousness into delusions. So subjective phenomenological reports – no matter how carefully conducted – do not provide any foundation for observations of reality or the nature of consciousness – be it mystical, divine or physical.

From my many field discussions with yoga adherents and from reading the theoretical literature it became evident that the yoga discourse tends to dismiss such a critical dialogue. Critique and dialogue with other discourses were often not welcomed. Yoga experience is beyond all such debate, practitioners sometimes claimed. The existence of yoga experience can only be verified by committing oneself to yoga thus: the ultimate experience of yoga is

beyond rational, empirical and critical evaluation.<sup>392</sup>

This in my view reveals the fact that mysticism – like the discourse of ‘the sacred’ - is typically a power discourse. The function is *a priori* to remove doubt and questioning. In our case it excludes others to evaluate the use-value of yoga. We are not allowed to dig through the layers of symbols and signs in order to scrutinise the use-value. This attitude “among (yoga) mystics ends up splitting researchers up into two toothless groups: either the researcher is a yoga mystic herself and understand the issues with total clarity or the (critical) researcher is not a yoga mystic herself and must remain silent as her remarks are always to be wide of the mark” (Katz 1978a).

In other word the critical dialogue has been cut off! Personally I do not believe that this ideology – in Bourdieu’s term: ‘symbolic violence’ - benefits the yoga community, but I know that their reply is that I “should rather stop my mind chatter and commit to yoga practice. It is just the ego babbling!” However I believe that before committing oneself to a life long dedication to a subject it is pragmatic to do some initial critical babbling – otherwise you might regret it.

*It has been shown how essentialism, mysticism and the discourse of ‘the sacred’ merged into each other within the yoga discourse. This had the effect of increasing the aspect of power discourse so central to yoga, turning yoga culture into a mean of ‘symbolic violence’. Further, it has also tended to leave the yoga discourse isolated from necessary and constructive dialogue with other and critical discourses. Let us now bring the aspect of orthodoxy into this concluding discussion.*

## 5. Orthodoxy, political ideology and yoga symbols

By ‘orthodoxy’ ([Wikipedia link](#)) I mean ‘the claim of conforming to ancient truth’. Implied in this is that (1) truth and value is buried in a remote past and (2) the power of particular groups is legitimised by their representation of that past. Orthodoxy is about ownership of tradition and is a classical example of conservative political ideology. Often groups fight about who most truthfully represents the past. In pre-modern societies ownership of tradition gives authority. Within the religious field it is a strategy of achieving monopoly over that field.

What we today could call Hinduist orthodoxy is a good example of this. The first version of this orthodoxy was first found among the Brahmins who claimed to know and represent the ancient and eternal Vedic truths. We saw how yoga slowly and initially reluctantly became entangled in this Brahmin ideology. Yoga was an *alternative* way to know the ultimate truth hence its doubtfulness to Brahmins. With the Advaita Vedanta breakthrough around 900 AD,

yoga became fully included in Brahmin orthodoxy. Suddenly, yoga had always been a part of the ‘Vedic Tradition’.

This adoption of yoga became typical of India ruled by orthodoxy. This strategy is also called ‘inclusiveness’: the new and the alien is included in the old and the known by giving it a lower ranking. As society changed, orthodoxy had to change in parallel. However, due to their conservative nature orthodox ideologies had to spin or to define the new as “not really new” and as a subordinate part of the past – or the other way round. Tantra and Saivism gave many examples of this.

We saw how the yoga discourse managed from early on to frame itself as a high status social totem. Thus to become associated with yoga was good: it generated symbolic capital. The closer a person is to high status items, the more status is rubbed off. Yoga gave or conferred prestige and superiority. It could even lift the yogi identity above human ranks to the semi-gods and gods. It could supply a person with symbolic capital turning him into a professional holy man.

As new social groups invented or compiled new techniques in response to social change it was often important for them to have the new associated with the old – in this case the term yoga. It was good for a technique to be labelled yoga. That would give the techniques and the groups authority and distinction. Sometimes – as we saw with the case of *hatha-yoga* – it could be the other way round. Established conservative and monotheistic groups included new yoga forms in their discourses by subordinating them.

So paradoxically, orthodoxy – despite its claims to the contrary – was always under pressure and change. Yoga’s relation to professional holy men within various cultural and religious fields demonstrated this clearly. As we saw, yoga often within a field became a path to becoming a professional holy man. As society changed however the holy men had to adapt their (yoga) practices and ideas in order to stay in power. Constantly competing intruders or religious innovators would destabilise the religious field. Newcomers maintained that they could deliver even more powerful “religious services” (blessing, protection, advice, teaching, guidance in death) to the community. In this way they challenged the existing overall religio-ideological power structure, which was a function of the relation between the religious field and its surrounding society.<sup>393</sup> Thus it was the politico-economical *relation* between a holy cult and its community (the last often represented by the local prince), which often forced through changes in religious ideas and practices like yoga. If the existing religious group was no longer seen to deliver efficient religious transactions or services, their economical and social base in the community would evaporate into thin air. In this respect the support of the local prince was crucial! To stay in power innovations were therefore incorporated by the holy men if necessary, even if these innovations were dramatically different from their old practices. So the content of orthodox ideas and practices changed significantly over the years: Tantric yoga is for instance notably different to Samkhya yoga. Ideas had to change in order for holy groups to stay in power – it was a question of social and economical survival! A way to legitimise change was to claim that the new was actually very old.

We are therefore witnessing a continuing process of ideological adaptation and adjustment, of which I believe that most if not all of the pre-modern and colonial yoga

scriptures are an expression. These scriptures were *not* written for students, but for the surrounding community and state. Their purpose in life was to signal changes in order to become accepted by those in power or by the local community – both providing the economic basis. In short the purpose was not to transmit knowledge but to send symbolic signals.

But nothing lasts – not even the authority of yoga. In the 18 to early 19 Century the status of yoga - its underlying semiotic code or *habitus* - weakened dramatically. This downturn of authority had perhaps already commenced in medieval times, but probably accelerated due to the Bhakti movement, the yogi identity being taken over by the Mughal *Lumpenproletariat* and the hegemony of British modernity. It was not of much social benefit to claim to ‘represent the yoga tradition’. Yoga orthodoxy lost its powers as the yoga power discourse withered. However, yoga came back into fashion as it was re-vitalised by Hindu nationalism and Western Orientalism. Suddenly people often from the new middle classes claimed to be gurus and sages representing the true essence of ancient yoga. This renaissance of yoga orthodoxy found its way into Western milieus of spirituality and romanticism. In modern times yoga orthodoxy and essentialism were subject to opposing tensions: on the one hand yoga received its identity by claiming roots in a far distant past and on the other hand the processes of modernity and the competition with similar discourses forced yoga to undergo exceptionally fast changes.

As the yoga discourse was a power discourse from day one generating symbolic value and capital, it is of little surprise that it became involved in orthodox ideologies. It did not have to be so, but the cocktail of essentialism, mysticism and orthodoxy in combination with the yoga power discourse was a strong proposition for many social groups and milieus. This cocktail became an important factor in the dynamic of the yoga field.

### **Yoga as a power discourse**

In contemporary popular yoga discourse, yoga is often associated with the word ‘power’. The power of beauty and eternal youth! The power of well being and de-stressing! The power of connecting to nature, ancient tradition and ‘the Whole’! Yoga empowers you to be competitive and successful in modern societies. You obtain physical and mental stamina allowing you to leave your exhausted competitors way behind.

In contemporary discourse the various yoga commodities are covered with layers of signs - as most products actually are, according to Baudrillard. Accordingly I suggest we should begin to treat yoga discourse addressing the public as if it was marketing and advertising. Reading marketing literature we know that it is often difficult to find the real use-value of a product. Often we wonder what product an advertisement is talking about at all. Brochures and advertisements produce a world of fantasies and dreams. We struggle to find out what is real and what is symbolic as they flow into each other. This is the function of marketing and advertising: not to mainly inform about actual use-values, but to generate *associations* - in other words to transform use-value into symbolic value.

Similarly, yoga discourse associates yoga with power – willingly or unwillingly, explicitly or implicitly. Yoga and power walk hand in hand. For many women today yoga is delivering the power of a beautiful body. It is my conclusion that throughout history all written

yoga discourses had an underlying purpose or effect of increasing the power of the yogi. The purpose of the written yoga discourse is and always was to endow the yogi with special powers and capabilities. What these powers and capabilities are differ over time as society changes.

Sometimes yoga generated power as a *means to something*, at other times power was the *direct goal*. Power as a means could be the power to arrest *karma* and secure *moksha* in death; the power to ‘unite with a god’; the power of energy re-charge; the power to become semi-divine; the power to ‘realise the ultimate’; the power to transmute epistemologically or ontologically; the power of a beautiful body.

When the goal was *directly* to achieve power it could be a huge range of possible supernatural powers; the power of gods; superior purity and status; perfection and immortality; tangible physical and mental powers.

A function of associating yoga with these kinds of powers was that the yoga identity became endowed with symbolic capital giving it the capacity to interact with society – for instance as a professional holy man, a guru teacher, a commercial business, a beautiful woman or a death ritual consultant. In the words of Bourdieu: the power discourse of yoga created a cultural field and within that the professional yoga specialist.

The Tantric period witnessed a significant increase in the power and status of such holy professionals, as the Tantric discourse endowed this cultural field with increased *divine-worldly* power. In Mughal India the perceived powers of the Sadhus turned them into armies of supposed fearless ferocious warriors. In late colonial India the yogi saint became a powerful cultural-political reformer or even a revolutionary, for example Gandhi. In the West yoga enabled women to build empowered narcissistic images and stamina and created the foundation for a new profession: the yoga populariser.

### **The surfacing of tangible use-value**

In the past a distinct and measureable use-value of yoga slowly surfaced in the writings. From Tantric times – often focused on the physical body – the written texts became more and more tangible, detailed and specific in describing yoga techniques and their perceptible psycho-physical effects. This tendency became apparent in the *hatha-yoga* discourse. Of course, *hatha-yoga* texts were mainly used to compare with lofty marketing pamphlets excelling in metaphysical benefits, but more and more we get glimpses of quantifiable body effects and ASC.

This process culminated in the modernist *yoga manual* and *DVD video* giving precise and comprehensive instructions - often highlighting the therapeutic, physical and psychological effects.

Gone are notions like Kundalini, god union and Siva consciousness, sometimes however replaced by claims of ‘spiritual awakening’.

## 6. Post-modern yoga: turning *Patanjali-yoga* on yoga culture

This book has been about new ways of talking about and dealing with yoga as culture. I believe my alternative methodology signifies a paradigm shift which might not be popular in parts of the yoga industry, as it undermines the image of the pure yoga constructed, celebrated and profited from. It might take the power out of yoga – but I believe many would benefit from getting rid of that delusion.

A main tenet of *Patanjali-yoga* is that the individual is caught in her own web of delusions, unawareness and myth. This yoga discourse was in some of its early forms a tool for liberation from what is basically *ignorance*. The proposition of this book is an invitation to the modern individual to investigate whether, ironically enough, *modernist yoga discourse itself* has become such an imprisoning delusion targeted by Patanjali. So I propose to turn the investigative practice of (Patanjali) yoga onto (modernist or any) yoga discourse itself, to investigate if the solution is the problem. Are all the layers of signs and symbols associated with the yoga commodity actually not a solution but fetters made of symbolic violence ?

Hence we need to ask whether our modernist yoga discourse is a mirage keeping us in our own captivity, a symbolic system of self-repression (the sociological term is ‘symbolic violence’)? Has modernist yoga become a tool for social self-control and self-discipline? A tool for coping with another turn of the wheel of social and economic competition (in Buddhism: *samsara* – “*rebirth, the daily life of suffering*”)? Have yoga popularisers and scholars a “delusional” (rose tinted) view of yoga because of their economic interests in yoga and their negative attitude to modernity? <sup>394</sup> Should we as postmodern/ post-structuralist yogis investigate whether yoga discourse is bereft of much use-value and primarily has symbolic-value? The snake biting its own tail – the investigation investigating the investigation: is that what post-structural Patanjali-yoga is about?

This book is dedicated to initiating this kind of discussion in modernist yoga circles. To deconstruct the yoga discourse is not just to pull yoga back into history, power and politics. It is not just an abstract sociological exercise with no practical consequences. Having aligned yoga with power, symbols and society we are logically led as the next step to investigate our own deepest and unconscious social drivers. Having realised that the individual self is not a closed world but is permeated by social structures and power discourses, we need to ask why we practise modernist yoga today? What do we really want to get out of it? What is modernist yoga’s relationship to contemporary anonymous social power? Have we through modernist yoga become entangled in an even more refined net of social discipline? Has social control occupied our yogic self? In the words of Bourdieu: is yoga culture associated with symbolic violence?

So maybe post-structuralist deconstruction is a contemporary equivalent to Patanjali yoga’s efforts to exorcise fabrications of imagination - delusions? A post-modern yoga? For

me it has been so. Researching this book has frequently turned my thoughts about yoga upside down.

Within Buddhism yoga has been criticised since the time of Buddha. There is a popular story that Buddha said that most people suffered because they were “materialists” – they pursued temptations of this world which could never deliver full satisfaction. However, there was a more sophisticated materialism according to Buddha and that was the materialism of the yogi. The yogi pursued *spiritual materialism*. In both cases, this story concludes, there is an underlying *thirst* – someone striving endlessly for *something*. Which implies suffering. Hence spiritual thirst was the yogis’ deepest ignorance. The yogis’ liberation was to *let go* of the belief of final deliverance or final insight - which according to Buddha is wisdom!

Of course this is a paradox given to us by this Buddha story for the natural consequence is of course that we yogis commence to strive after not-to-strive!

# Appendix 1 - The methodology of studying ever-changing cultural ideas

## Key Concepts

<a href="#"><u>Genealogy</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>Eco-material conditions</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Conflict sociology</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>Politico-social formation</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Cultural memory</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>Altered State of Consciousness</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Evolutionary model</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>Critical discourse analysis</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Status competition</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>Dynamic adaptive systems</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Sociological species</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>Oral- vs. written</u> memory</a>

*This section is about methodological reflexivity. Such reflexivity is crucial to cultural studies and sociology. The reader may skip this section. However, if the reader then starts to think that this cultural history of yoga is a strange account, or wonder why certain things are omitted and other things are focussed on, or become upset by the attitude and criticism, or fail to understand the relevance of many issues discussed, then you might consider returning to this section. As a metaphor, if my account of yoga history is compared to a building then this section is the brief, drawings and calculations of the architect and building engineer. Here you will find why the building looks as it does.*

*This chapter gives an outline of the sociology of conflict, which is the methodology underling the analysis of the book. In addition to this there is a short introduction to Critical Discourse Analysis as I find there is often little hands-on familiarity with this methodology. Discourse analysis is, for me, tightly interwoven with conflict sociology – it links the history of ideas neatly together with sociology and society. Finally, there is a short sketch of my understanding of a Psychology of Consciousness. I find that we need an alternative view of consciousness to hold up and compare and contrast with the “religious explanations” we typically encounter in the yoga discourse, when the “sacred and mystical experiences of yoga” are clarified.*

# 1. Conflict sociology and inter-disciplinary studies

## The sociological framework behind the book

My basic approach and worldview is one of the *conflict sociology* of Marx and Weber: society is fundamentally an inevitable and unending struggle for power<sup>395</sup>. This view is also fundamental to the French cultural sociologist P. Bourdieu who elaborated on Marx and Weber, and who has supplied this book with central notions. An important condition for conflict and cooperation is individual self-interest.<sup>396</sup>

This conflict view of course also applies to religion, culture and yoga. *Max Weber* ([Wikipedia link](#)) – one of the fathers of sociology – in particular recognised how religious phenomena originate in the interests of religious groups in continuous struggle with each other and with other social groups<sup>397</sup>. People are basically in conflict with or co-operating over material resources and social power (often expressed in status and prestige). This happens within a matrix of *eco-material circumstances*, which is configured by conditions like ecology, demography, technology and economy, according to the sociologist S.K. Sanderson. Sanderson has developed this general model in *The Evolution of Human Sociality* (2001), which I will follow in slightly modified form.

This matrix is fundamental to humans as it conditions their biological reproduction and economic production. When this eco-material foundation is in flux – like drought, demographic pressure, trade, invention of iron, and introduction of agriculture - this, will in turn cause changes in the societies and cultures of that matrix<sup>398</sup>. New ideas, discourses, goals, habits, attitudes are evoked (Harries 1979). Institutional patterns – like families, kinship, class, ethnic groups, social strata, - will change.

Social hierarchies will arise inside and between those groups: a social life of domination and subordination (along lines of gender, ethnicity, kinship, class, race, social stratum). The social tensions are often manifested in war and political structures. Dominant groups like clan dynasties will try to structure society in order to preserve their social position. This *politico-social formation* – which is the second fundamental matrix in human lives and societies - and together with the eco-material matrix the two matrices set the framework for all social conflicts within.

On top of all this, we find what could be called human culture. It could vaguely and cautiously be defined as ‘the learned, socially acquired traditions of thoughts, language and behaviour found in human societies’<sup>399</sup>. We are here talking about our beliefs, meanings, preferences, values, habits, music, philosophy, religion, myth – our feelings and mental life. These are expressed in and formed by language and discourses. This book focusses on culture as the production of meaning, self-identity, symbols and discourses.

Sanderson's model merely functions as a loose guidance for how I explain change and order – persistence and transformations – on any level in the model. Usually I will start from these matrices and hence the reader will also find all chapters of the book starting with an outline of the fundamental matrix. However, it is not a deterministic model but a *hyper-complex dynamic adaptive system*. It is an evolving system fluctuating between chaos and order and between continuity and discontinuity. It is about *conditions* in which a human reacts - and here they have a lot of choices! And when humans act in large groups they can change conditions – and force other groups into action. The discourses and cultural fields like yoga should be seen in this context: they often react to and relate to the social conditions which they try to influence.<sup>400</sup>

The main purpose of applying the levelled conditions model of Sanderson is to show how social and cultural events arise out of *momentary* tensions in the conditions of the matrix. So the emergence of a new yoga discourse for instance is not – as in a traditional ‘historiography of ideas’ - seen as a free floating mutation of say a 500 year older idea/discourse, but primarily seen as arising as a *response* to its contemporary conditions.

Does that mean that I see yoga and culture as passive and determined by the underlying matrix? No, definitely not. Human ideas, discourses, symbols and imaginations form a major parameter in what makes societies and the underlying matrix change. We are talking about dialectical relations; a dynamic adaptive system. Further, discourses and cultural fields have their own internal dynamic. We will see over and over again how the yoga discourse adapts to and influencing other competing groups and discourses.

### The struggle among sociological species

Let me return to the aspect of conflict. The model implies that within the eco-material and political-social matrix – the environment, as it were - social groups are struggling for existence. This struggle for often scarce resources not only concerns food, sexual reproduction and survival, but it is also a struggle for social power and status – recognition and influence/will. This often takes place within cultural fields. Discourses generate and become, in this context, resources/capital for accruing power and status. People can be influenced and controlled through ideas and knowledge. Knowledge – cultural capital – can be exchanged for economic resources. The human power struggle is in other words expressed in conflicting discourses. Discourse, knowledge and power walk hand in hand.

Now my suggestion is that we treat both individuals and traditional sociological groups - originating in economy, power, status and discourses – as *sociological species*. Their common interest and situation makes them like biological species facing each other in a struggle for resources and recognition. Significantly I also suggest we treat *discourses* as sociological species, as they are so intertwined with social identities and group formation.

Drawing this similarity between species and social groups, individuals and discourses is neither new in the social sciences nor accidental (Hodgson & Knudsen 2010). Let us first clarify the notion of ‘species’. Here is what the biologist E. Wilson says about species in general:

"Every species is bound to its community in the unique manner by which it variously consumes, is consumed, competes, and cooperates with other species." (Wilson 2002).

Similarly, human social groups and their discourses compete, exploit and cooperate with each other in order to survive. Exactly as in nature where all species evolve and struggle for existence with other species within a specific environment, social groups and their discourses similarly evolve and survive in niches of the eco-material and politico-social matrix – our species-specific environment. A cultural field such as yoga is an example of such a niche.

I believe it is meaningful to explain social dynamics using such a Darwinist evolutionary conflict model as a role model<sup>401</sup>. I know many sociologists look with disdain on the idea of introducing Darwinian notions to human society, but I suggest they should take a fresh look at the matter as I have done myself<sup>402</sup>. And actually if some post-modernist have red faces: when you think about it, it is not far away from Nietzsche's 'will to power'<sup>403</sup>!

*Evolutionary conflict models* have already found their way into comparative and evolutionary sociology, archaeology and anthropology<sup>404</sup>. Studying the history of yoga I find we can learn a lot from such research. These theories of social evolution – or should we rather say theories of *change* - have often been used to clarify how a range of pre-modern societies evolved and took the form they did. To conceive pre-modern forms of yoga in such parallel contexts will often help to clarify our understanding. However we will also find that these models also apply to modern forms of yoga culture, where the aspect of dominance and social ranking moves to the foreground.

But it is important to bear in mind – and this is often misunderstood - that Darwinian-inspired social evolutionism is *fundamentally non-directional*. There is no general purpose or tendency inherent to change. There is in this model no prescribed "way forward" toward for instance increased social complexity. There is only persistent adaption of random mutations to a changing environment/matrix. Hence we often see that socially complex societies are collapsing and returning to undifferentiated forms.<sup>405</sup>

The implication of Darwinism is not just non-directional evolutionary modelling but a fundamentally new methodology about change. In fact what Darwin introduced was a *historical genealogical methodology* – which was later realised and applied by both Nietzsche and Foucault (Sarasin 2009). So this methodology of change has proved useful within human societies.<sup>406</sup> I will return to this soon.

### **Status competition and yoga – rank matters**

So far I have mentioned general sociological models which can help us to understand change and human societies and their cultures. Let me now expand on the issue of social status. A major part of the human struggle for scarce resources – and here we are very similar to the other primates – is related to *status competition*<sup>407</sup>. Rank matters strongly in human societies! Hence I will show throughout this book how the yoga discourse is permeated by status competition. It imbues high status. What do sociologists mean by *status*?

Status or rank is based on social inequality and is independent of wealth. It implies, the existence of *social hierarchy* and is found in all societies (Sanderson 2001). Status is

sometimes expressed as *symbolic capital* (a term introduced by Bourdieu who saw status as an *asset* one can analyse using concepts of economy). Status is closely connected with *social identity* and difference<sup>408</sup>. To change status you need to change other peoples' opinion about you. Status protects the privileged by providing them with a non-material resource not easily taken by others. A high status group can further define *negative status* to others. It is now up to others to pass certain tests – meeting the norms of the high status group – to be upwardly mobile.

According to Weber the crucial requirement to be a member of a status group is conformity to a prescribed lifestyle. Elaborated norms and rituals – and we will see many of those within the yoga culture - are essential to distinguish between the conforming insiders and the outsiders. Furthermore the more closely one associates with a status group the more one's reputation will be coloured by it. Who would not enjoy to be seen in the company of a film star?

In the light of the conflict sociology and social evolutionism models outlined above we will see how new sub-populations of high status ascetics seeking liberation – a new social species - evolved during the fifth and sixth centuries BC as an effect of significant upheavals in the underlying matrix/ environment. In other words we identify some groups of yogis as a social species with high status and it is this high status and their yoga knowledge – their symbolic and cultural capital - that enables them to survive. At first sight full-time yogic ascetics are not producers but rather the opposite of a producer: they often celebrate *inactivity* as a virtue. How can inactivity create a niche of survival – a cultural field - in pre-modern India for the yogis we wonder? In this book we will see how this high-ranking species exchanged their knowledge and symbolic capital with other social groups.

Imagining the full-time yogis as a high status professional species throws up lot of fruitful questions. How did these professional holy men survive – because even yogic ascetics have to eat! What was their new economic niche – the new cultural field - and what made it possible? How was the cultural field of yoga situated in the overall social hierarchy – did they “prey” on somebody and who preyed on them? Did the yoga specialists need to cooperate with other social groups in order to sustain their position and capital? What kind of symbolic and cultural capital did they use for economical transactions? Did they face other species competing in their cultural field? How did competitive pressure, changes in the eco-materialistic matrix and upheavals in the politico-social formation influence their lifestyle, ideas and capital?

Another group within the yoga culture are however not full-time. I call them the *yoga sympathisers*. They are *amateurs* (lovers of yoga). Typically the yoga professionals dominate the yoga discourse, but under specific historical conditions the amateurs seem to take over. For this sub-species within the yoga culture we will see how social rank and social identity production is as critical, as among the professionals.

### The return to cross-disciplinary studies

When investigating the yoga culture, we can gain valuable insights from anthropological studies outside Sanskrit studies. We will then find that yoga, being part of a power discourse

of semi-divinity, was made possible by a *code and habitus* (unconscious cultural dispositions) belonging to what is called *Shamanism*. Here we will find a wealth of anthropological insight we can learn from (Morris 2006, Bourgignon 1979, Lewis 1971). We can also draw on anthropological studies investigating *folk Hinduism* (in contrast to elite Sanskrit Hinduism). Here we discover the daily life of ordinary people,<sup>409</sup> learn how religious ritual and practices are woven into their lives and become documented and how cults and sects fit into daily life<sup>410</sup>. One should be cautious about extrapolating the conclusions of anthropological studies into the past. But approaching historical sources with sensitivity and all due consideration – as many anthropologists and historians actually do – one can cautiously evaluate and discuss past material with these insights and approaches.<sup>411</sup>

Hence we can benefit from using the insights of social psychology and anthropology and, more especially, cultural sociology when discussing ancient groups – and by assuming that there are some general human traits (self interest, status seeking etc.), which are relatively “constant”.

In general, this book is guided by the assumption that the yoga culture (like religion) can *only* be captured by a *cross-disciplinary approach*. With this assumption I step into the research programme of *History of Religion*, which dominated European discourses on religion between 1850 and 1920. This new discipline of the history of religions was at that time a de facto cooperation of studies of antiquity, bible criticism, theology, European national history, Oriental philology, anthropology, archaeology, evolutionary biology, geology, emerging psychology and sociology. Here scholars of a wide range of disciplines - Durkheim, Weber, Troeltsch, Frazer, Marett, Bousset, Wellhausen, Robertson Smith, Mannhardt, Tylor, Müller and countless others - exchanged and developed their ideas about the history of religion in close inter-disciplinary cooperation (Kippenberg 2002). Sadly, much contemporary academic study of religion (and similar phenomena like yoga) have in their relentless drive for specialisation lost this spirit of cooperation<sup>412</sup>. This cultural history of yoga is an attempt to revive this old tradition.

## 2. A Darwinian evolutionary model of discourses

### Discourses, DNA signature and social species

We can now return to the discussion of genealogy after anchoring this methodology within a conflict sociological model of social change. We now need to demonstrate in more detail how discourses and cultural fields evolve and change in order for us to understand the logic of the genealogical map that we are drawing up. We want to anchor the surfacing and change of

signs (ideas) in the interaction and institutions of society (i.e. mutation). Such cultural and ideational change finds expression in and is accelerated by the status competition between experts (i.e. selection).

Mutation and selection is central to Darwinian evolution theory. Among biologists biological change is not just perceived as identical to ‘Darwinian evolution’. There are many conflicting models of evolution (Bowler 2009). What is special about Darwin’s model is that it is without any given evolutionary direction and progression. It is a specific instance of a *dynamic adaptive hyper-complex model* as applied within modern physics (Depew 2009).

The two elements of (1) ‘*random variation*’ and (2) ‘*selection*’ are the drivers of Darwin’s dynamic model. As the environment changes, or a subpopulation becomes geographically isolated, there follows a rapid emergence of random variations, which would otherwise not survive. This is the first aspect - the presence of *anarchic directionless mutations*. (In our case: new social practices, strata, habits, signs, discourses shoot up – all exemplifying new sociological species).

Then the second aspect sets in. Here Darwin was inspired by the political-economist T. Malthus: through a struggle for survival a process of selection takes place between the new mutations. Only the mutation best fitted to the new conditions will survive – that is, an adaptation takes place. This is the moment of contention and conflict. Slowly a new sub-population solidifies as it comes to dominate, and given enough time and change it will evolve into a distinct new species. (In our case: new specialists representing new knowledge have settled and dominate their cultural field).

If we treat social and cultural entities – like discourses, social strata, groups, institutions – as species, then we have with Darwin a model of explanation. It is a question of explaining how does the DNA - the stored cultural information that is configuring species – change?

### **Discourses emerging out of new habits and interaction**

It is central to this model that human practices, social identities and *cognition* (in the model: ‘cultural DNA’) are defined as tightly interwoven. New ideas and discourses (DNA) are not so much a product of a tradition of previous ideas and the competition between the specialists in such ideas. *New ideas are in this genealogical view seen as A PART OF new practices adapting to circumstances.* This enables the model to explain changes in discourses as a function of mutation and then selection. How?

It is central that we stop seeing practices (action) and ideas (DNA) as two separate worlds. As soon as we realise that they exist together and enable each other, then changes in ideas, signs and discourse are easy to understand.

When there are changes happening in the eco-material and politico-social matrix (for instance emergence of irrigation, iron, trade, social hierarchy, king ship), then human daily practices and interaction will begin to change accordingly. Social groups adapt to those fundamental changes by changing their daily interaction and social identities. Soon those changes in behaviour will form some pattern – they become new *habits*. Habits are embedded with rules and rules are formulated in language and ideas – i.e. culture. New culture emerges

in parallel implying new symbols, new knowledge.

An example of such change in habits is what the sociologist E. Goffman calls daily *face-to-face interaction*. Daily face-to-face interaction can be described as local social life, which is *implicitly guided by rules* and *codes* about how to proceed, how to behave, what to say and what not to say, what emotions to express, what is good and what is bad (Goffman 1967 & 1971). Thus new rules, restrictions, prohibitions, inclinations, recommendations, tastes, moods, politeness emerge as social life adapts to changes in circumstances. Even if habits are full of inertia, they change as we adjust to social change.

So habits are “*ideas in action*”. They are formed by human deliberation, rationalisation and calculation. A habit – a rite, a ceremony, a custom, an institution - cannot be performed without *thinking* about what to do right now. It can only be performed because you *know* what to do. This knowledge of what *should be done* in a given situation is a result of previous conclusions and deliberations. There is in summary a permanent acquisition and modification of habits in human existence, *through which cognition and behaviour simultaneously evolve* (Hodgson 2006, 2010).

The process of mutating cultures is metaphorically like many small streams merging into a river. New small emerging patterns of daily local interaction and habits – dynamically adapting to social change and conflicts - are interwoven with new learning, conclusions, decisions, beliefs, and experiences – new cognition, new priorities, new values, new cultural DNA.<sup>413</sup> Then, as they swell and become a river this myriad of new daily habits and interactions penetrated by conclusions and rules *solidifies and becomes culture and society*. This is represented in new rites, rituals, institutions, customs, ceremonies, procedures, conventions, social strata, associations, discourses, cultural fields, lifestyles and so on. Soon experts and specialists – competing for status and power - will further drive the selection, refinement and clarification of the new signs and knowledge. This is what discourses are about: more than mutating signs they select and refine them.

*We have in other words mapped the evolution of new cultural signs and discourses out of changes in society.* The embryonic discourses – in a process of struggle, refinement and selection - will then in a feedback loop generate further change in the habits, practices, life experiences and worldviews from which they emerge. It is a process of *random variation and dynamic adaptation*. This is how *cultural DNA* emerges and change.

This model will guide us in this cultural history when we try to explain changes in the yoga discourse. We will *not* try to search for ‘what idea inspired what idea’. Instead we will look for changes among the institutions and the life situation (habits, conflicts) of the interactors, and see how these changes find their way into yoga discourses and cultural fields, where knowledge professionals and amateurs compete for recognition and survival.

### Cultural fields and discourses as battlefields

In other words we have mapped the road and environment of an emergent discourse. What is central in this vision of change are social groups and individuals (the interactors), who struggle for survival, recognition and power. In this process people – individuals and groups –

will struggle with each other about what new conclusions, rules, habits, institutions are to rule. This is step two in Darwin's model above: selection.

So *within* institutions, cultural fields, rites, ceremonies, practices, signs and discourses there will be a struggle about their formation – their content and form – as change is disseminated through society. Take the urbanisation of Northern India as an example: should the old fire ritual be replaced by theistic devotion or rather with ascetic lifestyles? How could local grounded signs, norms and gods be fitted into travelling merchants' daily experiences and interaction with foreign cultures and markets? What was the meaning of 'the immovable soul' and its 'release', which everybody started to discuss?

And similarly we will find conflicts *between* emerging institutions, cultural fields and discourses. Here in our example Buddhists and Brahmins representing different institutions and fields fought about the validity of a hierarchical caste system. Or they fought about who best could exorcise evil demons or were most able to assist the soul in its afterlife journey. Or they clashed about who was to advise and initiate the king.

So institutions, cultural fields and discourses are simultaneously *battlefields and instruments* of such power struggle. As we shall see the yoga discourse evolved out of a conflict between various groups caught up by dramatic changes in their institutional environment.

I hope that this theory outline has given substance to a social genealogical evolutionary model of non-linear random variation, dynamic adaptation and conflict that provides a good basis for the explanation of changes in the yoga discourse and its cultural field.<sup>414</sup> We can see how signs and discourses grow dynamically out of, react to and take part in further social change. This change in culture is then accelerated by status competition among specialists with further cultural and social consequences. I find it significantly superior to the traditional History of Doctrine approach. New cultural ideas and signs need not be explained as either one-good-old-idea-leads-to-the-next-new-one.

In my conflict model *species* becomes our core notion. Like Darwin we do not try to define the essence of a given cultural or political species. Hence there is no evaluation of what "the true yoga form" is and what are the unlucky derivatives/satellites "which are not really yoga".

*Discourses function as storage and transmission of information – their cultural DNA. Thus there is a critical element of 'cultural memory' within discourses. Memory is as we all know very, very fragile. How do we stop it from fading? It is often said within the yoga discourse that this has been solved by the 'yoga tradition', which through history successfully has stored and transmitted the cultural memory of yoga. This cultural history of yoga argues that such a claim is an ideological myth. This book de-constructs the sign 'tradition' as coded with power discourses. It replaces 'tradition' with the sociological notions like 'discourse field', 'cultural field' and 'habitus'. Below I have summarised the alternative view to 'tradition' that is underlying the argumentation of this book. As we know cultural memory is often stored in writings. Let us investigate yoga memory and writing.*

### **3. Writing, cultural memory, canons and the yoga discourse**

As various discourses surfaced and turned into the first early-yoga discourse, Northern India consisted of Archaic kingdom, which had left the social simplicity of small tightly knitted clans, but had still not reached the complexity of supra-regional civilisations and empires. At this moment in time Northern India had still not developed writing (the writing of the older Indus valley civilisation was long since extinct). The initial storage and transmission of yoga discourses – the cultural memory - happened orally.

Moving into the civilisation process Northern India like the other Axial Age civilisations developed new styles of writing. In India two styles spread – *Brahmi* and *Kharosthi* script styles. The advent of writing had tremendous impact and meant a significant acceleration of the civilisation and state building process (Goody 1986).

The technology of writing means in a Darwinian discourse model that the *cultural memory* – the DNA replicator - loses its direct dependency on and connection to its interactor (individuals, social strata, discourses). This is significant. The introduction of writing allowed cultural DNA to be extracted from its “biological roots” and stored physically almost for eternity. In other words a social group, discourse or organisation could become extinct, but its written texts – its cultural memory - would still exist as a physical record.

The conversion to the writing and documenting of cultural memory was not a sudden event – many if not most social strata continued with oral transmission. How did writing affect yoga? The various strata within the yoga discourse seem not to have adopted writing in any extensive way: the few texts radiate all the signs of a discourse based on oral transmission. Yoga was probably hundreds of years old before any significant writings on yoga *theoria* and *praxis* took place. But we never know if this is just because writings on yoga were not preserved properly.

So with the spread of writing about 300 BC in Axial Age India, there was for any given yoga branch a choice between an oral transmission and a written transmission of its cultural memory – its DNA. Each choice created its own situation and issues, relevant to our discussion of the viability of ‘a yoga tradition’ – an uninterrupted cultural memory of yoga.

First let me outline the conditions facing a possible *oral transmission of yoga* in some few condensed points. These points are pivotal and guide my presentation of various historical conditioned yoga forms.

## **Oral replication of Yoga memory**

1.1. All languages and cultures are in a process of continuous change. Given enough time later generations will not be able to understand the old language of their predecessors – neither linguistically nor culturally (Anthony 2010). Thus the social interactors commence *of necessity* to lose their *linguistic and cultural* understanding of the initial DNA replicator (their cultural memory) - the original words and signs defining the interactors.

1.2. If a given branch of a yoga discourse remains orally transmitted, then each succeeding generation of interactors necessarily will have to transform the language and the signs of their original DNA replicator (cultural memory). Otherwise it would not be comprehensible within their contemporary linguistic and cultural horizon. A cultural memory is *in perpetual* metamorphosis. Alternatively, if they choose to maintain the original terminology and language of the original DNA replicator, they would have to develop a *meta-language/system*, which would translate, explain and give meaning to the old cultural memory. This implies a major increase in the complexity of the cultural memory.

1.3. As social groups – the interactors – face the risk of disintegration (due to war, famine, epidemics, economy, etc.); or as they over time tend to lose their understanding of the original DNA replicator (due to language and cultural change); or – finally - as they tend to split up in various conflicting understandings of the original DNA replicator (many contesting meta-systems due to complexity), we will expect a oral based yoga cultural field to have a tendency to fragment into historical branches and styles each *reflecting the meta-text at that given moment of time*. There is an inherent tendency for the DNA replicator to break up and mutate.

1.4. Hence unless some institutionalisation is undertaken, the cultural professionals within the field (experts living from owning the cultural memory) will over a couple of centuries tend to become extinct and with them the DNA replicator is lost, if not referred to in other milieus.

It seems that during the first 500 to 700 years of its existence the main bulk of the yoga discourse struggled under the conditions facing any oral transmission: it was a fragmented cultural memory prone to re-configure and flare up locally (due to specific historical conditions) and then after a relatively short time it would disintegrate again. Hence there is little refinement and clarification of the yoga sign to be found. In our modern world we could compare this to the cultural field of sport, where we constantly see new fashions of sports techniques emerge, gain popularity and then disappear as the next fashion wave rolls in: jogging, roller skating, boxing, dancing, aerobics, pilates, wrestling, volleyball and so on. The same observation applies to “folk religions” and their dynamic (McMahan 2008).

This generalisation – the historically conditioned “fashion waves” of perpetual changing cultural practices and memories - might even hold true for most of later yoga history despite the adoption of writing in the yoga discourse that actually happened. Let me explain why this is so by investigating the conditions framing the road to textual transmission.

## **Written replication of Yoga memory**

2.1. As discourses are written down the effect is that their form and content are fixed and

frozen in time while the surrounding language and culture continue to change. Every succeeding generation of interactors *has to* re-establish *their* interpretation – reflecting their specific historical and cultural horizon – of the textual replicator.

2.2. As in an orally based transmission the interactors have to develop a meta-system of understanding: text based exegetic discourse – meta-texts - aiming to explain the meanings of the signs and language of the original text. The number of meta-texts will multiply. Hence the discourse encounters the problem of a steadily *increasing growth in the complexity* of the DNA replicator: not only the text but also a cluster of meta-texts needs to be transmitted and soon the meta-texts need their own meta-meta-text (Assmann 2012).

2.3. This hyper complexity of the cultural memory generates the emergence of *canon*. Over time contending systems of texts and meta-texts are bound to surface. They then of necessity cause conflicts between various interactors – cultural specialists - about the definition of a canon and who rightly represents this canon (Assmann 2012). The control and management of *the* DNA replicator – *the canon* - becomes crucial for social power.

2.4. New historically conditioned meta-texts sometimes become the *new canon*. Hence new discourses claim that they are the true and direct representation of the original replicator. The new cultural specialists claim they embody ‘the tradition’ and in this way legitimise their power. If the guardians of the old canon have become weak, disinterested or extinct, as often seemed to be the case for yoga, the canon has accordingly changed. However it will be claimed by the new guardians that there was no change of canon – everything is really the same. This process happens smoothly and continuously if the degree of institutionalisation is low, which was the case within the cultural and religious fields of liberation and salvation in India.

### The lack of yoga institutions and boundaries

Thus it seems that a decisive factor in the history of the yoga memory is the lack of institutionalisation. Over time – maybe over the first millennium of its existence – there was a very slow build up of written yoga discourse. The main thing these texts revealed about yoga discourse – often found in epics or stories - was that there was little agreement about yoga’s DNA. Reading the texts it seems fair to conclude that whatever there would have been of use-value-based transmission of yoga it must primarily have been orally based. There was apparently no emergence of yoga institutions or canon in this period.

Until the Brahmin [Vedantic revolution](#) in the medieval era there was very little institutional support for textual storing and transmitting the use-value of yoga. The half-hearted and “me-too” incorporation of [Samkhya yoga](#) into Brahmin Vedantic canon did not lead to any real canonisation and fixation of the specific version of yoga memory on which the Brahmins chose to standardise. Due to this lack of interest the Brahmins soon lost their understanding of their new yoga canon and it became a symbolic relic. The then lukewarm Brahmin yoga canon reflecting a specific historical situation seemed not much occupied with replicating yoga know-how – the use-value of yoga. This was not its *raison d'être*. Most yoga texts were, as we shall see, instead primarily *social symbols* constructing and charging cultural specialists with

power and difference.

It was presumably this symbolic aspect which kept the yoga discourse alive by in this way making it attractive to new generations of cultural and religious specialists. Despite its ostensible canonisation the yoga discourse retained its character of an ever-mutating folk religion. We see in later eras how new fashions of yoga endlessly re-configure, flare up and then disappear. Despite the emergence of writing there was never a cultural elite who managed to institutionalise, canonise, monopolise and define yoga.

The end result of this lack of institutionalisation was that each new generation of cultural specialists – framed and orientated by their contemporary historio-cultural horizon and tempted by the symbolic power of yoga - would have to start almost from scratch compiling various residuals of a fragmented cultural memory. The irony is – and this became an essential part of the yoga discourse - that due to the power aspect of the yoga discourse – its habitus - these specialists had to deny the fragmentation and discontinuity of their cultural memory.

*What needs to be outlined is my understanding of critical discourse analysis, as it is so central to my approach. Then in a final theoretical interlude I will add a psychological model in order to offer an alternative explanation of the category of “the mystical and sacred experiences” of the yogis.*

## 4. Critical discourse analysis

### Critical discourse analysis

Discourse analysis can take many forms (Phillips & Hardy 2002). [415](#) The way I use it is in a *critical constructionist* fashion. This means that there is a focus on how discourses create social entities, practices and identities. By this is meant that discourses give us the categories through which we group, classify and experience reality, as in the yoga case: immoveable soul, ascetic living, the-yogi-in-the-cave, the living liberated, Kundalini, *samadhi*, the guru, mystical experience, renouncer.

Discourse analysis is often linked with genealogy. The analysis then focusses on what processes conditioned our categories; what conditions make them change; how are the categories protected from the change; what influence do they have on society and those using them; how do they generate social difference and power? Hence discourse analysis transforms fixed typologies into *fluid categories*.

Discourse analysis as genealogy is very easy to understand if we investigate how Darwin

transformed our category of ‘species’. Darwin’s great revolution was that he did not see the biological species as a god given and unchangeable reality (and so should we not see any of our categories). The ‘species’ were, according to Darwin, nothing but a *name* biologists had given to a *similar population of individuals* (Sarasin 2009), some common traits they were *perceived* to share. So not only were these *alleged* common traits grouped together by biologists, but further these common traits were also under constant change and all varied in one way or another. So before Darwin’s discovery, ‘species’ were perceived as *god given eternal objects*. After Darwin’s discovery, ‘species’ were not only just a human classification, but they were also *historical processes under change*.

So what is then new in this method? Here is an answer from Phillips & Hardy (2002)

“In fact, traditional methodologies [for instance hermeneutical-phenomenology] often reify categories, making them seem natural and enduring. Discourse analysis, on the other hand, provides a way of analysing the dynamics of social construction that produce these categories and hold the boundaries around them in place.” (p.13) .... “Using a non-traditional method provides a way to see things that have been obscured by the repeated application of traditional methods – all ways of seeing are also ways of *not seeing*” (p.16)

So discourse analysis reveals how categories and society *mutually construct each other in an ever-changing interplay*. This continuous process is driven and maintained by conflict and power.

What is of specific interest to detect in this process is that it is often obscure to us: it is like the blind spot in our eyes impossible to see. Because we experience social reality through categories and because our social identity is constructed by those categories, we take them for granted. Here once more Phillips & Hardy:

“... discursive activities help to construct institutions in which power is embedded through the way in which taken-for-granted understandings serve to privilege some actors and disadvantage others.” (27)

This is where the notion of *power* discourse analysis enters. Here we investigate what is taken for granted, focussing on social inequalities and subordination. We are investigating the hidden semiotic *code* sitting in the background like a computer program controlling or influencing what can and cannot happen on the screen. Metaphorically, if your text program does not have a *copy* function, then you cannot do any ‘copying’ despite your intentions and efforts. And if you were new to word-processing you might not miss it, because you had never imagined there could be such a function.

Such background and taken-for-granted processes creating social differences are expressions of the power relations embedded in our discourses. As we live out the categories – our identity, our practice, our conversation - power flourishes.

### **Power-discourses.**

Let me give an example of a power discourse, encountered in many male dominated societies throughout history. It is often expressed in a generalising statement like this: “*Woman’s nature is passive, emotional, irrational, to look after children, and ....*”. We have all experienced this rhetoric countless times – even today. This male rhetoric about women’s nature is supported by principles or *universals*, which claim knowledge of: ‘the

essence of phenomena'; 'the nature of things'; 'that which is god-given'; 'that which has always been so always will remain so' (transcending human society and time); 'the fact (!) with *no* exemptions' etc.<sup>416</sup>

My example might be banal. In reality power discourse analysis is rather complicated. Here, for instance, is the conclusion of American professor of history of religion, B. Lincoln, expressed in his tenth thesis on method:

Understanding the system of ideology that operates in one's own society is made difficult by two factors: (i) one's consciousness is itself a product of that system, and (ii) the system's very success renders its operations invisible, since one is so consistently immersed in and bombarded by its products that one comes to mistake them (and the apparatus through which they are produced and disseminated) for nothing other than "nature". (Lincoln 2000a).

Power discourse scrutiny tends to be multi-disciplinary and genealogical. For me a central part of power discourse analysis is to find the implicit assumption behind what is said. What is hidden is stated before anything has been stated yet! So the power discourse is about identifying some processes which *define the context and situation*. Power discourses tend to be situated in our habitus – our mental habits guiding our practice and perception. I am especially investigating implicit belief systems and signs generating social inequality and subordination.

Inspired by a paper by R. Warne (2000), here are some abstract generalisations of what a power discourse is *doing*: the power discourse will tell

- what Being is (*ontologising*),
- what are essential and eternal (*essentialising*),
- what is natural (*naturalising*),
- what has authority (*authorising*),
- what gives value to things (*valorising*),
- what sets up standards to judge deviation (*normalising*) and
- what are problems requiring solutions (*problematising*).

If the reader recalls the example above of the assumed nature/essence of women, you will realise how permeated it is by those characteristics listed by Warne.

Let us take yoga as an example. The power discourse which was a part of yoga's habitus as it emerged, was:

1. Reality is organised in a hierarchy of human and divine power
2. Some special *disciplines of self-effort* enable people to ascend this hierarchy
3. Having this power makes them semi-divine

Three disciplines (models) – most of them entangled with yoga - managed to become accepted as leading to divine power as yoga emerged: asceticism (including meditation), ritual observances, and knowledge of the One. If a person mastered one of these three disciplines he would be seen to have accumulated semi-divine powers – what I term symbolic capital. Each discipline was embedded in comprehensive discourses and would require focussed and prolonged efforts. In the end, the practice of the discourse transformed the individual significantly.

In Foucault's terms we are talking about 'disciplines of the self'; yoga of the self. In this

context, the individual consciously and deliberately enforces a regime on him/her-self in order to become someone else/ a new identity. By the fact that the self disciplines itself, it was seen in India to accumulate supernatural powers.

In summary, discourses construct our worldview of what is, how it is, what is normal, what is acceptable, what is authority, what is truth, what is reasonable, what cannot be seen etc., which tend to empower certain groups and disempower others. In this way, discourses are often power discourses creating social hierarchies or differences. To *de-construct* - another crucial post-structuralist notion - a discourse is to reveal those differences and show that they emanate in discourses and not are as ‘natural, god-given and eternal’ as the discourse claims.

## 5. Technologies generating Altered States of Consciousness

*This final discussion is about establishing a framework for analysing and comparing different technologies affecting consciousness, so that we can rank and compare yoga to similar practices. It is also a model for trying to talk about ‘mystical experiences’ or ‘the sacred’ in other terms than those we normally encounter in yoga discourse. The reader may skip this discussion but may in other chapters face some difficulties in following the analysis and comparison of different traditions and mind technologies close to yoga.*

It seems that yoga techniques as they emerged often induced the virtuoso with an Altered States of Consciousness (for short ASC). ASC means a change of our normal state of mind of cognition and sensation – characterised by for instance logical thinking; selective attention; and reality orientation. This change in subjective experience can be measured objectively in many ways in the body. Many biochemical parameters are influences like blood sugar, adrenalin levels, blood pressure, pupil dilation, pulse, skin resistance and so. ASC can subjectively and objectively be registered as for instance changes in perception, cognition, anticipation, emotional state and self-awareness. The controlling logical capacity feels diminished as the inner stream of thought is less organised and reality directed. There is a definite transformed sense of self, of reality and of perceptual processes. There is a sense of unreality: the awareness of reality seems distant. There is an estranged perception and interpretation of *incoming* sensory stimuli as well as of *internally* generated stimuli (thought, emotions). Sometimes there is a sense that the perpetual inner dialogue has stopped. (Kroll and Bachrach 2005, Kahneman 2011)

ASC can be generated in many ways and each method is generating its own experiences. I call this methods for ASC generators. Here are some examples:

## **ASC generators:**

- Rhythm: endless repetition of prayer, word, sound; massage; swirling dance; music; drumming;
- Drugs and alcohol
- Trance: hypnosis, trance talking, extended focus, prolonged body posture
- Deprivation of sense inputs: flotation tank, social isolation
- Extreme events: bad news, good news; death threat; explosion
- Breath: retention, rapid
- Pain of ‘heroic asceticism’: Prolonged standing in ice water, wrapping chains around oneself, self-torture by movement and postures, slowly forcing thorns through limbs, laceration with swords
- Ascetic renunciation: starvation, sleep deprivation, prolonged moderate body discomfort
- Meditation: inward focus, inner guided visualisation, outward focus, pondering, absorption, ignoring sense input
- Ecstatic: orgasm, shouting and screaming, fast chaotic movements

These generators can be grouped in various ways: rhythmic acoustic stimulation, kinetic stimulation, forced hypermobility, psychedelic drugs, hyper stimulation, breathing patterns, mind control, sensory deprivation, fasting, seclusion, and restricted mobility (Kroll and Bachrach 2005).

It seems that most branches of yoga throughout history in one way or another relate yoga to ASC. Yoga was most often presented as a vehicle for moving consciousness from its ‘everyday-state’ functioning into an ‘altered state’ of functioning. Yoga is however not the only technology for that. At the time yoga emerged a range of technologies was already widely known and used.

I would in the following like to look briefly into different ways of transforming the state of awareness of our consciousness to establish common ground. In the concluding chapter I will take up the theme of ASC and explore it further in relation to the yoga discourse.

What I say in the following does not pretend to be the rocket science of consciousness, as it is only there to clarify. It is based on my experiences as an artist working with creativity and spontaneity (and of course of my experiences of meditation, Tantric techniques and drugs)<sup>417</sup>.

During the last 100 years there has, evolved among artists, a range of techniques to bring the mind into creative states – to bring it out of its everyday-state of restricting rationality and conformity. If we combine this in a truly multi disciplinary way with the insight of contemplative traditions and further involve sciences like neuro-psychological research, cybernetics, Gestalt psychology, and biology, some interesting distinctions appear<sup>418</sup>.

First I suggest that we initially treat ASC loosely as ‘trance’ and we define trance as “state of awareness insensible to sensory input”. Trance is not the same as unconsciousness.

Trance means that external stimuli normally influencing the mind have been made transparent – re-prioritised and submerged.<sup>419</sup> A very deep and well known form of trance is '*hypnotic trance*'. In this ASC people can often perform extraordinary acts like walking on fire and have their tongue pierced without suffering pain, body marks or wounds.<sup>420</sup>

### A hyper complex multiple-centred system

Secondly, I suggest we start to see consciousness not as being one single control centre, but as being *multi-centred*, a range of independent sub-systems interacting. As an emerging result of this systemic interaction the ego and self-awareness arise.

Let me give some examples to which we can all relate: for instance driving home without remembering driving (some part of consciousness negotiated you home – an auto-pilot?); watching yourself doing some complex and fast body activity and as soon you try to understand what you actually are doing, the act collapses ("Am I really doing this!"); you suddenly remember something that you just some minutes ago gave up trying to remember ("Where did that come from?") etc.

Biologically this is explained by the brain having multiple centres of consciousness working on their own. However, there is a centre monitoring, co-coordinating, planning, integrating those sub-centres and which is self-aware about these processes. We could call it the 'ego', which consists of processes like perception, anticipation, testing, evaluation, self-reflection. However, this is not consciousness per se as we tend to believe – it is just an overarching function of sub-systems of consciousness, an overarching function emerging out of hyper-complex sub-system interaction. This phenomenon – the ego - is like a conductor in relation to the orchestra. An orchestra consists of a range of conscious sub-systems: the group of violins can play on their own, so can the percussionists or the wind instruments, but only the conductor can bring them altogether in a combined and coordinated symphonic performance.

What has this to do with 'trance'? Trance is when we take the conductor out of the action! Returning to 'technologies of consciousness' we could say that they short-circuit the centralising functions. As the overarching functions shut down, or are overridden by sub-systems, the consciousness moves into trance.

How can we bring normal consciousness into trance? Let us draw a map of trance which allows us to plot different technologies in relation to each other.<sup>421</sup> First, I suggest two opposite dimensions as seen in the figure: *sensory overload* and *sensory deprivation*. Sensory overload can have many causes: extreme pain; the subject talking as fast as possible; intensive screaming; fast complex movements; extreme emotions; shock etc. Anyone acquainted with drama and theatre training will know some of these techniques for altering states of creative mind. Most of us will for instance have experienced someone (yourself?) screaming aloud leading to sudden unexpected behaviour – sometimes aggressive – as lower parts of the brain and consciousness take over.

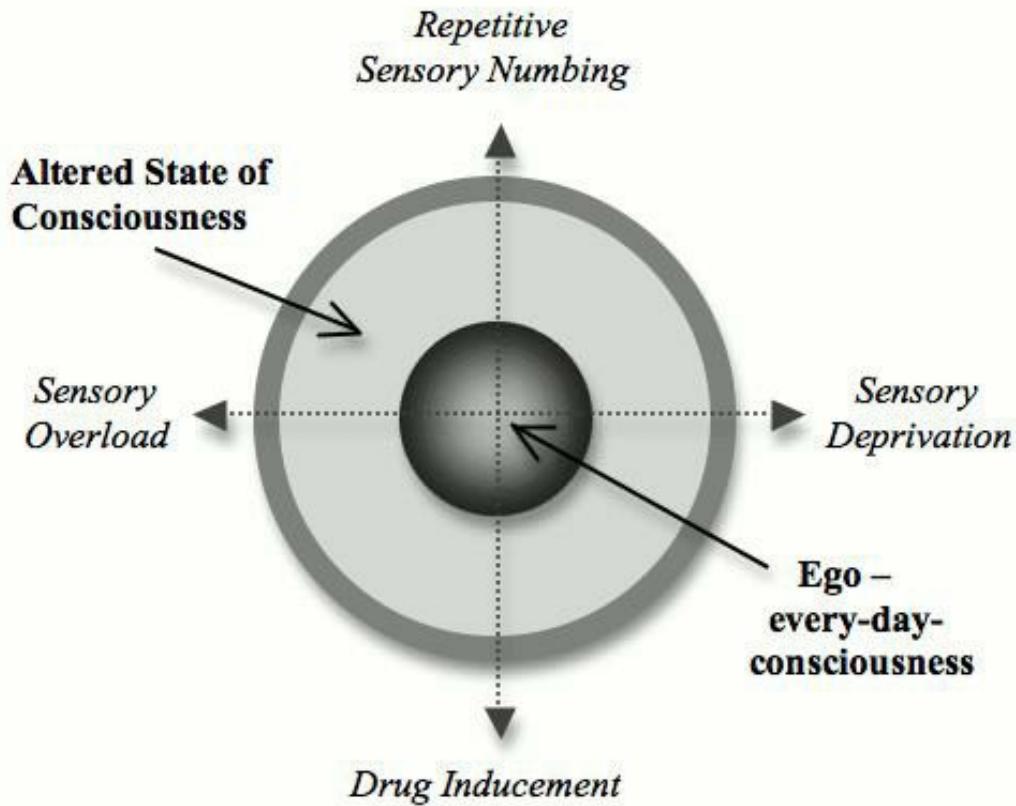
Sensory deprivation goes the other way: the mind receives no input and commences to generate its own. This is often demonstrated in a water tank where the subject lies in absolute silence and darkness in salt water at body temperature. Soon you will hear voices and have

visions. Subsystems of the brain are for some reason reproducing input – probably very similar to what is happening in dreams?

I have put this dimension horizontally into the map – sensory overload versus deprivation. For our discussion in relation to yoga I suggest we add two further polarities along a vertical dimensions: *Repetitive Sensory Numbing* and *Drug Inducement*, rhythmic trance created by repetitive numbing of the senses is known to most of us. It happens in situations of continuous monotonous input: rhythmic dance; whirling around; drumming; hypnotic talk; repetitive music etc..

Finally, the dimension of drug inducement; we all know what drugs like LSD, ecstasy, Mescaline etc. can do to our minds<sup>422</sup>. Let us call this form of trance “hallucinatory”. If we compare such drugs with strongly calming drugs like opium, and then have a look at the map of ASC, we can start to plot some of these technologies in relation to each other.

### *A circular map of trance (ASC)*



Now some examples: LSD moves the mind along the combined direction of drug induction and sensory overload (left corner) while opium moves the mind in the combined direction of drug induction and sensory deprivation (right corner). Many styles of focused meditation aim for sensory deprivation as the meditator shuts down the senses (a horizontal move towards right). However, other meditators might enter meditation through mantra recitation – endless repetition of a word - and they accordingly move up the dimension of

repetitive numbing (left). The map in other words allows us to compare and measure various types of ASC.

The map indicates a centre – the dark core. This symbolises our daily normal consciousness and could be described in Freud's words as the ego function. A. Geel (1982) discusses two important attempts to illuminate the relationship between ego and ASC – or trance. It is based on the famous experiments with meditators which A.J. Deikman conducted in the 1960s, and the psychoanalytical theories of S. Ariete. Processes of cognition are here seen to be processes of increasing differentiation, articulation and interpretation as inputs and impressions are propelled from lower centres to higher centres of consciousness. What commences in lower forms of consciousness as fragmented, non-verbal and nebulous becomes final perception and articulation in the ego function of consciousness. In this context meditation (and ecstasy, creativity, intuition, spontaneity, rage) can be seen as a de-differentiation – a reversal – of these differentiation processes as the meditator moves from ego into ASC, as indicated on the map above. Moving into trance – de-differentiating – in this interpretation, means re-activating primitive, associative, pre-verbal cognitive processes<sup>423</sup>.

### **The implications of dimensions**

So the overall idea is that these technologies “move” the mind out of the ego area (the centre of the circle) into somewhere in the larger circle area named ‘trance’. Or, to put it differently, the overarching function of consciousness is either muted or just simply pushed away/ overridden by sub-systems of consciousness. In either event, it will be experienced as trance or ASC. The employment of a common denominator of trance does not indicate that it is all the same phenomenological experience occurring. On the contrary! The point is that these technologies will send the mind in very different phenomenological directions. Even when moving out of a given dimension such as drugs, you do not experience the same thing when taking alcohol, nerve pills or LSD! The idea of dimension also gives an idea of how much one moves into trance: if you stray too far on a given dimension the overall system will shut down and consciousness will move into a self protective coma. We are in an anaesthetised or cataleptic trance (no reaction to even strong stimuli, the autonomic nervous system shuts down to a minimum, a person incapable of action).

The ancient Indian meditation traditions might have had other expressions for this extreme end of the dimension of sensory deprivation namely the Brahmin *turya* or the Buddhist *sannavedayita-nirodha* (Griffith 1981). The dark grey line of the largest circle indicates this. If we move beyond that, death awaits us as our organs shut down completely.

### **A simple theory of the transformative meaning of yoga as it emerged**

Asceticism – sitting in the sun, fasting, not sleeping for days – will put most of us into deep trance. Some ascetic technologies – pain, heat – clearly point in the direction of sensory overload, while others like isolation, silence – point in the direction of sensory deprivation. It should be no surprise to us when such ascetics report “voices and visions”.

This last point indicates that with these considerations we have established the outline of a theory for how different people in different cultures from a technological point of view arrived at different ‘revelations’ and ‘mystical experiences’. By the help of technologies of consciousness they have brought their minds into states of trance allowing ‘creative’ sub-systems to dominate and penetrate awareness. These experiences – like those in modern submersion tank experiments - have been interpreted in what would over time develop into religio-philosophical doctrines. In the water tank experiment psychologists believe that we experience sub-systems of the brain becoming active. Had we been able to place Bronze- or Iron-age man in the tank, we might have been told about visions and speeches of ancestor spirits.

Finally, the map gives us a clear orientation of proto-yogic technologies as they emerged. They were about stilling the mind. One of the yoga technologies is called *pratyahara* – to switch off the senses. The resulting mortified mind – a still mind deprived of all sensory inputs - means we are in deep trance as consciousness has moved far in the direction of sensory deprivation. The question is what meaning yogis gave to those experiences in relation to the individual and society. This is what their yoga culture is about – giving their experiences transformative meaning to the individual and symbolic meaning to society.

### **The contest of how we should talk about such experiences**

The issue of giving meaning to such trance experiences – the subject of discourses - is often highly contested and politicised. Take LSD, which was highly in vogue in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The LSD trip was often interpreted as ‘expansion of consciousness’ – whatever that may mean. This rhetoric among “liberals” would often implicitly approve and even recommend LSD (we all “needed to expand our mind”) and it had a clearly critical aim towards “conservatives” whose “narrow mindedness would benefit from getting high”.

This endorsement later received support from scholars like S. Grof, who gave the experience a Freudian psychoanalytic signification - even sometimes with Jungian archetypal twists. People would in Grof’s drug experiments report memories of experiences happening before and during their birth. Soon, there were even people who claimed that LSD brought them ‘near god’ or even gave ‘god realisation’: similar experiences, different ways to talk about them; to give them meaning.

Many of the hippies disapproved strongly of such religious interpretations or discourses. Critiques of LSD, on the other hand, would typically interpret the LSD trip in bio-medical terms and talk about it as ‘hallucination’. Their discourse would typically highlight the many potential dangers of LSD: psychological, social and bio-chemical disintegration of the user. So the same LSD-induced experience fuelled numerous discourses emerging and clashing.

This also happened to the ASC generated by many if not most yoga techniques, as we shall see in this book. In the various yoga discourses, however, not only is the interpretation and meaning disputed and politicised, but also the description of what the technique and experience actually consist of. There is no agreement as to how to create the “yoga trip” or what it actually consists of.

The theory of consciousness as sketched above does not, in my opinion, reduce the individual yogic experiences to simply ‘trance’. It recognises that the technologies of yoga might produce very specific and unique phenomenological experiences. It further underlines the issue of intersubjectivity – that the yogic experience is defined by and gets its meaning from its context of doctrine and society.

I believe this model to be a *humanistic interpretation* as discussed by D. L. Pals (1994) in a paper on how to explain ‘religious experiences’. Such a humanistic interpretation explains the meaning of yoga (and religion) in relation to the individual in the same way as it would explain poetry, paintings, philosophy, law or music. They are creations of and relate to conscious human intelligence, will and feeling. So here yoga discourse is not reduced to something else (opium for the oppressed, sub-conscious processes, collective projections) but explained as emerging on its own from human actions and their interpretations. Humans can create *semi-autonomous cultural practices*, producing experiences, emotions and interpretations that thrill and enchant us to such a degree that we move into further explorations of actions and interpretations. His cultural history of yoga explores the symbolic and power aspects of such semi-autonomous cultural practices and how they are affected by it.

Such a psychological theory clearly needs to be complemented with the sociological explanation of the intersubjective meaning of yoga as sketched in this chapter. It is a new way of talking about yoga challenging older hegemonic ways.

# Appendix 2 – The *Yoga Sutra* discourse of modernism

## Key Concepts

Classical yoga

Yoga tradition

Modernist filter

Dominant/hegemonic reading

*This contemplation investigates how modernist yoga discourse introduces new significance to the Yoga Sutra (YS) by informing it with signs like ‘classical yoga’ and ‘tradition’. It is shown that there is within modernist yoga discourse a subtle re-definition and guidance of what should be our interest and concern in studying yoga. I show how modernist habitus draws our attention toward certain details while excluding other aspects. To describe this process, I use the term ‘filtering’: taken-for-granted codes. Thus this is a contemplation – based on de-constructing the two signs ‘classical yoga’ and ‘tradition’ - of how we all unintentionally filter the notions of yoga. Finally I show how fascination and choice of methodology can amplify this filtering with the risk of turning academia into theology.*

*Hence this chapter is mainly for readers who propagate and research yoga.*

### The modernist yoga discourse of the ‘classical yoga’ tradition

Based on the last part of the chapter on Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra*, readers may wonder why there is today so much talk – a discourse - about ‘classical yoga’ and a ‘tradition’ placing the YS at the centre of the canon of that alleged ‘philosophical tradition’. Most readers would have concluded that a few commentaries struggling to understand the YS plus some spread references to the YS in other text sources, hardly make a philosophical tradition.

To answer that, according to Mark Singleton in his paper *The Classical Reveries of Modern Yoga* (2008), we have to jump forward in time to between 1850 and 1900 AD. At that

time European [Orientalists](#) and Hindu nationalists conducted half a dozen translation projects of the *YS*. It was within this discourse that the ideas of a ‘classical yoga’ and ‘tradition’ appeared. It was, according to Singleton, all part of a major undertaking showing the magnificence of ancient Indian culture to the West.

Orientalists recognised that the *YS* and its accompanying handful of commentaries gave a dedicated, systematic and broad exposition of yoga and its philosophy. Hence the minds focussed on the *YS*. However, the translation projects of the *YS* encountered the problem that the Orientalists could not identify any local Sanskrit experts with knowledge of the *YS*. The translation of the *YS* was not a straightforward exercise. The treatise could in some respects be compared to a contemporary high-tech manual. As we know such a manual often requires a translator with engineering expertise in order to translate its many technical terms. According to Singleton, the technical expertise required for a translation of the *YS* was simply not available in colonial India.

Nevertheless, the projects did manage to deliver much awaited translations. In these, *YS* was typically brushed up and presented in an Orientalist and [Neo-Hindu discourse](#). It was claimed that the *YS* embodied a ‘*classical yoga tradition*’. There was nothing new in framing the *YS* as a part of ‘ancient Hindu teaching system’. The *YS* had for a long time been celebrated by the Indians themselves as one of the six [\*darsanas\*](#). *Darsana* can be translated as “teaching”. However in a modernist Western context *darsana* became equivalent to a ‘philosophical system’, a more demanding notion, than the modest word ‘teaching’. This means that the *YS* teachings, a compilation of rather incompatible and incomprehensible verses, were presented as an *intellectual system* which was logically coherent, rationally ordered and orderable. Such a construct was highly viable and desirable in the cultural ecosystem of Western modernity. But it was not critically investigated if the *YS* was to live up to its new status. The task was rather to “prove” that it was exactly as philosophically consistent as it was assumed to be.

It was the ambition of this Orientalist and Neo-Hindu discourse to present Indian high-caste religio-philosophy as equivalent to rational Greek philosophy. As Greek philosophy was seen to be the cornerstone of Western science, this would prove that the wisdom of ancient India was in accordance with Western Science which it predated (Singleton 2008, Liberman 2008). By applying the word ‘classical’ to the six *darsanas*, these texts were expected to be treated with similar respect and admiration to the Greek classical text tradition. As the European Renaissance and humanism had rediscovered and been inspired by the classical Greek tradition, so the world was now once more to excavate and learn from a similar zenith of brilliant intellectual and rational endeavours. Once more, the yoga discourse had become a Totem associated with images, signs, imitations, and agendas of a specific historical sign system.

In this modernist religio-philosophical spin – or discourse - the *YS* was constructed as a rather rational and yet mystical philosophical treatise. In the midst of opaque and knotty verses the reader was guided towards a rational core. Hence, in this discourse the [\*vibhuti\*](#) aspect of yoga – its supernatural powers – was downplayed and defined as a distraction. The same de-emphasis happened to all the Brahmin rituals in the *YS*.

Secondly, this modernist spin, using the rhetoric of ‘an ancient tradition’, signalled that this yoga philosophy had been kept alive by a tradition of pious, intellectual and meditating Yogi monks: the ‘yoga tradition’. This ‘tradition’, which had become (almost?) extinct, as it was ‘covered with superstition and religion’, was now going to be revitalised. This spin or discourse also implied that the *jogi* identity – the vicious wizard – disappeared out of elitist official history.

Even if it was clear that the tradition had gradually become extinct, it was not clear when this actually happened. When did this classical period commence and when did it fade away? It was as if the Orientalists stood with a snapshot photo in their hand and fantasised that it was part of a video recording of a long extended process.

### The filtering of modernistic YS discourse

The discourse of the ‘classical yoga tradition’, with its essence and philosophy defined in the ancient YS, is still alive and well maintained in modernist yoga discourse. The 20 century has witnessed countless translations and hermeneutical explanations of the YS. In such works Hindu theologians, yoga scholars, and yoga popularisers are all trying to find the ‘truth of yoga’ – a rational, wise and coherent system at the heart of meditative mysticism - which generation after generation of Yogi sages have truthfully carried over (the word ‘tradition’ is Latin in origin (*tradere*) and means “to carry or hand over”). Many contemporary popularisers believe that this essence gives meaning to their practice.

After more than 150 years, modernist YS research is still preoccupied by translation-related issues, explaining the opaque notions and line of arguments; correcting previous explanations and interpretations; classifying and re-classifying what parts are related and what not; resolving issues related to Buddhist and Samkhya philosophy; and discussing authorship and historical dating.

There is still a clear emphasis on the philosophical and meditative aspects of the YS. This is not surprising, as it is a daunting and challenging task to make sense of these aspects of YS. What is similarly clear, however, is that the aspects of the supernatural powers, the rituals, the magical, and the chanting are de-emphasised.<sup>424</sup> Why does this matter?

It shows that the YS is still exposed to strong modernistic filtering. Imagine that the main interest of the YS, as it was compiled, was those low-prioritised aspects; that the meditation aspect did not bother people at that time – what counted was the magic, the power, the rituals; and that the compiler only included the meditative aspects - which he possibly did not understand - because for some reason he felt obliged to do so. We do not know the answer to this problem of relevance.

If we look into the research of the neighbouring Buddhist modernism, we will see that there is ample field research into the lives of Buddhist monks in Japan, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Tibet (Scharf 1995, Williams 2005, McMahan 2008). Such studies show that most of the monks, if not all, do not meditate much. Their daily life is filled up with totally different concerns like performing rituals, managing demons, protecting ancestors, accumulating merits for the next cycle of life, praying for rain, healing the sick, running the monastery. So field

research confirms that the Buddhist canon has symbolic value. Holy scriptures are –and most probably always were - mainly used for recitation, worship and display. They were totems – object associated with signs and symbols. The monks did not understand the content. The content – the technical meaning of the various meditative mind states of Buddhist cannon – had no use-value for them. For the monks, the main concerns were to build up merit in this life. Liberation from *samsara* through meditation and wisdom were for them utterly out of reach in this life. We can assume that in traditional Buddhism, as it was practised in pre-modern societies, meditation had little use-value but great symbolic-value. However within Buddhist modernism meditation came to the forefront of practice due to the filtering of modernism – our tacit orientations, ontology, concerns and assumption (McMahan 2008). So for us, today, Buddhism equals meditation, a strong filtering of pre-modern Buddhism.

We have to consider the possibility that the same conclusions apply to pre-modern and modernist yoga discourse. Maybe texts like the *YS* did not play any role worth mentioning in the daily life of yoga professionals and sympathisers. This is not easy to investigate, because unlike the existence of Buddhist monks, there is very little evidence of identities of ‘Yogis’ or ‘Yogi monks’.

The only example of a historical social group labelling itself ‘Yogi’, is the medieval Nath *jogis*. Their descendants are still found in India. It is interesting in our context that there are ethnographic works studying the lives of contemporary Nath *jogis*. The *Naths* could be described as a rural based *jati* – a caste or community. Today the Naths often live a normal family life, living from livestock for instance, or as shopkeepers. This is called a ‘householder’ as in opposition to an ‘ascetic mendicant life’. We often tend to connect yoga with ascetic itinerants but maybe the main groups practising yoga were householders of the elites.

In any case among the Nath *jogis* we find many Yogi householders and we see that most of their time is not spent in meditation and striving for liberation. The householder Nath *jogi* can in many ways be seen as a ‘folk’ competitor to the Brahmin householder offering similar services. According to the Nath *jogi* experts Gold and Gold:

“Respected religious experts, Naths perform a number of roles, explicitly connected with their yogic identities. They serve as worship priest (pujaris) in many regional Siva temples and shrines, and as repositories of healing and protective knowledge, possessing spells that provide succour for various afflictions.” (Gold and Gold 2012, p. 290)

At night some of them conduct burial rites accompanied by their songs – *bhajans* – educating the soul. So these recent studies might raise the suspicion that most of pre-modern India’s religious experts, like the Buddhist monks, were preoccupied with much more mundane and metaphysical tasks (like demon management) than in meditating for prolonged periods.

This should lead us to some reflections. Maybe the liberation efforts highlighted by our modernistic filtering played no significant role in daily yoga culture? The primary function that the holy yoga scriptures had in relation to daily life was as transmitters of social symbolic communication? With good reason we can wonder if yoga texts like the *YS* primary were *totems* – objects generating a social field of difference, meaning and status for those having them in their possession? We can further wonder if the “inner technical world of the texts” was largely unknown - except by an insignificant elite? Perhaps what counted was instead the

“symbolic world of the texts” – their power to differentiate and give people a social identity in life?

### The lack of critique and cross-disciplinary studies

What comes to mind in much modernist yoga discourse is the lack of critical investigation of the issues discussed above. Such accommodating attitudes are often termed ‘*dominant reading*’ or ‘*hegemonic reading*’ (the reader is reproducing the codes and ideology of the texts). Unlike in Buddhism, the reader does not find, much epistemological and ideological critique of the *YS*. It is not that philosophical critique – ‘counter-hegemonic reading’ or ‘oppositional reading’ - does not exist, but it has not found its way into the yoga discourse.

However for those who find that the *YS* *de facto* documents meditative stages, it is a serious constraint that they do not conduct critical experimental and psychological investigations of the *YS*. Why is it so? This is because much contemporary *YS* research is restricted by a hermeneutic-phenomenological methodology of translating, reporting, comparing and explaining. Within this research programme it is not meaningful or conducive to ask if the minute and extreme detailed phenomenological reports of the *YS* are reliable and correct.

There is little research based on for instance the scholars’ own, or other peoples’ meditative experiences. Do meditators really have these ‘Samkhya experiences’, when they are meditating? Other traditions often give different descriptions of meditative experiences – how come? In other words, we lack research confronting the signs of the *YS* with living experience.<sup>425</sup>

Breaking out of these limitations, we could easily imagine a Sanskrit professor, working with social psychologists, dividing the students into for instance three long-term meditation groups: one group getting *YS* instruction, one getting for instance Zen instruction and the third getting only the most basic instruction. Would the groups deliver different phenomenological reports? Would the group having *YS* instruction report the experiences predicted by the *YS*? If the *YS* students reported *YS* experiences, and the Zen students reported Zen experiences, what conclusions should we draw? Or what would we conclude if all the groups to everybody’s surprise, produced reports similar to those of Christian mystics’?

Such experimental studies could throw new light on the *YS*. It might, confirm that the rich, minute and detailed description of various meditative states are empty. One could then investigate, whether the text is a philosophical treaty trying to visualise the implications of the categories of Samkhya, if applied to human consciousness.

Scholars could reply that it is not their job as Sanskrit experts to conduct cross-disciplinary studies. However, it is a serious limitation which could mislead the research. Imagine to give an example which might be provocative, that we studied the reports of people who claim that they had been kidnapped and kept imprisoned by aliens in spaceships for prolonged periods. We could of course limit our studies to describe, systematise, classify, and compare these experiences. We would do that in order to find the ‘truth about aliens’, their spaceships’ interior, their habits and language, their treatments of and relationships to humans.

It is evident that such research restricting itself to “the inside of the alien kidnappers discourse” risks missing the point of what such kidnapping accounts are about. Only adopting a critical attitude, engaging with psychology, sociology, politics and history, would allow us to explore “the outside of the kidnapping discourse”, which might give a rather different picture of what is happening.

### **Theology and romanticism**

I believe that what distinguishes academia from theology is a sceptical and critical attitude *towards fundamental assumptions*. Due to such lack of a critical attitude, some of the modernist YS readings are often at best labelled ‘theology’, “the reflexive self-description of a religious tradition *expressing* its religious ideas rather than talking *about* them” (Flood 1999). Many texts arriving from an Indian *swami* are indeed of this kind, but they do not try to play down their theological origin.

The label ‘theology’ does not exclude the possibility that exciting and revealing translations and interpretations can be produced. Far from it. However if academia wants to distinguish itself from theology, it needs in addition to introduce ideological and philosophical critiques of fundamental assumptions of the text.

The scholar should not be blinded by his fascination and admiration of the ‘ancient wisdom of the sages’. We see this lack of critical attitude clearly in the 19 century Orientalists’ romanticist idealisation of India as the ‘cradle of spirituality’ and ‘moral saviour of the West’. Such works sometimes reveal that they are often guided by romantic nostalgia which might explain the lack of critique. The reader will even today in some contemporary research find such biases, blessing the wisdom of spiritual sages, often revealed in the foreword of such works.

### **Modernist yoga discourse: A ‘YS tradition’ of signs or of usage**

Finally, some words on the claims of a living yoga tradition founded and expressed by the YS. Over and over, during more than two hundred years of modernist yoga discourse, it is claimed there was a strong and vibrant Indian philosophy-based yoga tradition. It is admitted that it was maybe a bit meagre at the end of the nineteenth century, but it went then through a strong revival. Many books will accordingly display ‘yoga tradition’ in their titles.

But the existence of a living yoga tradition is and remains a *claim*. To my knowledge, there has been no systematic investigation as to whether there is such a philosophical based living yoga tradition. Countless books take it as their tacit starting point. The problem I raise is, what actually constitutes a ‘tradition’: how is it defined; what is it that is handed over; what defines the boundaries - the content or the people - of the tradition. Further, how often, how regularly and how much do we need to see the indications of a tradition throughout history, before we can conclude there actually is a tradition? Before talking about ‘tradition’ it is wise to contemplate what is understood by the word.

The reader might think that clearly there must be a tradition, as so many texts mention yoga. The issue I have raised is that even if the text mentions and briefly discusses yoga it does not imply that the text referred to any social reality. Maybe yoga was rather a symbolic notion

– a sign communicating certain messages to its audience. A *simulacrum* – a copy without original. What do I mean?

We know from daily discourse that we sometimes refer to the ‘love of Jesus’, the ‘mercy of Allah’ or the ‘compassion of Buddha’. Often even if we use such notions they do however not play any role at all in our practical daily life – which is guided by other often opposite concerns. Such rhetoric rather has a function in our self-image and the image we would like to signal to others. It has no real content and is purely a sign world. We need to consider whether a relatively frequent rhetoric of yoga does not imply the widespread usage or practice of yoga.

Even if the use of the word *yoga* did point to a practising reality, we do not know if the speaker or writer had any actual knowledge of the 1500 year old signifier. How many people, who mention Einstein’s theory of relativity are able to explain it?

Our modernist filtering might orientate us to assume that when the signifier ‘*yoga*’ is mentioned, it refers to a meditating practice (the referent). There must be such a yogic meditative tradition, as ‘*yoga*’ is mentioned so often. But because contemporary discourse in for instance films, books, newspapers, and music frequently contemplates Buddhist compassion, we cannot conclude that people at the turn of 21 century have converted to Buddhism. Neither can we conclude that the existence of such a discourse indicates, that a new ‘tradition of compassion’ is emerging. The use of the signifier could be purely symbolic rather than pointing to a reality of practice and use.

As we progress through this cultural history of *yoga* there are many indications that *yoga* texts are mainly totems or social signs. There is a strong suspicion that they do not point at a reality – towards usage and use-value – but instead are pure signs in people’s discourse. They are what Baudrillard calls *simulations*. If this holds true, we have to re-evaluate our perception of the *yoga* ‘tradition’.

The word ‘tradition’ was – and still is – in Indian theological- and popular *yoga* discourse used to link the past with the present. This is done with the unstated assumption that because of tradition the present is able to speak with the authority and wisdom of the past. However, as there has never been a proper investigation, if there was for instance a ‘classical *yoga* tradition’, this must therefore remain as wishful thinking.<sup>426</sup> The word ‘tradition’ seems to imply ideology and symbolic power: it signifies the *yoga* specialist with authority and truth.

Based on such imagined ‘classical *yoga* tradition’, the *YS* was incorporated as the “*bible of yoga*” in the modernist *yoga* discourse emerging in late colonial India and in the West. Suffice it to say that contemporary *yoga* students, struggling to make sense of their *yoga* practice in light of the *YS*, might here have an explanation, why their “*bible*” seems to be so distant from their practice. The link between the *YS* and modern practice was deliberately established in order to give authority and authenticity to a favoured sign. In other words: in order to give *symbolic meaning*.

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## End Notes

1 This distinction and analysis here follows the philosopher Jean Baudrillard

2 For further reading on the Humanists, see Davidson (2002) who inspired these thoughts. See also Flood (1999)

3 However I have not specifically addressed the male (chauvinist) ideology intrinsic to most pre-modern yoga discourse, as I find this subject so large that it deserves a book on its own.

4 My sources were therefore mainly existing scholarly literature – often called *secondary sources*. I have however focussed on translations of *primary sources* (translations of Sanskrit texts) in some chapters. My main concerns are to see these texts in relation to *social groups, conflicts and processes!* My aim as a social scientist was *not* to challenge translations of Sanskrit – I leave this to philologists.

5 Those interested in an introduction to these approaches can start with Dean (1994), Belsey (2002) or Couzens Hoy (1986), Featherstone (2011). For a very good introduction to social constructionism see Burr (1995). For a critical discussion of the pitfalls of these approaches see Hackings (2000)

6 A very good overview and summary of the criticism is Morris (2006)

7 For good introductions to post-structuralism see Belsey (2002) and Peters & Burbules (2004)

8 For an outstanding introduction to Cultural Studies, see Barker (2012) and to Cultural Sociology see Schwartz (1997).

9 For a critical article about the outcome of this post-modern research on India, see Eaton (2000). See also David Smith's criticism of "de-constructors" such as R. Inden in Smith (2005). However these criticisms do not shake the deconstructionist approach as such but rather an unhelpful implementations of it.

10 Inden (2000) challenges postmodern approaches as in his opinion they tend to dissolve history into fragmented atoms of separate isolated cultures.

11 For an introduction to the sociology of Bourdieu, see for instance Bourdieu &

Wacquant (1992), Schwartz (1997).

12 Bourdieu produced around 600 texts and most are somewhat difficult to interpret. However there are today several good introductions to his central notions – see Schwartz (1997), Grenfell (2012), Webb, Shirato and Danaher (2002) and Jenkins (2002).

13 This label was originally proposed by de Michelis (2004) and criticised by Singleton (2010)

14 See for instance *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary online*: **Yo;ga** (noun), Sanskrit, *Yoking*, from **yunakti** : he yokes). For a historical investigation of the word yoga see S.N. Dasgupta: *Yoga Philosophy* (1930)

15 White (2009) shows some of the many meanings yoga had. He says that during the first thousand years or so the word was used in significantly different ways.

16 See Hausner (2007) and Clark (2004) who give a good anthropological view of modern yogis.

17 “*Sect*” means here a “small, voluntary and enthusiastic religious community with doctrinal conformity” and is not to be used as in Western tradition where it means a splinter group breaking out from the main church. For a discussion on ‘religious movements’ see Lorenzen (2004)

18 For an overview of modern ascetic sects and their historical origin see (the detailed table of) Michaels (2004). See also the sociologist Ghurye (1953). Another good historical overview and anthropological study of Sadhus is by Gross (1992).

19 See the sociologist Ghurye and the anthropologist Gross – as quoted in the note above. Hindu asceticism here becomes an “anti-institution assimilating the social spill over of a rigid society”.

20 A good discussion is found in Cope (1999).

21 Another recent example of a too broad understanding of yoga is found in Connolly (2007). Larson (2008) similarly criticises such an approach.

22 This option is chosen in *Encyclopaedia of Indian Philosophies vol. 12; Yoga: India's Philosophy of Meditation* (2008) mainly written by the Samkhya and yoga specialist scholar G.J. Larson. As Larson explicitly opts for one interpretation of yoga as *THE* yoga philosophy, he therefore has to classify other styles of yoga - which clearly, as he admits, do not fit in as “satellite and other sectarian systems” - the scholar has made himself the

judge of what is the real and what is the sectarian.

23 Recently David Gordon White (2012, *Introduction*) has claimed that from about 500 AD the meaning of the yoga sign stabilised. Hereafter most yoga discourse was preoccupied with ‘four principles’ or themes. However what White presents as ‘the core principles of yoga’ (each of them is rather ambivalent and one wonders whether if a yoga text only subscribes to two or three of the principles, is the text not to be classified as yoga discourse?) suffers the same problems as the too-broad definitions of yoga. The reader will struggle to decide if a given text either meets the definition or ends up in a situation where almost all of India’s religio-philosophies become ‘yoga’. Thus the problem “what are we actually talking about?” has not been solved.

24 A major critique of applying essentialism to Indian culture and history can for instance be found in Inden: (2006). An example of a recent comprehensive academic/theological analysis of yoga, which ignores the social aspect (i.e. being an ahistorical analysis) is Whicher (1998).

25 Larson (2008) is drawing similar critical conclusions.

26 Psychologists label these *initial classifications*. Initial classifications are said often to be based on “folk understanding” of a phenomenon. Understanding we build up in our daily lives. They are sometimes called *prototype-classifications* and they are unavoidable (Saler 1989). They are fully legitimate, as *any* (!) classification/definition of a phenomenon in the end is subjective. As soon as we say that phenomenon A (i.e. a cow) belongs to classification X (i.e. an animal) we have made a conceptual choice, which we have to be aware of and take responsibility for (Lakoff 1987).

27 As I started to dig through the historical material I could see that I had to apply some restrictions to my approach, as the word yoga – even in a specific technical meaning - was much more widely used than I had imagined. If I did not restrict the scope of research this book would never end. There was for instance the *Yogacara* - meaning “those whose practice is yoga” - a 4-500 AD *Buddhist* branch. Buddhism mostly does not use the word yoga, but here was a branch, which was an exception. So would a detailed study of Yogacara Buddhism not be within the frame of this book? Maybe, but to discuss the extreme sophisticated and complex Yogacara, we would have to dive into very detailed explanations of Buddhist philosophy, which is beyond the scope of the book. So I only briefly mention such discourses as far as they are relevant and try to stick to social strata where the use of the yoga notion was widespread.

28 Collins (1998) points out that intellectual discourses have their own internal dynamic. Their ideas stimulate creations of new ideas charging the individual with emotional energy. This is what I have in mind and I thereby avoid the notions that ideas are *only* passive reflections of social conditions.

[29](#) See for instance Glucklich (2001) who uses a interdisciplinary method in explaining religious behaviour using pain – especially as she employs neuropsychology very innovatively.

[30](#) For an introduction to Bourdieu and 'cultural field' see for instance Jenkins (2002), Webb & Schirato & Danaher (2002), Thompson (2012) and Schwartz (1997).

[31](#) In this chapter I am to a large extent drawing conclusions based on many years as a participant. Since my friends and acquaintances in the 1970s first began to take up yoga – often as a part of shared counterculture, women's lib and left wing milieus – we have of course discussed and analysed our motives and ourselves. So if I for instance conclude that 80% of participants of most yoga classes or spiritual groups are women, then I have little statistical evidence. Rather the feeling comes from my numerous discussions with other participants, when we were asking each other questions like: "*Is it also your experience that yoga classes are joined mainly by women free of child care issues*". Personally I find that such conclusions can often be as reliable as sample tests of sociological research. Anyway there is hardly any empirical data based research on the issues I discuss in this chapter.

[32](#) This process is described by McMahan (2008) in relation to Buddhism.

[33](#) Charles Wilkins translated the *Bhagavad-Gita* to English in 1785.

[34](#) For more about the arrivals of the first gurus – like Paramanada, Yogananda, Krishnamurti - in America see Trout (2001), Albanese (2007) and Syman (2010).

[35](#) For a good overview of how yoga around 1900 intermingled with various social and cultural movements in the West and here mainly in USA, see van der Veer (2001), de Michelis (2004), Singleton (2005, 2007, 2010), Albanese (2007) and Syman (2010).

[36](#) The 20 Century's "invasion" of Hindu culture can be grouped into 4 substreams: yoga, Advaita Vedanta, Bhakti and Tantra – see Forsthoefel & Humes (2005). This chapter will of course mainly focus on the yoga substream.

[37](#) P. Bourdieu is renowned for the countless writings and analyses he has produced of the academic cultural field, see for instance his *Homo Academicus* (1988)

[38](#) To distinguish this new social group from the old middle class it is often labelled the *middle-layer* – i.e. a class of highly educated producers – "white collar workers" – employed in bureaucracies to handle administration and services.

[39](#) In the language of sociologists you could say that women *increasingly* became

subsumed to typical processes of male-dominated societies making women into objects of beauty – fetishism or objectification.

[40](#) Similar ideas have been expressed by the American feminist sociologist N. Chodorow *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978). She argues that women in their role as mothers become primarily occupied with emotional and relational issues. The emotional core of female identity hence become relational – i.e. is occupied by nurturance, empathy, relatedness and care. This female identity building is then theoretically easy to connect with spirituality as an inner process of relatedness.

[41](#) See for instance Heelas (2008) for a overview of the ideological war between romanticism and modernity.

[42](#) A classic work on esotericism, New Age and spirituality is Hanegraaff (1998).

[43](#) This is confirmed by the research of Hanegraaff (2008) who sees Western esotericism – including New Age and occultism - as a hybrid mixture of secular scientist worldviews and enchanted holistic Christian worldviews.

[44](#) Heelas (2008) gives an overview of the vast amount of critical literature on the role of spirituality in contemporary society.

[45](#) Heelas (2008) discusses the relationship between spirituality and consumption. He argues that there is much truth in the criticism, however as he points out the word ‘consume’ is vague and pejorative so he is trying to find a middle ground. See also the criticism of consumer culture in Possamai (2005) and Aldridge (2003).

[46](#) The Austrian business magazine *Trend* describes how the wellness business is classified in the last couple of years as a growth industry creating thousands of jobs : *Die Luegen der Wellness Gurus* (11/2004).

[47](#) For a wealth of examples of spiritual marketing, see Lau (2000).

[48](#) For a left-wing critique of New Age spiritualism, see Carette & King (2004) and Hanegraaff (2008) and for a religio-philosophical critique, see Campbell (2001).

[49](#) Newcombe (2005) undertook a statistical investigation of Iyengar students in Britain. She found that these women were well educated and even if they had a mystical/spiritual bias they did not define themselves as religious.

[50](#) There are lively discussions trying to explain the relationship between religion/spirituality and women – see for instance Walter & Davie 1998 and Stark 2002.

[51](#) Well-known here are for instance the books of the sociologist P. Berger: *The*

*Homeless Mind* (1973) and *The Sacred Canopy* (1967)

52 The are attempts to answer this in Heelas & Woodhead (2001).

53 The study of *identity* is popular in the social sciences today – see for instance Elliott (2007). My comments above are inspired by the sociologist Z. Bauman’s reflections on modern and post-modern identities in books like Bauman (1991, 1993, 1995, 1997).

54 See Ackerman (2002) for an analysis of different social and cultural reactions to life under modernity.

55 Interestingly many of modern India’s ascetics were also initially driven by personal or social problems or existential life crises. See Gross (1992), who concludes that asceticism is an anti-structure in a closed society; an institutional solution for those who struggle to integrate. Storr (1996) similarly says that all spiritual gurus initially had a life crisis in which their “guru-ness” is rooted.

56 For an introduction to the sociology and psychology of identity and self see Elliott (2007) and Giddens (1991).

57 There is an tendency for oppositional movements – like New Age - to attract drop outs and “deviancy” – see Heath & Potter (2005).

58 In the 1990s a new breed of yoga instructors consisting of fitness instructors, dancers and models emerged witnessing how yoga had moved into mainstream popular culture.

59 For a general and interesting analysis of how and why the counterculture transmuted into a consumer culture see Heath & Potter (2005).

60 For more on religion and commodification see for instance Kitiarsa (2008).

61 They even created and dominated the teacher education market. They had the skills to build up and run global enterprises. But their cartel power is breaking up as the market since the 1990s has changed – which is investigated later.

62 See for instance the article by W.J. Broad: *Yoga and Sex Scandals: No Surprise Here* in New York Times 27 February 2012.

63 As in the early 1960s many people will also encounter yoga in evening schools and pre- and post-natal classes. However the yoga of the mass culture is encountered by most in the gym and the studio. For more about the fitness culture and the Gym see Sassatelli (2010).

64 Bourdieu uses the term *hysteresis* to describe the unease an individual experiences

when he/she encounters a habitus to which one does not belong. For further on *hysteresis*, see Hardy 2012.

[65](#) For cultural sociological views of the consumer culture see Sassatelli (2007, 2010) and Lury (2011).

[66](#) The notion was coined by de Michelis (2004).

[67](#) Here is a short overview of the Western yoga class offered from the 90s at the gym or in the yoga studio. The class often commences in absolute silence were students sit in crossed legged meditation pose. The whole class then hums the *om mantra*. The teacher then commences with detailed physical instructions and advice. The first poses are normally gentle stretches: standing forward bending, cat stretches, sideways stretches. During this process deep and slow breathing is established. Then the classes move into different forms of sun-salutation series to warm up the students. This is then often followed by strenuous standing poses like warrior poses and balancing poses. The body is now warmed up, and demanding back bending poses like bow pose and camel pose are performed. The class will often climax with some very demanding poses – true contortions -which normally only very few students can perform. From here the class slows down and moves into floor exercises: hip openers, twists and varieties of sitting forward bends. Finally inversions like shoulder-stands are performed before everybody lies on the floor for a couple of minutes in the relaxation pose – the corpse. Often students then sit up and either do some short breathing exercises (*pranayama*), a little meditation or do some final *om*-humming. In deep silence the students leave the studio – most have hardly said a word to anyone.

[68](#) The highly influential magazine *Yoga Journal* was launched in 1975 circulating 300 copies. By 1990 the circulation had increased to 55,000. (Syman 2010)

[69](#) For those interested in how systems suddenly undergo significant eruptions without any warning signs see P. Ball: *Critical Mass – how one thing leads to another* (2004)

[70](#) Theos Bernard: *Heaven lies within us – yoga gave me superior Health* (1939) is also promising much in its title

[71](#) For other general sociological discussions on identity and society see Lury (2011), Giddens (1991), Taylor (1989), Jenkins (1996) and Hoffman (1996.)

[72](#) See for instance the works of Bauman or Featherstone (2011), Elliott (2007).

[73](#) For more about identity, fitness and consumer culture see Bordo (1993), Smith Maguire (2007), Sassatelli (2007, 2010), Glassner (1992).

74 Under the post-modern condition the technical-transformative goal of yoga – sometimes called the *sacred* - has become a symbol: the idealised individual ‘*true self*’. This post-modern self/identity is discussed by scholars like the American social-psychologist R. Baumeister and the Polish/British sociologist Z. Bauman.

75 For more about the negotiations and creations of the individuals, see Sassatelli (2007, 2011) and Barker (2012).

76 For five typical examples of professionals using yoga to improve their professions and to help them to cope with a demanding life see Brown (April 2005) which starts with following sub-heading: “*Five high-profile professionals who deal with HIGH-OCTANE stress say the best defenses against it are YOGA and MEDITATION*”.

77 The British sociologist B.S. Turner (1984 & 1992) has explored further how one can through the body influence self and knowledge.

78 This is a main theme in the criticism of McCutcheon (1997) of what he terms the *sui generis discourse* and of which he gives the following excellent summary: “.... it generally consists in the use of vaguely defined and subjective comparative categories (e.g., the ultimate, the sacred, feelings, mystery); a methodology which that can be characterized as sympathetic, or descriptive, hermeneutical intuitivism; an emphasis on the study of the personalistic and nonfalseable contents of religious experiences; a prioritised insider’s perspective – all of which contributes to an ecumenical theology of religious pluralism. It is a perspective that privileges religious phenomena by removing them from the realm of theoretical and materialistic analysis. And in large part it is a perspective that has not changed since the nineteenth century.” (1997).

79 P. Bourdieu in his sociolocial investigations spends much time on what he called *reflexivity*. Here he laid bare his reflections on his own methodology and in fact tightly integrated his philosophical and methodological self-reflections into his research project. See for instance Deer (2012).

80 Many other Orientalists saw Indian culture as inferior and degenerate. Orientalism has since the momentous E. Said: *Orientalism* (1991) been under intensive critique and discussions – see for instance King (1999b), J.J. Clarke (1997) and A.L. Macfie (2000).

81 The claim that yoga was a *science* emerged among the Indian colonial elite based in Calcutta – the *bhadralok*. See Brekke (2002).

82 These arguments are building on McMahan (2008) who argues that modernist Buddhism is subsumed this same process.

83 See Stein (1998) who analyses the new state based Indian middle class. See also Killingley (2005).

84 W. Halbfass is often quoted for the exchange of ideas between India and the West.

85 Everywhere in Asia the Buddhist discourse ran through exactly the same processes of protestantisation: reforming and cleaning up the mystical and the ritual in order to return to the original, rational and classical (Borup 2008).

86 Before 1900 AD the main target was to build *a nation* as such and from about 1920 the *Hindu* aspect of nation building became central witnessed by the emergence of a range of specific Hindu organisations like the founding of the Hindu Mahasabha in 1915 and the RSS in 1925 – see Metcalf (2002) and Ram-Prasad (2005).

87 See Grieves & Weiss (2005b) for discussions of how traditions are not just habits but also contemporary inventions and re-configurations. It is maintained that religious traditions often are social projects deliberately constructed to serve present ideological ends.

88 This idea is still widespread. It seems that many contemporary yoga scholars and yoga popularisers – often very critical of Western modernity - have become entangled in this discourse of proving that East is “better” and “more ancient” than West.

89 See Oman’s (1905) ethnographic study: most Sadhus around 1900 were members of monastic orders, which in fact were filled with an illiterate *Lumpenproletariat*. One abbot complained that only one in hundred were Sadhus – the rest were “scum”.

90 Another source widely read by contemporaries was P. Brunton: *A Search in secret India* (1934) – an esoteric and romantic journalist’s meeting with yogis – some practising ‘yoga of body control’. It seems to consist of 30 different *asanas* held for prolonged periods of time. Their serious, but secret practice, was however *pranayama*. These yogis were hard to find – most yogis Brunton met were impostors and impoverished drifters and tramps.

91 Bernard probably never received the training he claimed, but it was rather his father who received it whilst travelling in India a decade earlier (Symon 2010)

92 According to Brekke (2002) Vivekananda turned yoga and Hinduism from a collective and communal event in which a person participated, into an individual internal experience, a change identical to the Protestantism of Luther and Calvin. ‘Protestant Hinduism and yoga’, we could call this. Piety and internalisation were required in protestant Hindu private life from now on – it was not sufficient to participate in prescribed collective rituals. Buddhism went through exactly the same process of re-vitalisation as Protestantism – see Bond (1988) and Eckel (2000).

93 These 84 *asanas* are today very influential and influenced the Bikram style yoga.

94 See for instance Bender Birch (2004).

95 The following pages introduce the people who mainly influenced *popular* postural yoga in India from the 1920's and who *after* WW2 influenced the West. There are countless other tiny groupings of followers of an Indian Guru (or a westerner who has studied different forms of yoga in India and now promotes it by writing books, making classes and retreats) who influenced modern postural yoga. For instance there was *Kundalini yoga*, which apparently was brought to Los Angeles in 1969 by the Sikh yogi *Bhajan*. Kundalini yoga, a dynamic and ecstatic yoga, also has a strong following today, maybe 1 million.

96 Most often the *hatha-yoga* ideas have to be incorporated to make any sense of practice – see for instance Smith (2008)

97 An analysis of Iyengar is found in De Michelis (2004).

98 Disikachar (2005) - The author is the grandson of Krishnamacharya. He delivers many anecdotal details and seems to confirm the official family version of the great man very faithfully. Krishnamacharya claimed he knew *six different styles of yoga* – *krana* - and a style was applied to a student depending on the student's age and condition. As most of the students of Krishnamacharya were very young they were taught *srsti krama* (i.e. *vinyasa*), which is a strenuous *asana* based yoga. Accordingly this is why the yoga brought to West by the students like Iyengar and Jois is often so physically demanding: as young teenagers they were themselves taught strenuous yoga appropriate to their age group.

99 A student for many years of Krishnamacharya is Ramaswami who also offers some stories about the guru and his disciples (2005). He calls the *srsti Krana* (see previous note) *vinyasa yoga* – which is the name now used in the West for a floating movement in and out of *asanas* combined with deep calm breathing.

100 Ramaswami (2005). This student of Krishnamacharya claims that *ashtanga* yoga is mainly a copy of sequences from a scripture he calls *Yoga Makaranda* combined with some of Krishnamacharya's own sequences. He maintains that Krishnamacharya normally taught a less aggressive form of *vinyasa yoga* or movement based yoga than Jois'.

101 Smith (2008) gives an overview of the series and how Jois and his students interpret them in a context of *tapas* discourse.

102 For a critical investigation of modern Indian spirituality's – especially Sivananda's - involvement in Hindu nationalism see McKean (1996).

103 Post WW2 Indian religious movements sweeping the West like *Transcendental Meditation*, Bhagwan Rajnesh (Osho) and his orange Sanyasins and Sri Ravi Shankars *Art of Living Foundations* have *not* positioned themselves as specific yoga schools. They

have rather entered the West as popular Eastern offering of religion for the individual (i.e. *individualised religions*).

[104](#) I have not spent much energy in showing how India influenced Western thought in the 19 and early 20 century (Clarke 1997, van der Veer (2001). It was more appropriate in this study to show how India's metropolitan middle classes reacted to Western onslaught of colonialism, modernity and Christianity (Evangelicalism).

[105](#) This is well documented in Brekke (2002). For further theoretical underpinning of this notion of 'horizons of understanding' see the works of the philosopher H. G. Gadamer like *Truth and Method* (1960).

[106](#) For further discussions of how traditions configure themselves giving social identity and ideological ammunition, see Grieve & Weiss (2005).

[107](#) See Alter (2004) for further comments on the myth of the true yoga form.

[108](#) This link is not as obvious as most people today tend to believe: the medieval *hatha-yoga* – although it was a discourse preoccupied with the body – never gave *asana* any priority in relation to final goals of practice. Further the body signified by medieval *hatha-yoga* was primarily a Tantric metaphysical entity – [the subtle body](#). This subtle body sign should not be confused with a Western orientation of the body – the chemical - and mechanical processes we signify with the flesh.

[109](#) We have seen how for Sivananda's and Swami Rama's yoga as a part of a healthy Hindu lifestyle was a mutation of this national reform oriented scientific yoga discourse. On the surface these gurus transformed its nationalism into globalism and universalism; but they did not change its core use-values of physical and accompanying metaphysical and psychological transformation. Still behind the gurus' internationalism and universalism we glimpse proud nationalism and symbolic representation. The repressed British colonial subject signalling to the Christian imperialist: it is *you* who needs reform. "*We are the spiritual agents of mystical East with ancient roots coming to the West to reform your materialism and superficiality*". The imagined holy lifestyle of a spiritual athletic ascetic, sold as a missionary product.

[110](#) In some popular yoga books one finds that yoga is described as reaching back to the Indus civilisation 4-5000 years ago, based on clay tablets found which showed a person sitting with crossed legs wearing a hat with horns. I do not agree with this; I believe one needs instead to have a structural *contextual* approach. That means we have to interpret and evaluate things in a historical context of supporting evidence. There has to be a cluster of historical evidence whose components mutually support each other, not just a single sign.

111 The term '*Axial Age*' was coined in 1949 by the existential philosopher K. Jaspers and further developed as a comparative sociological notion by S.N. Eisenstadt. Often its use is restricted to the cultural sphere. It here signifies among other things what the sociologist Bellah (2011) calls the advent of 'thinking about thinking' - abstract thinking or meta-thinking. It took place among new strata of often itinerant intellectuals, who criticised prevailing conditions and circumstances. I primarily use this term in order to highlight the underlying and general *process of civilisation*. It was *civilisation as such* which conditioned this breakthrough of human ability to think about thinking: " All these civilizations display literacy, a complex political organization combining central government and local authorities, elaborate town-planning, advanced metal technology and the practice of international diplomacy. In all these civilizations there is a profound tension between political powers and intellectual movements. Everywhere one notices attempts to introduce greater purity, greater justice, greater perfection and more universal explanation of things" (A. Momigliano: *Alien Wisdom* p. 9). In other words I use the notion 'Axial Age' as suggested by Jan Assmann (2012) as an *analytical tool*. Thus the notion 'Axial Age civilisation' forces us to lift our view from the local and to look for comparative explanations among more abstract sociological and evolutionary categories. For further discussions on Axial Age, see Bellah and Joas (ed) (2012).

112 Some historical introductions to ancient India: Witzel (2003), Michaels:(2004), Samuel (2008), Thapar (2002).

113 See Quigley (1993) and Michaels (2004), Samuel (2008) and Desika Char (1993) for accounts of the caste system. For a critical analysis of the caste concept see Dirks (2001).

114 For a socio-historical view see Thapar (1995, 2000, 2002), Inden (2006).

115 The ritual and the Brahmins went through dramatic changes over time – see R. Eaton (1993) who also gives a good overview of R. Inden's research on this topic.

116 For details of urbanisation and the transformation into petty states see for instance Erdosy (1988), Allchin (1995), Gat (2008), Graweber (2011) and Thapar (1990, 2002). Some scholars claim that the *Upanishads* - as they do not mention towns and trade - actually precede urbanisation. Bronkhorst (2007) argues that the *Upanishads* ignore urbanisation.

117 White (2009) traces a different early meaning of yoga. It is in relation to the notion *yoga-yukta*. This notion is related to a dying warrior who lashes himself to his chariot so his soul can go to heaven and penetrate the disc of the sun.

118 The sociologist R. Collins (1998) for instance in his comprehensive sociological history of intellectuals treats the groups where yoga was emerging – the Sramanas and the Brahmins – as intellectuals practising philosophy. For a comparison between ancient Indian and Greek philosophy and society see Obeyesekere 2002.

[119](#) See Seaford (2004) who in the case of Greece shows a close connection between the surfacing of the financial institution and abstract philosophical thinking. For further, see also Bellah (2011).

[120](#) There was an extensive contact between Greek and Indian intellectuals, see A. Kuzminski: *Pyrrhonism – How the Ancient Greeks reinvented Buddhism* (2010), D. Vassiliades: *The Greeks in India* (2000) and McEville (2002)

[121](#) All the quotations from Megasthenes in this module are from J.W. McCringle: *Ancient India as described by Megasthenes* (1877, new ed. 1926).

[122](#) Here I draw on the thinking of the cultural sociologist of P. Bourdieu. For good introductions to this complex writer see Schwartz 1997, Webb, Schirato and Danaher (2002) and Jenkins (2002).

[123](#) White (2009) however argues that “yoga” in this founding phase was used in many different ways. Many of them had nothing to do with asceticism or meditation, but were about dying warriors hitching themselves to their rigs or about ritual suicide. Over time these different meanings slowly merged with the meditative yoga notions known today. This might be true but I see the main technical genealogy of yoga as originating in Sramanic discourses and this chapter shows how. What is interesting in White’s analysis is that he shows how the other meanings of yoga identified by him directly link into what I call the symbolic meaning of yoga – i.e. yoga as a discourse of semi-divinity and magical powers.

[124](#) An explanation of proto-definitions can be found in the Chapter [“What are we talking about?”](#)

[125](#) For an overview and discussion of research of Shamanism see Morris (2006), Stone (2003) and Samuel (2008).

[126](#) It is important to include ‘the benefits to the community’ in the definition in order to distinguish Shamanism from spiritual possession, which according to Lewis (1981) tends to have individual aims. For a critical evaluation of the notion ‘Shamanism’ see Kehoe (2000) and Stone (2003).

[127](#) According to Stone (2003) it is important to realise that the Shamanism of the Tungus was a *specific historical form* of Shamanism, in this case a combination of animism and Buddhism. *Shamanism* should in my view be seen as an abstract notion used to discuss various historical forms. In Weber’s terms we might call it an *ideal type*.

[128](#) There has been some criticism of this use of Shamanism as a universal and

transcultural institution, see Atkinson (1992) and Stone (2003) – but used with some caution I believe we can learn a lot about Vedic societies looked through the prism of Shamanism

[129](#) A similar distinction is used by Lincoln (2006) who distinguishes between the status quo and the oppositional function of religion.

[130](#) Some scholars interpret the practice of the Shaman as role-play (imitating spirits) with audience participation according to Stone (2003). I agree this might be an aspect of it but it does not prevent ecstatic trance actually happening.

[131](#) M. Eliade who studied Shamanism shortly before he released his monumental book *Yoga – Freedom and Immortality* did not see the yogi as a late Shaman. He argued, however, that even if the ‘ecstatic Shaman’ was significantly different to the ‘meditative yogi’ he thought that Shamanism provided a cultural *basis* for yoga. I agree with this more cautious view and we will further see that that even if the Vedic society at the time we are now studying was in a process of transformation into civilisations, still a huge part of India was not undergoing that transformation. Here discourses of Shamanism and asceticism in all kinds of mutations survived, developed and influenced much later Tantric yoga discourses.

[132](#) For very different conclusions of the origins of yoga, see Whicher (1998) who search the Vedas for its origin.

[133](#) For details of asceticism see Wimbush & Valantasis (1995), Flood (2004), Glucklich (2001).

[134](#) Converse (1974) – argues that asceticism was common in non-Aryan Indian culture.

[135](#) Two strong proponents are Werner (1989) and Crangle (1994).

[136](#) According to Deeg (1993) the Muni were not even connected with asceticism (*tapas*).

[137](#) These Brahmins *internalised the sacrificial fire* and made themselves a living sacrifice (Heesterman 1964 & 1987, Olson 1997, Olivelle 1992).

[138](#) This has also been investigated by another authority on these matters – Olivelle (1992, 1993). Olivelle (1995b) criticises some of Bronkhorst’s conclusions for making too sharp distinctions between Brahmin and non-Brahmin traditions. Bronkhorst (2006) has extended his line of argument with research into the Magadha culture.

[139](#) White (2009) argues that most of the meditative and yogic notions for several

hundred years were used differently by different groups. There were in other words no firm definitions and use of these notions as concepts would continuously change their meaning through history. *Dhyana* is certainly an example of such notions loaded with ambiguity.

[140](#) However in making this comparison to the two other Axial Age civilisations, there emerge some interesting issues. Did the new ontological reflections – indicating the birth of wisdom discourses - primarily happen among new emerging ruling strata of warrior nobles and groups *directly* connected to urbanisation, monetisation, trade and state building? Or was it a new *general* way of abstract thinking (conditioned for instance by monetisation as claimed by Seaford (2004) in the case of Greece) - which also gained popularity among the existing elites of priests? In India we can see from the *Upanishads* that such abstract thinking did take place among the older strata of priests – the Brahmins. However it also appears that Brahmin abstract thinking about the One might have taken place *before* any significant monetisation of Northern India had taken place, which seems to conflict with Seaford's thesis that monetisation enables abstract thinking. Hence we might conclude that when and if the Brahmins – who evolved and were rooted in Archaic Vedic societies – took up new abstract wisdom-based discourses and developed new rituals, they were *politically* forced to do so by new hegemonic social actors *directly* connected to and conditioned by the new social institutions, politics, division of labour and economy.

[141](#) Some scholars like the Indologist J. C. Heesterman (1987) claim that there is a logic in this internal development of Brahmin discourses and institutions. It is argued that meditation became conceived as a self-sacrifice. Meditation became a new invention of *tapas* techniques. The fire ritual no longer contained an external sacrifice. The Brahmin instead offered himself. This is apparently a very logical explanation. It assumes that there is an internal intellectual engine pushing forward developments and innovations and demonstrating the logical path of developing such thoughts. And it is true that thought systems often generate their own path of change. However we are trying here to explain fundamental change among conservative groups who resist change – who have no interest in changing. Why should they rock the boat?

[142](#) See Bellah (2011) who argues the Brahmin *Upanishads* signify Axial Age thinking although the *Upanishads* belong to pre-Axial Age societies – Vedic Archaic state forms.

[143](#) However the notion of Yoga was at that time also uncertain and undecided. For other conceptual possibilities, see White (2009).

[144](#) For a discussion of the meaning and origin of the word see Olivelli (1993). He traces the origin of the word into the Black Yajurvedic Vedic tradition – which interestingly enough is located in the Magadha area. The Vedic *Taittiriya Aranyak* 2.7 – the earliest to mention them - gives the Sramanas a high status as it sees them as a Rishi sub-group: "The

vatarasana seers (rishi) were sramanas and celibates (urdhva-manthinah)". The word *Sramana* is connected with wilderness and wandering, the labour and weariness of doing so, the fatigue of undergoing austerities. So it has a meaning of 'to strive' or 'to toil'.

[145](#) This centralising process among warring petty states is typical of the evolution of supra-regional states (Gat 2008). According to Graeber (2011) this is central to all Axial Age civilisations.

[146](#) See Chakravarti (1996) for a discussion of the social conditions of the time of Buddha.

[147](#) See Chakravarti (1996) who finds further support in M. Weber's observation that salvation groups emerge when the ruling strata have lost social power. Bellah (2011) argues that all Axial Age societies and their existing elites were under pressure and that this pressure was a significant factor in the emergence of their new civilisation.

[148](#) The Sramanas included some women but in general it was a male movement. The whole tradition of asceticism was fundamentally hostile towards women. Women were thought to be highly polluted and all of these ascetic movements condemned strongly any contact with women – most of all a sexual one – as they saw it as a major set back for liberation. I will not further systematically analyse yoga's repressive attitude to women and sexuality as it is a separate subject requiring its own investigation.

[149](#) For further details of such schools, see for example Obeyesekere (2007).

[150](#) See Zyst (1991) on how Sramanas were involved in empirical based medicine while the Vedic tradition tended to follow magical treatments.

[151](#) Quotes from J.W. McCringle: *Ancient India as described by Megasthenes* (1877, new ed. 1926).

[152](#) H. Zimmer: *Philosophies of India* (1951) has been very influential in arguing about that the three notions of the soul, its rebirth and release – the *karma* doctrine – is non-Vedic in origin and represents a significant break in Vedic thinking.

[153](#) For more historical and philosophical details on *karma*, see Obeysekere (2002) and Gombrich (2009).

[154](#) For a history of the *karma* notion see Tull (2004).

[155](#) The Kshatriyas in the three *Upanishads* discussing *karma* and re-birth found a different solution to the issue of release. Most probably under strong Brahmin influence the solution was not found in mortification, but in *Gnosis*: only insight could lead to

*brahman*, says for instance the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* (Obeyesekere 2002).

[156](#) For a historical overview of suicide and its role in society, see Thakur (1963). See also Olivelle (1993).

[157](#) This was early recognised by scholars like Dasgupta (1930) and Weston Briggs (1938).

[158](#) Many conservative Brahmins dismissed with scorn liberation discourses and even asceticism. Here is a quotation from the *Aitareya Brahmana* (part of Vedic corpus) which clearly says that if you want eternal life, you should get a son (in which “you” would live): “What (use is there) of dirt, what use of antelope skin, what use of the beard, what is the use of Tapas? O’ Brahmanas! Desire a son, he is a world that is to be highly praised”. From Kaelber (1989).

[159](#) The cultural sociological analysis draws on the ideas of P. Bourdieu. For an introduction to this sociology, see Jenkins (2002) and Schwartz (1997).

[160](#) For an overview and discussion of such texts see Sarbacker (2008) and Jacobsen (2012). Sarbacker points out that also birth, mantra incantation and certain herbs were seen to deliver special gifts .

[161](#) According to White (2009) this theme of taking over other bodies and souls and the ability to become omnipresent can be traced back to the *Brahmanas*, the *Upanishads*, some *Sutras* and the *Mahabharata*. This ‘science of entering another body’ was often discussed in connection with yoga. So according to White, we can trace here a different *technical* meaning of yoga not connected to meditation but to the soul’s wandering and omnipresence.

[162](#) Quoted from White (2009), p193.

[163](#) Quoted from White (2009), p.217.

[164](#) Quoted from White (2009), p.237.

[165](#) But we have to be careful that we do not project too much of present day understanding of asceticism onto their practices. Take for instance the sixteen years of celibacy of the young Brahmacharin. We might today say that it is a sign of asceticism, but the Brahmins seem also to have seen it as a ritual fire sacrifice: symbolic burning. The whole process was designed exactly as if it was a fire sacrifice – but lasting 16 years (Kaelber 1989)! So was the young Brahmacharin using technologies of asceticism or of ritual action? Even if our concepts and models are clear, the reality can be very confused.

[166](#) Some identities – like the Brahmin forest hermits - did not relate to the surrounding

population but lived from what they could scavenge from nature as they passed by. But their number and significance is probably exaggerated. The Sanskrit expert P. Olivelle (1993) claims that these groups only lasted for a few hundred years and then became obsolete. The lifestyle was, for instance, seen to have negative consequences for ancestors. However, according to Olivelle, it was kept alive in popular legend, poetry, drama and myth.

167 The Buddhist texts are rich in examples of how the Buddhist monks provided a wide range of services. The monks became renowned for appeasing and even converting spirit-deities and ghost. They were also able to improve the situation of ancestor spirits so they moved higher up on the ladder of rebirth, according to DeCaroli:

“...the Buddhist developed ritual practices that would allow the living to aid the deceased, no matter the type of new existence into which they had been born. By transferring the positive merit generated through donations to the Buddhist community, the living could benefit and appease the dead regardless of their current state of existence.” (2004, p. 94) Hence DeCaroli concludes that: “The non-elite people in the literature, however, more often than not approach the sangha [the monastic community] for two basic reasons: either they are seeking merit through donations or they need help in dealing with a super-natural problem.” (2004, p.38).

168 For further discussions see Sharf (1998), Sarbacker (2005), Klein (1986) and Gimello (1978). See also Glucklich (2001) for a refreshing neuropsychological interpretation of ‘religious experience’.

169 Of course the word ‘yoga’ has been used in earlier Vedic scriptures but then in its original physical meaning of *yoking* – for instance bringing two horses together, to discipline them and benefit from their joint efforts. The root form of yoga is ‘*yuj*’ - ‘yoke, harness’ (Joshi 1965). It is first in the *Katha Upanishad* that the word *yoga* is used as a technology in relation to consciousness and mind.

170 B. Lincoln (2000a) in his 4 Thesis on Method gives a good description of the task ahead: “The same destabilizing and irreverent questions one might ask of any speech act ought to be posed on religious discourse. The first of these is “Who speaks here?”, i.e., what person, group, or institution is responsible for a text, whatever its putative or apparent author. Beyond that, “To what audience? In what immediate and broader context? Through what system of mediations? With what interest?” And further, “Of what should the speaker(s) persuade the audience? What are the consequences if this project of persuasion should happen to succeed? Who wins what, and how much? Who, conversely loses?”

171 For a critique of this line of thought, see for instance Obeyesekere 2002. To illustrate the critique we can draw a contemporary parallel: In the 1980s in the Soviet communist party the doctrines of Perestroika and Glasnost emerged – doctrines which contributed significantly to the collapse of the communist system as they allowed the expression of political criticism; were they the outcome and refinement of intellectual ideas? Or were these doctrines conditioned by contradictions in the communist system, its economic bankruptcy, the defeat in Afghanistan, the Soviets losing out in the arms race, and also

finally losing out in new information technologies?

[172](#) For an introduction to and translations of the *Upanishads* see Hume (1921b), Olivelle (1992 &1996). Olivelle warns that the texts are often later highly edited and extended. See also Hume's introduction (1921).

[173](#) For more about this network character of intellectual ideas in the *Upanishads* see Collins (1998).

[174](#) For more about this ideological manoeuvre deliberately directed against the Buddhists see Collins (1998).

[175](#) Cohen (2008) opposes this view. She sees the *Upanishads* as a direct outgrowth of the Vedic tradition. They are texts belonging to different Vedic Brahmin lines of transmission on which they comment.

[176](#) Cohen (2008). The four Vedic branches are: *Rig-veda*, *Yajur-veda*, *Sama-veda* and *Atharva-veda*.

[177](#) This is in line with the arguments of Olivelle (1993) and Cohen (2008.)

[178](#) They are categorised as ‘sympathisers’ because they do not turn yoga knowledge (their *cultural capital*) into a *profession*.

[179](#) For more details see Cohen (2008). She also gives a brief overview of the common themes of the *Upanishads*.

[180](#) The two remaining Vedas are: *Sama Veda* (chants) and *Atharva Veda* (magic formulas).

[181](#) Cohen therefore concludes that a group of texts – *Mundaka*, *Katha*, *Svetasvatara*, *Maitri* and *Mahabharata* (including the *Bhagavad-Gita*) - all belong to a common textual tradition: they are all texts belonging to a unison *meta-text*. They therefore share many arguments, metaphors, notions etc.

[182](#) It would be more correct to call this Cosmological Monotheism.

[183](#) Hopkins (1901) makes the same observation.

[184](#) Cohen (2008) warns that 12 out of the 13 times when Siva/Rudra is mentioned they are later interpolations probably made by Saivite theologians.

[185](#) For a discussion of this see for instance White (2009).

[186](#) Büntemann (2007) is mentioning that the six-limb yoga (and other parts) according to Van Buitenen are inserts of a much later date.

[187](#) However, if yoga is a new *upasana* we have to recall that the purpose of *upasana* was a symbolic sacrifice. Is yoga then to be understood as a symbolic sacrifice?

[188](#) For a quick introduction to structuralism and Saussure, see Belsey (2009) and Peters & Burbules (2004).

[189](#) This implicit doctrine (or maybe there were several doctrines) could maybe be extracted by looking at the conceptual context in which yoga was used. A collection of concepts like *samsara*, *karma* and *moksha* and a range of Samkhya philosophy notions like *gunas*, *prakriti*, evolution from primeval essence, *citta*, *buddhi* etc. – all essential in the yoga doctrine as it was *later* formulated – are certainly present in the Brahmin texts (Hume 1921, Cohen 2008).

[190](#) The *Mahabharata* even discussed styles of Brahmin ‘element meditation’, which I have not found discussed in the *Upanishads* (Wynne 2007). This element meditation, according to Wynne, inspired Buddhist fourth level meditation. But yoga was not mentioned in relation to Brahmin element meditation, so there is probably no connection between yoga in *Mahabharata* and this early Brahmin meditation form.

[191](#) See for instance the comparisons made by Sarbacker (2005) and Wynne (2007).

[192](#) Quote from King (1980).

[193](#) A more critical difference is that *samatha* meditation is guided, informed and deepened by liberation insight (Buddha’s teaching) while this Gnostic element is lacking in ascetic mortification meditation.

[194](#) For comparisons of *Yoga Sutra* and Buddhism see Crangle (1994) and Cousins (1972 & 1993); the two authorities of Senar and De la Vallee Poussin - writing in French - is summarised in Sarbacker (2005) and Wynne (2007).

[195](#) Sarbacker (2005) gives a good overview of the discussion around *samatha* and *vipassana*.

[196](#) Buswell & Grimell (1992) argue similarly that Buddhism – like most paths of liberation – fluctuates between ‘knowledge’ or ‘ethical life’, which will purify the defilements and lead to liberation. See also Bronkhorst’s discussion of this (2009).

[197](#) Three good introductions to the *jhanas* are found in Stuart-Fox (1989), Griffith (1981) and Wynne (2007).

198 As Bronkhorst (1986) points out, the situation of stages of meditation is very complex within Buddhism. The texts mention a whole range of stages – the four Brahmic Stages, the nine Successive Cessations, the eight liberations, the seven Ideations etc. See also Mills (2004) and Wynne (2007).

199 Others – like Bronkhorst (1986) – claim that Early Buddhist liberation insight happens in the fourth *dhyana*.

200 Obeyesekere (2012) finds that Buddha had his insights while meditating and hence sees him as relying on 'visionary knowledge', based in shamanism. In this way Obeyesekere mutes the Axial and rational aspect of some Buddhist schools, as such liberating knowledge is derived in trance *outside reason*.

201 Sarbacker (2005) argues that as Buddhist and yogic cults became mainstream, they became more scholastic and valued insight above meditative absorption. Bronkhorst (2009) comes up with an alternative explanation.

202 The reader will find a good overview of this highly technical discussion in Sarbacker (2005) and Bronkhorst (2009) - and also a philosophical critique of "the mystical experience" in Sharf (1995 & 1998). Sociologists like Lewis (1989) following Weber, would argue that this move where insight became crucial to obtain liberation is a typical process, through which charismatic and ecstatic cults have to pass as they move from peripheral to central positions in society. According to such theory they become institutionalised and rationalised. In such a process, scholasticism and doctrine then become increasingly prominent. Hence technology and practice (*samatha* meditation) moved into the background as intellectual teaching (*dharma/dhamma*) took over. Stuart-Fox in a paper "*Jhana and Buddhist Scholasticism*" (1989) has shown how this process describes the process that Buddhist monasteries went through during the first 800 years of their existence. The twist here is that this process in some respects did not mean 'rationalisation' but 'mystification'. Liberation – in the meaning of Mystical Realisation - often turned into a mystical event, incomprehensible and not explicable.

203 So early yoga acquired the meaning of a *cluster* – a plurality – of techniques. Yoga was typically not just a single meditation technique – like *dhyana*. It was a conglomerate. Hence we often hear later on about the *limbs* of yoga like the six limbs of the *Maitri*. Over and over again a style of yoga was later described by the number of auxiliaries it enveloped. It could be a three, four, five, six, eight or even ten fold cluster of techniques. For instance the *Yoga Sutra* is an eight limb yoga – *ashtanga* yoga – while most Saivite types of yoga were six limbs – *sadanga* yoga (Vasudeva 2000).

204 The amateur is often stigmatised by the professional. See P. Bourdieu (1996) :

205 This conclusion is not shared by Chapple (2011) who identifies three positive ways in which Jains refer to yoga: 1. Yoga as meditation, 2. Yoga as ascetic disciplines and vows, 3. Yoga as the final effort of practice leading to *ayoga*. It is however not clear from Chapple if this usage of yoga is widespread among the Jains or mainly related to a group of medieval writers.

206 This can also be seen from the central doctrine of Jainism formulated around 1100 AD, which is called *The Three Jewels*: The way to deliverance is right faith (*darsana*), knowledge (*jnana*) and behaviour (*caritra*). (Dundas 2002) So central in the Jain formula is to live an ethical and ascetical life centred around the *Five Great Vows* (no killing, no lying, no stealing, no sex and no possessions). The overall goal of the ascetic life was to eradicate passions, achieved through the suppression of negative thinking, the cultivation of positive attitudes and the uprooting of delusions. So we can see that Gnostic insight was a crucial part of the ascetic life. The Jain monk had to understand Jain philosophy about the world - the *loka* -, which consisted of only 5 basic ontological elements: soul, motion, rest, atomic matter and space. Similarly in the *Yoga Sutra* with its insight into *Prakriti*, the Jain monk had to grasp the full depth of these categories and this knowledge would slowly lead him to liberating insights when integrated in an ascetic lifestyle.

207 Some mediaeval Jain writers painted a different positive picture of yoga, which led to the conclusion that they saw Jainism as subscribing to yoga. For instance the *Yogabindu* written about 550 AD by Virahanka Haribhadra instructed a five limb yoga consisting of (*bhavana*), meditation (*dhyana*), equanimity (*samata*), and elimination of thought (*vittisamksaya*) (Chapple 2011).

208 It seems that some theistic milieus - mostly Saivite sects - driven by the religious symbolic significance of yoga were also encouraged to engage with its use-value. It further seems that these Saivite yogis in many respects emulated the life styles of the Sramanas. They had probably not initially learned their actual yoga practice from "yogis" (for instance Kshatriyas) but had Buddhist and Jain teachers (role models), because it was they who were the custodians and transmitters of the *practical knowhow*.

209 This paradox also outlines some of the significance of the methodological limits of this book. By focussing the narrative on the *use of a word* instead of focussing on a *definition* (of yoga) we get some benefits and some drawbacks. The drawback we face here is that for some periods of its history the yoga discourse was mainly a reflection and clone of the discourses of other milieus.

210 My dating is based on Olivelle (1999) and my exposition is based on his book.

211 Olivelle (2006) explains that Brahmin *dharma* teaching emerged as a response to the

Buddhist *dharma*.

[212](#) Quoted from J.W. McCringle: *Ancient India as described by Megasthenes* (1877, new ed. 1926).

[213](#) See Thapar (1987) and Hesterman (1987). For significant changes of the Vedic ritual and Brahmin roles see Eaton (1993).

[214](#) Olivelle who is an expert in Brahmin renunciation reaches similar conclusions (1993, 1995, 1999).

[215](#) This notion is suggested by J. Assmann as the Indian form of monotheism is not identical to the one known from Jewish, Muslim and Christian discourses (Malinar 2007).

[216](#) The same process of religious subordination happened to all Sramana groups. Branches of for instance Buddhism in this period turned into Mahayana Buddhism and became later heavily involved in local (often Tantric) folk religion. Buddha became a god-like principle very similar to *brahma* in Brahmanism.

[217](#) Many of these early local warrior gods later on merged into Vishnu and Siva (Colas 2005).

[218](#) Colas (2005) gives a thorough overview of the Vishnu Tradition which when you look more closely dissolves into a number of streams. For a quick introduction see Flood (1996).

[219](#) As we can trace signs of universal gods before this period historically this should not lead us to believe that monotheism was “invented” under Puranic Hinduism (Samuel 2008). The typical notion of a god – a *yaksa* - at that time was of a *local-based god* serving local needs (Samuel 2008). Yaksas continued to exist as local gods.

[220](#) Morford (2002) shows how the Roman warrior aristocracy was in similiar ways educated and trained – a task often performed by the philosophers: the Roman equivalent to Buddhists and Jains.

[221](#) With the influx into Northern India of foreign warrior tribes in this period, the Kshatriyas lost their position as a social and ethnic well defined stratum. The political rulers from then on were recruited from all strata of society. The Nanada and Mauryan rulers were Sudras; the Sungas were Brahmins while the Guptas were Vaisyas. Many new ruling groups or tribes through history constructed genealogies, which “proved” that they originated from Kshatriyas. Hence from the *Mahabharata*, when we talk about

Kshatriyas, it is to be understood as an ideological notion for the political ruling classes as such – not just the Aryan warrior nobles. For further, see for instance Desika Char (1993).

222 On Indian religio-philosophy see for instance Halbfass (1991), Carr and Mahalingam (eds.) (1997), R. King: (1999a & 1999b). On how the *Darsanas* became “the six *Darsanas*”, see Pahlajrai (2004) and Collins (1998).

223 The *Darsanas* – especial Mimamsa and Vedanta - were plainly establishing discourses of power (Pollock 1990). Boiled down they are saying: “As you know we Brahmins are in position of the Truth, we would now like to show you why it is necessarily so!”

224 The canonisation of the *Darsanas* to the six we recognise today happened around 1300 AD. However, already around 700 AD the Jain Haribhadra in his overview of Hindu religio-schools in India listed six.

225 For more about relationships between Samkhya, yoga and Buddhism see Larson 1987, 1989 & 1999.

226 The word ‘yoga’ is mentioned 900 times in the epics. You will find most discussions of yoga in the *Moksha-dharma; Mahabharata* 12.168-132. See Schreiner (1999). For an investigation of the strong symbolic representation of the *Gita* over the last couple of hundred years in a range of discourses, see Robinson (2006).

227 Some of the monotheisms expressed in the *MBh*, however, contradicted Brahmin orthodoxy. Like the *Upanishads*, some conservative Brahmin groups also initially rejected the warrior epics.

228 This conclusion is confirmed by the *MBh* specialist J. Brockington *Yoga – in the Mahabharata* (2003).

229 *Buddhi-yoga* is deliberately compared to stoicism as both philosophies fits naturally into the state reasoning of societies ruled by aristocratic warrior clans – for Roman adoption of stoicism, see Morford (2002)

230 Think about it as many of us today refer to Einstein’s theories of relativity without really knowing what they actually are about.

231 Around 4-500 AD there emerged for instance within Buddhism a new school called *yogacara* – meaning “one whose practice is yoga”. It was thought among them that the practice of yoga would remove false imagination – tainted perceptions of reality – leading the yogi to “perfected nature”. *Yogacara* was mainly known for its complicated

philosophical contributions centred on the notion of “storehouse consciousness” and not for its contribution to Buddhist meditations practice – i.e. “Buddhist yoga”. As *yogacara* clearly defined itself within the Buddhist tradition – despite calling themselves yogis – I have chosen not to include them. It might not be a wise decision, but I have given my reasons earlier. However, *yogacara* is a good example of how no definition is watertight (it is only a more or less useful tool) and we will see more examples of how it is very difficult to talk about yoga without being ensnared in Buddhism and its complex history.

[232](#) Or rather it gives insight into the rules and regulations that these renouncer groups were expected to follow according to *dharma* (i.e. rules and regulations for a correct religious life). What the historic reality was, we do not know.

[233](#) See Olivelle (1999) who gives a short and clear introduction to the various Vedic genres. This presentation of *Ysam* is based on P. Olivelle’s translation and comments (1995).

[234](#) According to Chapple (2003) this development of a Perennial philosophy (different name for the same thing) also took place among Vedantic Brahmins at that time – for instance seen in the *Yoga-vasistha*, which was in the process of being compiled.

[235](#) During the following Tantric period this power discourse was applied endlessly: opponents were good but never good enough, so even if they thought they had realised for instance ‘ultimate consciousness’, they were deluded. They had been stranded at a lower stage.

[236](#) For an account of this cultural and political clash see Freeman (2005).

[237](#) For the most pedagogic translation of the *YS* for the newcomer see Stoler Miller (1996). For the most recent and deep-going *textual criticism* (i.e. the notions of the *YS* are investigated for different technical meanings and for dissimilar translations within different traditions) see Whicher (1996) – however many of his central conclusions diverge from mainstream perceptions of the *sutras*. I have used Feuerstein’s translation (1979) of the *YS* as it is not controversial.

[238](#) For the opposite view, appraising the *YS* as a philosophical masterpiece, see Whicher (1996).

[239](#) See Whicher (1996) for different views among scholars about what divisions underly the *sutras*.

[240](#) For an in-depth philosophical comparison see Larson (2008).

[241](#) Sanskrit experts like La Vallee Poussin have counted up to one hundred notions directly lifted out of Buddhist texts (Larson 2008).

242 E. Senar in his classical work from 1900 argues that the influence however is the other way round: the *YS* might be compiled after Buddha, but its sutras historically stretch back in time to before Buddha - it is the Buddhists who copy from yoga. Thus Senar makes the ideas of the *YS* synonymous with the original shared ascetic substream.

243 See Sarbacker (2005) and Larson (2008) for an overview of this discussion.

244 Pflueger (1998) confirms the view that many parts of *YS* are related to Brahmin rituals – especially chanting. Quiet murmuring – called *japa* – calms the mind and brings it into deep absorption. As all sound disappears the mind is in trance and there is no more intellectual cognition taking place. Pflueger in other words sees *YS* as a kind of *nada* (“sound”) yoga.

245 Bronkhorst (1986) argues that the definition of yoga in this chapter is inconsistent with the actual description. Bronkhorst argues that the meditation described in this chapter is a mainly Buddhist meditation style, while the definition is strongly influenced by ascetic ‘mortification meditation’.

246 For a total opposite, recent and well argued view of not only how to understand *nirodha* but *YS* as such, see Ian Whicher (1996). Here, *nirodha* (stopping) is interpreted as not being about stopping the mind, but about deleting the bad *Rajas* (“activity”) and *tamas* (“inertia”) vibrations in the mind and replace it with *sattva* (“pure intelligence”) vibrations. This will allow *purusha* to be reflected pure and without distortions in the mind, according to Whicher.

247 Scholars (for instance Crangle 1994, Sarbacker 2005 gives overview of discussions) have been discussing if the notions *samprajna* & *asamprajna samadhi* are equivalent to the Buddhist distinction between the four *dhyanas* and four *arupyas*.

248 See for instance Wilber 1986; Sarbacker (2005) gives an overview of scholarly discussions.

249 Bronkhorst (1986) reaches similar conclusions.

250 For a discussion of the various meanings of *samadhi* in relation to the *YS*, see Whicher (1998). For a detailed comparison of *samadhi* within Buddhism and Brahmin yoga, see Sarbacker (2005).

251 For a further discussion of the *Siddhis* of chapter three, see Chapple (2012b) and Rukmann (1997).

252 For further comparison between the methods of hypnotic trance and the meditation of Yoga Sutra see S. Chowdhary and J.K. Gopinath: *Clinical Hypnosis and Patanjali yoga*

*sutras* , in Indian Journal of Psychiatry 2013, vol. 55, issue 6.

[253](#) White (2009) also argues that *vibhuti-yoga* – supernatural powers of yoga – is a central strain of yoga and therefore not an accidental extension of the *YS*. However later yoga discourse – Brahmin and orientalist – has tried to downplay this strain in order to construct the pious, spiritual and peace-loving yoga monk.

[254](#) For a good concise introduction to these complex issues, see Larson (2012).

[255](#) Larson (2008) argues that yoga does not mean *yoke*; but the root form of yoga is *yuj* – which rather mean concentration. Hence in the *YS* *yoga* really means *samadhi*: i.e. Yoga = *concentration*.

[256](#) Different interpretations are possible here, see Whicher (1998) and Sarbacker (2005).

[257](#) There is a growing list of research (see Sarbacker 2005 for an overview) into the influence of Buddhism and *Yogacara* on the *YS*. However I have just chosen to show the similarities which would catch the eye of even a novice of Buddhism.

[258](#) Instructive and critical introduction to Buddhist *jhana* can be found in Griffiths (1981), Stuart-Fox (1989), Bucknell (1993).

[259](#) Scholars like Deussen, Frauwallner and Hauser almost a century ago came up with different suggestions based on detailed analyses for which specific parts of the *YS* are influenced by which different roots – be it Buddhism, Samkhya, ascetic traditions, Brahmanism. Larson (2008) gives an overview of this. Mine is just a rough one trying to sort out some headlines.

[260](#) There is an *exegetic* *YS* tradition where different (sectarian) interpreters (like Vyasa, V.Misra, V. Bhiksu, B. Raja, H. Aranya and many others) put a range of opposing views upon these abstract *sutras*. This *exegetic* tradition is documented by Whicher (1996, 2003). See also Larson (2008) for an overview of the commentary tradition.

[261](#) Larson (1999) however argues that the commentaries make the textual tradition – i.e. the commentaries were a way of innovating an orthodox tradition by leaving the orthodox doctrine intact and adding innovation in the commentary. If this observation is correct, Larson then would have to explain why did all Buddhist orthodox schools not just similarly provided commentaries, but instead produced philosophical innovations and ruptures.

[262](#) So commentaries were not about meditative issues but about theological inclusions. As an extension of that inclusion strategy, we see that as the Muslims entered India some

of them also translated and adapted the *YS* in similar ways to their religion. An example is Al-Biruni's "Book of Patanjali" from about 1000 AD (Larson 2009).

263 Malinar (2009) draws similar conclusions: in order to become recognised new sects needed to align their theology with the orthodox hegemonic philosophies.

264 This ideological move has been accepted and reproduced by many if not most Orientalist and modern scholars.

265 A (theological) paper rejects this and claims that yoga does indeed play a role for the founder Sankara, see Sundaresan (2003).

266 See Stein (1998), Thapar (2002) and Kulke & Rothermund (2006) for introductions to the Mediaeval Ages. For a quick introductory historical overview see Michaels (2004). For a regional perspective on Medieval History see Eaton (1993 & 2005).

267 As *hatha-yoga* grew out of the Tantric and Saivite discourses I will mainly focus on them. As I said, the discourse of Tantra also fundamentally changed the other discourses. In fact the Buddhists and the Saivists argue amongst themselves, which were first and most influenced by Tantric discourse. Both of them developed parallel notions of the *subtle body*, a notion which *hatha-yoga* discourses refined and made fundamental to their practice.

268 I deliberately use the notion of 'feudal' and 'mediaeval' even though they are periodisations belonging to European history. Inden (2000) criticises the idea that we can force such traditional European periodisation periods upon Indian history. I agree with his discomfort with the use of the terms, but as the notions are very vague and seem to be generally used and known by most, I have chosen to use them anyway, as I have not come across anything better.

269 In the 19 century the noun *Tantrism* was constructed as a *concept defining a cultural period*. Western Indologists – the Orientalists - who thought they had discovered an exceptional undercurrent contrasting sharply with the respectable Hindu philosophy - coined it.

270 Urban (2003) has one of the best discussions of the term Tantra and its historical construction.

271 There is very little research but see for instance Grönbold (1996), Feuerstein (1998), Brunner (1994), Rastogi (1992), Vasudeva (2000).

272 Bharati (1965) has analysed some 35 Tantra scriptures, which show that 60% of the verses are about *mantra* themes (10% about *mandala*, 10% meditation on gods).

273 Due to extensive trade India's religio-philosophy came in this period under strong Chinese influence (Samuel 2008).

274 A historical-sociological presentation of these eras of India's history in Ling (1968), Nandi (1986) and in the discussions of Champakalakshni and Chattopadhyaya (1995). See also the historical articles in White (2000).

275 Sharma (2000 and 2001) has a Marxist account of the rise of Tantra.

276 For further details on the relationship between kings and religion/ cults in this period see Inden (1990), Davidson (2002), Eaton (1993), Cort (1998), Davis (1998) and Michaels (2004).

277 Stein (1998) and Jha (2000). Eaton (2005) gives a detailed description of the same processes in a later period.

278 Davidson: (2002). Srinivas (1966) – his interesting concept of ‘Sanskritisation’ (an emulation of high caste behaviour) should not be confused with M. Weber’s term ‘Hinduisisation’ (enforcement of caste). See also N.B. Dirk’s critique of Sanskritisation (2001).

279 The terms ‘Great versus Little Tradition’ was coined by Redfield (1956) and has been extremely influential. It has also been widely criticised (see Morris 2006 for an overview) but as long as the conceptual pair is used as guiding notions I find they can have a heuristic function in capturing underlying structural conflicts.

280 In general the medieval individual and his community would in fact get their identity from a mixture of sources: rituals (religion), caste, occupation, guru lineage, clan, tribe, geographical location. For more on elusive religious boundaries and identity in Indian society, see Oberoi (1994) and Dundas (2002).

281 Hence a local clan or tribe would often connect to a local guru or priest *lineage* and follow their rituals and social codes. The guru lineage-ship in itself could be the property of a certain clan, which secured the guru clan authority and existence over generations. So a tribe could end up subscribing to a local guru lineage, which had practices, rituals and gods, which actually contradicted many of the tribe’s own rituals and gods. But such diversity was not a problem.

282 It seems that most resistance coming from these Tantric groups worshipping female gods, was the *Sakti communities*, as Sakti managed in many texts to rise to the levels of power of Siva, Vishnu, Suria etc. For more about Sakti see Brightenti (2001), Ling (1968), Brockington (1981), Davis (2000), Flood (1996 & 2006), Urban (2001).

283 It seems that some extreme Siva (and Sakti) cults shared a belief in spiritual exaltation and purification through subversive behaviour.

284 Others were borderline groups between Tantra and Saivism: should they be classified as ‘aboriginal local clans’ (having adopted certain Saivite ideas) or as ‘ascetic Saivite groups’ (having adopted Tantra)? In this melting pot of liberation discourse, monotheistic salvation, Brahmanism, asceticism and Tantric discourses it is almost impossible to say how we should categorise them.

285 For further discussion of yoga within Tantra, see Muller-Ortega (2005), Brunner (1994 & 1992), Rastogi (19920, Alter (2006), Vasudeva (2000).

286 This suspicion is supported by Sanderson (1988), who claims that the Pasupatas were restricted to Brahmins.

287 Harper (2002). Both Flood (2006) and Michaels (1998) show that Tantric rituals and imaginations transformed the body of the king to a deity - thereby securing his power basis.

288 For more about the relationship between the King and the holy men, see Inden (1990) and Davis (1998).

289 This situation is very similar to the present day New Age spiritual market.

290 Tantric culture went on undisturbed in rural areas (White 2003, Urban 2001).

291 See Desika Char (1993). I have not come across much research how the life of holy men was affected by the Turkic Muslim take over. Eaton (1993) has made some contributions.

292 According to White (2003) some Tantric texts continued to surface – in fact there is a small Tantric renaissance some hundred years later, he says.

293 Eaton (1993) and Desika Char (1993) state that the displacement of Hindu kings by Muslim rulers meant that many cults lost their royal patronage and almost vanished. However, Sakti cults being merged with Siva ideology blossomed under the restructuring of Sakti Brahmins.

294 For further details of the Kula movement see White (1996).

295 This intercourse technique of sucking up the female sexual discharge by using *urethral suction techniques* became known as *vajroli mudra* - a technique much later adopted by *hatha-yoga*.

296 In a modern world framed by Western philosophy we would not see the subtle body as a physical system but as a meta-physical notion. However, in the Tantric discourse the physical and meta-physical flow seamlessly into each other - those who have the right knowledge and tools are able to access systems not visible to the human eye.

297 The Siddhas could be found in most regions of India and were therefore known under different names such as the *Manesvara Siddhas* (Siva worshippers), the alchemist *Tamil Sittars*, the *Maha Siddhas*, the *Rasa Siddhas* and the *Nath Siddhas*.

298 Feuerstein (1998).

299 Accordingly one of the Siddha groups was named the *Rasa (fluid) Siddhas*.

300 From the beginning the function of the subtle body was to energise and vitalise the physical body. We could therefore call the subtle body (or *rasa*) our ‘vital force’. This is what we would today call ‘vitality’ or just ‘life’.

301 For an introduction to the interaction between these three bodies, see for instance Prawley (1999).

302 There was such a close exchange of ideas, practices and people between the Buddhist Siddhacaryas and the Siddha Naths (Siva worshippers) that they shared a *common platform of Tantric practices*. We have already observed that two Buddhist Tantras – the *Kalakakra-* and *Guhyasamaja-Tantra* - taught a six-limb yoga almost identical to that of some Saivite groups. Sometimes these rural groups attended the same temples and worship the same Gods. The existence of a subtle body among the Buddhists is documented in the Buddhist text *Amrta-siddhi-yoga* from about 1200 AD (Schaeffer vol.30). Here they discuss how *amrta* - nectar from the subtle body being channelled up - meant the attainment of immortality. K. Liberman *The Reflexivity of the Authenticity of Hatha Yoga* (2008) even claims that the Siddhas actually evolved out of Buddhist circles (Mallik 1953 has the opposite view). Liberman claims, among others, that the founders of *hatha-yoga* were actually Buddhists. See also Birch (2011).

303 Some of the early groups among the Siddhas who offered techniques manipulating the subtle body were the *Rasa Siddhas* alchemists. They claimed that they could achieve immortality by increasing the vital fluids by eating mercury. Increasing the level of mercury would increase the level of semen *and* the presence of Siva in the body, all seen to be the same. So we see how various discourses of fluidity and divinity are freely combined.

304 He did not use the term ‘*hatha-yoga*’ for the techniques – Gorakhnath coined this name much later.

305 For a detailed description of the Tantric *sadhana* (techniques) and ritual, see Bharati

(1965) – the 5 M techniques should not be seen as hedonistic pleasure but serious sacrifice to Kundalini, according to Bharati.

[306](#) Hence Mallinson suggests that the two distinct *hatha-yoga* discourses belonged to separate milieus – one focusing on *bindu* in Saivite, Buddhist and Brahmin milieu and one on *Kundalini* in Kula and *siddhi* milieu. However if we follow White it seems that the fluid discourse instead belonged to the *siddhis*.

[307](#) See Birch (2011) for an overview of the early *hatha* discourse and how the sign slowly took form.

[308](#) Some researchers have tried to identify the real core writings – see for instance White's detailed detective work (1996), Briggs (1938) or Banerjea (1962).

[309](#) Historical dating by Mallinson (2012). See Larson (2008) for brief summaries of several of Goraknath's writings.

[310](#) Texts that would become central to the canon of the Nath order - like *Goraksa-siddhanta-samgraha* and *Yoga-yajnavalkya* - are often attributed to Goraknath, but they are probably written 100 years later. They repeat Goraknath's ideas and promise the self's union – i.e. yoga - with the 'supreme self' mainly by applying the techniques of *pranayama*. It seems that these texts see a Nath as 'one who is endowed with liberation of the Supreme' - typical Tantric Siva discourse establishing divine identities through the salvation of Siva.

[311](#) There are many other early hatha texts *not* belonging to the Nath canon. Mallinson (2012b) discusses some of them. They were texts like *Armta-siddhi*, *Dattatreya-yoga-sastra*, and *Khecarividya*. Birch (2011) also gives a good overview of the early hatha texts.

[312](#) For a discussion see Eliade (1958).

[313](#) It is often claimed that *immortality* and *perfection* are *symbolically meant*: they are about *immortality after death*. First the Siddha becomes perfected with a strong and purified body (*siddhi*), then he can commence becoming an immortal soul (i.e. a *jivan-mukti*), who later on will leave his physical body - it is the *soul* which becomes immortal. This interpretation is very popular. However Dasgupta (1976) (among many other scholars) analysing the Siddha-Naths, concluded that 'immortality' should be understood in its direct physiological sense. The Naths were closely related to the alchemist Rasa-Siddhas and the Buddhist Siddhacaryas who all aimed to escape death (Schaeffer vol.30). They asserted that when the 'perfected body' was 'free from defilements', it was a purified principle fitted to become a *guru/arahant* - then this body

could decide when it wanted to leave this world and become like Siva – *para-mukti*- or Buddha.

[314](#) For Vedanta see Fort (1996); for Tantra see Muller-Otega (1996).

[315](#) Often *jivan-mukti* was made the equivalent of being physically immortal. Sometimes a two step rocket was envisioned: yes, the yogi can become immortal (*siddhi*) – physical purified and loaded with magic. He can then move on and become a living liberated (*jivan-mukti*) – a person who one day decides to leave his body and become an immortal soul.

[316](#) Birch (2011) list the most important compilation sources as: Yajnavalkya's and Vasistha's Ashtangayoga, Amanaskayoga's Rajayoga, the Vivekamartanda's Sadangayoga, Ardinath's Khecarividya, and the Virupaksanatha's Amrtasiddhi.

[317](#) There are different versions of *HYP*. One version consisting of ten chapters and a version found in Jodphur provides instructions for a larger amount of *asana* – but these passages were probably inserted later (Bühnemann 2007). My account relies on the short version based on a translation of Swami Muktibodhananda (1998) from the Bihar School of yoga.

[318](#) The drawings illustrating the *HYP* techniques in this chapter are from Swami Muktibodhananda (Bihar School of yoga) commentary on *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (1998).

[319](#) The text does not make clear what principle is behind its recommended diet. To get an idea of how such principles might have been, see Frawley (1999) who from a modern Ayurvedic point of view advises how a correct yogi diet can facilitate liberation efforts.

[320](#) According to Mallinson (2007) the instruction of the *khechari mudra* is based on an earlier influential Tantric Nath text called *Khecharividya*. Mallinson also confirms that these extreme Tantric techniques, which *HYP* just lists, tended to disappear as the *HYP* was adopted by high castes.

[321](#) According to Birch (2011) the *HYP* here mainly draws on Medieval *raja yoga* discourse – as for instance the already mentioned *Amanaskayoga* – where *raja* was a synonym for *samadhi*. However in this *raja* discourse we find the same ambiguities as we find in the Patanjali *samadhi* discourse.

[322](#) The whole idea of ‘increasing subtleness of *chakras*’ is discussed in Alter (2004).

[323](#) White (2003) claims that *raja* in *raja yoga* in the early texts is meaning *semen* and *raja yoga* means the union of semen and blood.

[324](#) I use the translation by Briggs (1938). He calls his version the *Poona Text* and

defines it as the most central of all *hatha-yoga* texts, as it is “quoted” in several later texts.

[325](#) This ambivalence can be traced back to Matsyendra (900AD – precursor to Gorakhnath) who according to White (2003) began to domesticate the wild Kula rites, hitherto taking place in cremations ground. Matsyendra included them in a Saivite Gnostic discourse. Those who receive the *jnana* (“Gnosis”) obtain *bhukti* (“pleasure”), *mukti* (“liberation”) and *siddhi* (“magical powers”) – according to the *Kaula-jnana-nirnaya* of Matsyendra. So already here, there is a tendency to subsume Tantric practices in Saivite theism.

[326](#) See Eaton (1993) and Desika Char (1993) - how religious life was affected by Muslims.

[327](#) See Metcalf (2002) and Bayly (1986) for how a small trading company developed into a colonial master.

[328](#) White (2009, p. 212). White has done a long overdue job in gathering a range of accounts from Muslims and Europeans arriving in India in the period we are dealing with here. Hence many quotes in this chapter draw on White’s efforts.

[329](#) For historical introductions to the Sultanate and the Mughals, see Metcalf (2002), Eaton (1993), Desika Char (1993), Eraly (2007), Asher & Talbot (2006).

[330](#) For a controversial account, see Sharma (1986).

[331](#) See Pinch (2006) for the conflict between Bhakti and yoga ascetics. He argues further that Bhakti and British colonialism seriously marginalised asceticism during the 19 century.

[332](#) Quote from White (2009), p.220.

[333](#) So there was close interaction between Muslim and Indian elite and popular religious cultures. It is however unknown to me how this new Northern Indian multi-culture *specific* influenced for instance urban Brahmin yoga and rural *hatha-yoga*. Certainly we can see many Persian translations of Indian religious texts – even the *Yoga Sutra* and *HYP* were studied. So there was certainly some uptake among the Muslim upper classes. For Hindu and Muslim religious relations, see Desika Char (1993).

[334](#) All over India there were small rural fortresses where the local people would be able to defend themselves for months. This of course also generated problems for the upper classes trying to levy the farmers’ economic surplus. They had to muster significant armies to claim their taxes, and travelling through the countryside was connected with

significant risks of attack from the locals (Kolff 1990).

[335](#) Kolff (1990) in his investigations of the military market of Northern India commencing in 1450, at the end of the Delhi Sultanate.

[336](#) Farquhar (1925), Lorenzen (1978), Clark (2004) show how militant asceticism in the Sultanate period was widespread. See also Gross (1992) for further literature discussions.

[337](#) Pinch (2006) argues that the Muslims did not escalate these conflicts.

[338](#) Quote from White (2009), p.214.

[339](#) Quote from White (2009), p.216.

[340](#) See Metcalf (2002) and editors *Introduction* in Gommans & Kolff (2001).

[341](#) Muslims brought with them a tradition of using either slave-soldiers (*Mamelukes*) or mercenaries (often warrior tribes) according to Keegan (1993).

[342](#) See also Ghurye (1953), Gross (1992), and Clark (2004) for discussions of militant asceticism. Clark focusses on the Siva tradition. Kolff (1990) gives an overall analysis of the military market.

[343](#) Quote from White (2009), p.222.

[344](#) Orr (2001) (1940) describes further the aggressive culture of the Nath yogis.

[345](#) Hence we hear about such communities/identities – often emerging from the ranks of the Rajput semi-nomads - of warrior-ascetics carrying names like *Purbiyas*, *Ujjainiyas*, *Bundelos*, *Baheliyas* and *Pasis*. Such identities were grouped together as *Naukari* – “providers of (soldier) services”. They often provided the backbone of armies for local warlords, travelling caravans and Mughal armies etc.

[346](#) White (2009), p.222.

[347](#) White (2009), p.211.

[348](#) However among the local population the discourse of holy men as ever imbued them with awe *and* respect and made them acceptable as a fact of life. The European Christian discourse on the other hand mostly lacked this quality of respect as it could not possibly see these men’s “holiness”.

[349](#) White (2009), p.217.

[350](#) See Tod: (1920) and Gosh (1930) – painting a picture of thieves and lawless bandits of the sadhus.

[351](#) However ironically enough the *jogi* of the marketplace performing contortionism became one of the first *hatha yoga asana* performers – seen with the eyes of a modern observer.

[352](#) See Gold (1984 &1999,) Mahapatra (1972), Robertson (2004). For the doctrines of the Nath see Gupta (1976) and Mallik (1953).

[353](#) They subscribe to a mixture of Buddhist, Saivaite and Tantric ideas and practices. They seem to have strong caste opposition and a taint of anti-Brahmanism.

[354](#) Quote from White (2009), p.218.

[355](#) It is a seven-limb yoga: *kriya* (21 variations; hygienic techniques similar to shatkarma) – *asana* (32 variations; mostly meditative poses) – *mudra* (25 variations) – *pratyahara* – *pranayama* – *dhyana* – *samadhi*. The six ancillaries remind much more about those typical listed in yoga treatises than those of *HYP*.

[356](#) According to Mallinson (2007) *hatha-yoga* became – stripped from its Tantric elements - very popular among Vedanta Brahmins.

[357](#) Actually there are many texts directly influenced by *HYP*. Larson (2008) gives a short summary of texts like *Vastistina-samhita*, *Satkarma-samgraha*, *Hatha-samhitacandrika*, *Hatha-tattva-kaumundi*, *Yoga-cintamani* etc.

[358](#) We can gather that the number 84 became a crucial number in the *hatha* yoga discourse.

[359](#) Larson (2008) briefly summarises one of them written by Brahmananda.

[360](#) They carry the names: *Kshurika-*, *Yoga-Kundalini-*, *Yoga-shikha-*, *Yoga-tattva-*, *Yoga-cuda-mani-*, *Darshana-*, *Tri-shiki-Brahmana-*, *Vraha-* and *Shandilya-Upanishad*.

[361](#) The *Yoga-Sikha* apparently borrowed many passages from Naths texts like the *Yoga-bija* mentioned earlier. The *Kshurika* has extensive discussions of subtle body notions like *nadi*, *ida*, *pingala* etc. The *Kundalini* discusses the Bandhas (locks) of *HYP*. The *Tattva* argues that *hatha* prepares for the demands of *raja* (i.e. *samadhi* meditation) and so on.

[362](#) This ideology of inclusion is often re-created by uncritical scholars in their interpretation efforts. Eliade is an example.

363 Accordingly reading the *Upanishads* listed above which discuss *hatha-yoga* shows how *hatha-yoga* was adopted as a *technical yoga* within all kinds of Saivite, Vashnavite and Vedanta communities, some of them probably conservative communities. Even around 1900, the technical adaptation strategy was still in place as seen by the influential neo-Hinduist Vivekananda: *hatha-yoga* was once more defined as a preliminary step for doing raja (i.e. meditative) yoga.

364 Some Brahmin upper castes might even have practised *hatha-yoga* and other Tantric rituals in private because of the violation of many caste norms. During the day they would follow their duties as a Brahmin public person. But in private they would turn to their secret Tantric practices for their own private goals (Renfrew Brook 1990).

365 See Alter (1992) – showing that the difference between wrestler / ascetic Sadhu is minor.

366 Often *asanas* are combined with interlinking movements – *vinyasa* – and special breathing styles, which are never mentioned in the old *hatha* texts. The modern student is primarily taught refined body awareness and aims for gymnastic perfection and health. This again diverts dramatically from the *hatha-yoga* scriptures, which aim for Kundalini to rise through the *sushuma* channel.

367 Many instructors – sometime Brahmins and holy men - were previously employed and participated in royal rituals and they seem to have left traces of their instructions in form of documentation. Part of the instructors' job was the physical and mental training of the princes, rajas, aristocrats, warlords and their soldiers. Extensive training programs were developed– both for strength and flexibility.

368 Many of the wrestling orders were protected by the royal courts or were a part of them. The Muslims brought originally wrestling to India. It was a popular Persian sport and became also popular in India (Alter 1992). As mentioned earlier, under British rule many warrior ascetics turned to wrestling, as they could no longer make a living as professional soldiers.

369 Many of the *asanas* shown are - in best Western gymnastic style - using ropes. The *asanas* described in this document are the oldest *asana* document we have, where the *asanas* in both name and form are very similar to Western modern poses. However, these poses were not exercised for liberation purpose, but to physically train soldiers and wrestlers.

370 Alter (1992) describes the *danda* and other wrestling exercises in detail, where Sun Salutations were an essential part of the regime. He states that the sun salutations were formalised in the late 19 century by royal wrestlers and that different early forms of sun salutations can be traced a ‘couple of hundred years back’ (from 1992) – they seem to

have emerged in the period of the Mughal empire. Are sun salutations originally ascetic warrior exercises adapted by wrestlers?

[371](#) See D. Kahneman *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (2011) for a Nobel prize-winning social psychological account of how the mind thinks and makes decisions.

[372](#) See Olson (1997 & 2002) for further comparisons between Indian and post-modern philosophy.

[373](#) Buddhist philosophy – build around anti-essentialism - very strongly criticised Brahmin essentialism (Gombrich 2009).

[374](#) One of the finest proponents is Karl R. Popper. See for instance *The Open Society and its Enemies* or *Conjectures and Refutations*.

[375](#) For the different histories and origins of Perennial Philosophy see von Stuckrad (2005).

[376](#) Jones (1993) gives a comprehensive philosophical critique of this claim of mystics.

[377](#) For further excellent discussions of “mystical experience” and non-reductionism, see Katz (1978). For a philosophical reply from a mystic to Katz’s famous criticism see Forman (1990 & 1999). For an overview of the discussion see King (1999b) and Jones (1993).

[378](#) For further ?????see C. Keller: *Mystical Literature* – and S. Katz: *Language, Epistemology and Mysticism* – both in S. Katz (ed): *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (1978)

[379](#) For an quick introduction to this see Spinelli (1989) (psychological perspective) Burr (1995) (sociological perspective), Hagen (1995) (Zen Buddhist perspective) and Spinner (1974) (philosophical perspective).

[380](#) See Olson (2002) who compares how language (and writing, desire, disappearing self, rationality, etc) is understood in Indian and postmodern philosophies..

[381](#) For further excellent discussions of “mystical experience”, non-reductionism etc., see Katz (1978). For a philosophical reply from a mystic to Katz’s famous criticism see Forman (1990 & 1999). For an overview of the discussion see King (1999b).

[382](#) See my discussions on consciousness in the chapter *What are we talking about?* and Glucklich (2001). This notion of ‘multiple-centre-processing-of-consciousness’ also offers an explanation to the objections the phenomenologist M. Merleau-Ponty in his *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962) has towards this Kantian approach to

consciousness. Merleau-Ponty criticises the Kantian model as an ‘intellectualist’ model not able to explain the findings of Gestalt psychology and the experiences of brain damaged patients.

383 See Gimello (1978), Klein (1986) and Scharf (1998), Forman (1998) for discussions of de-conditioning of consciousness and pure consciousness – a discussion stretching back to Kant and which have been re-invigorated by post-modern philosophy. King (1999b) points out that as well as perennialism ends in “ a myth of a transcendent object” then constructionism ends in an opposing “myth of isolated context”.

384 Sarbacker (2005) tries to rescue the notion of ‘liberation as mystical insight’ from the onslaught of constructionism. He calls his approach a mild form of constructionism, but I struggle to see why any constructionist should accept it. See also Forman’s (1990 & 1999) attempt to save mysticism.

385 See Brown (1986) who reaches similar conclusions in a technical and psychological comparison of three meditative traditions – Theravada, Mahayana Buddhism and Patanjali yoga.

386 Sharf (1998) has produced some interesting reflections on the meaning of the notion ‘experience’. He shows that the concept originated among the romantics and argues that to talk about an ‘inner subjective religious experience’ breaks down what experience actually is about. If we were to take seriously reports of ‘religious experiences’ we should also take seriously people reporting to be abducted by aliens, he says mockingly.

387 Bourdieu has a very critical view on ‘the sacred’. For him it is an example of symbolic violence. He sees ‘sacredness’ as a central part of religion’s primary function to legitimate social inequality. Through the power of the religious field to define what is sacred – called ‘consecration’ – it elevates social and cultural signs to a sphere where they can only be admired and respected but not critically evaluated. See Rey (2007).

388 Quoted and translated from Sarasin (2009) p.228.

389 See the efforts of Forman (1999), Sarbacker (2005), King (1999b).

390 There is also widespread criticism of introspection within social psychological experiments, where it is found often to have serious drawbacks. Wilson and Dunn (2004) find for instance that introspection, instead of leading to genuine self-revelation, often leads to self-fabrication.

391 See for instance M. Hewstone, W. Stroebe & K. Jonas: *Introduction to Social Psychology* (4 ed. 2007).

[392](#) Even some accomplished critical researchers seems to adhere to this discourse – see for instance Sjoman: (2004) who for instance maintains the old saying that “yoga is known from yoga” and “What can a mind, fed on a gluttonous feast of distraction as culture, understand of a system that teaches the contrary?” which seems to exclude “external non-yogis based” critical evaluation.

[393](#) See Lorenzen (2004) for further discussions on how religious groups competed for income and support. An important source of income from the Medieval period was the control of pilgrim routes and centres – often situated along the Ganges basin.

[394](#) The Introduction of this book looked for *critical yoga literature*. As the yoga popularisers have strong economical interests in yoga it is clear that those circles cannot generate a critical discourse about yoga. That would be to cut away the branch they are sitting on. As these popularisers of the yoga industry are further enmeshed in a spiritual and romantic crusade against modernity they cannot therefore allow themselves to criticise the instrument – yoga – which they hold up against modern life and its diseases.

[395](#) Following Collins (1975) who builds on both Marx and Weber and integrates their focus on social conflicts.

[396](#) Self interest is here seen as an impulse. A default reaction, which of course can be - and often is - overwritten. Further I am not saying that self-interest is the only driving factor. Interesting studies show that human beings also had a propensity to corporate and to punish (even at personal costs involved) those who abuse the norms of corporation (Gintis et al 2005 ; Beinhocker 2007, Seabright 2010). For a critique of defining ‘self interest’ as human nature, see M.Sahlins: *The Western Illusion of Human Nature* (2008) Self interest clearly also underpins Bourdieu’s works even if he denies this (Schwartz 1997).

[397](#) Weber himself also wrote on *Religions of India* (1909). I am not drawing much on the conclusions Weber made about yoga in his book, as they were based on the very restricted information available at that point in time. What is of interest is Weber’s methodology and how it can be integrated with recent methodologies. One could say that the sociology of Bourdieu in many respects is a refinement of Weber and his reflections on religion (Rey 2007).

[398](#) See for instance Benavides (2000) who discusses the interplay of ecological conditions, social hierarchies and religious legitimation – based on Leo Howe’s studies of Balinese societies: certain hierarchical organisations (like kingships) can only emerge under certain ecological/demographic conditions and need to be justified by religious ideologies.

[399](#) Definition from Harris (1997). For a discussion of culture, see Lincoln (2000) and

Barker (2012).

400 Sanderson's model is consciously left open and vague as it assumes that when human culture and religions arise – often expressed in new discourses and cultural fields - it is in response to *historic specific configurations of conditions, dynamics and conflict lines*. There is, therefore, in the model no specific trans-historical assumption or general understanding as to why cultures and ‘religions’ arise, what functions they have or what content they have.

401 Increasingly within history, politics and sociology one see Darwinian evolutionary models being successfully applied (Gat 2008). G. Hodgson & T. Knudsen: *Darwin's Conjecture* (2010) and B. Thayer: *Darwin and International Relations: On the evolutionary origins of war and ethnic conflict* (2004) give methodological and philosophical reasons for integrating the biological and social sciences.

402 See Sanderson (2001) and Sarasin (2009) for a discussion of the debate around the use of Darwin's model of evolution in sociology and for the application of ‘the evolution algorithm’ to economy, see Beinhocker (2007). Regarding my effort to bring together Darwin and Foucault: according to the Swiss historian P. Sarasin (2009) this makes sense in many ways. For instance, both thinkers employed a genealogical method which showed that what we previously thought to be the essence, identity and origin of phenomena (species or ideas) would dissolve on closer historical inspection. For a provocative account of us humans being more animal-like than we prefer to be and of our efforts to disguise them, see Gray (2002) and de Waal (2006). See also Dennett's (1995) influential account about the impact of Darwin's way of thinking.

403 One could argue that my use of a-historical notions like ‘self interest’ and ‘status competition’ (alluding to ‘human nature’) directly contradicts the fundamentals of post-structuralism. However, I believe it is now time to introduce counter-intuitive ideas – following Kuhn and Feyerabend - in order to break out of the constraints of post-structuralism; this is an attempt to establish new research programmes. Anyway, according to Sarasin (2009) the effort to bring together Darwin and Foucault is meaningful as both of them employed a genealogy.

404 For theory and historical application see for instance Yoffee (2005), Lull & Mico (2011), McNeill 2003, McEvilley 2002, Gat 2008, Thayer 2004, Fukuyama 2011, Witzel 2003. Among Russian archaeologists and anthropologists social evolutionary approach is widely used (Korotayev et al 2000, Kradin 2002, Beliaev & Bondarenko 2001 and in Kohl 2009, Anthony 2010).

405 For an example see J. Diamond: *Collapse* (2005).

[406](#) Darwin's *genealogical methodology* should be kept very separate from *Social Darwinism* (and bio-sociology) which are lamentable ideologies transforming Darwin's ideas into something they never were (Sarasin 2009, Bowler 2009). For discussions of integrating the biological and social sciences see Thayer (2004), de Wall (2009), Alcock (2003) and Segerstrale (2000).

[407](#) Barkov (1989) argues that prestige is the most important factor of human drives. This drive for social power and recognition – status – is prevalent among all the primates (de Waal 2006 & 2009).

[408](#) Milner (1994) has a good discussion of status.

[409](#) Basham (1967) show how asceticism is related to social change. See also C. Fuller (1992), Aiyappan (1965). How social groups upgrade themselves in a caste system, see Srinivas (1952).

[410](#) Preston (1980), Wadley (1985) – religious life in a village. Dalrymple (2009) shows for instance how dance and epic telling is given magic-religious meaning by the rural population.

[411](#) There is nothing unique in this method of using the insights of contemporary- and inter-disciplinary studies to help us to understand the past. An excellent example is the work of the historian Peter Heather: *Empires and Barbarians – Migration, Development and the Birth of Europe* (2009). Other impressive examples are the historian Azar Gat: *War in Human Civilization* (2005) and the anthropologist D.W. Anthony: *The Horse, the Wheel, and Language* (2010) – the last discussing this methodology. So more and more scholars are very critical of current academic hyperspecialisation, which sees the trees but not the forest.

[412](#) Gat (2008) makes a similar complaint.

[413](#) Keith Sawyer (2005) argues in his book about societies as complex systems, that stable *emergents* – the new – can only be explained by introducing an *interactional level* as a mediating link between the structural and the individual. It is within the interactional layer – where ideas and practices flow together – that the new crystallises. The *Interactional Paradigm* as Keith Sawyer labels it allows us to explain social change on both the individual and on the structural level. Adherents to this Paradigm are, according to Keith Sawyer, writers such as Simmel, Mead, Cooley, Bourdieu, Foucault and the Chicago School of Symbolic Interaction.

[414](#) A better way of labelling social and biological evolution following Beinhocker (2007) is that both models are sub-classes of *hyper-complex adaptive dynamic systems*.

415 For introductions to discourse analysis see Phillips & Hardy (2002), Fairclough (1992).

416 As the reader might have observed my basic assumption of conflict sociology - like impulses of self-interest and power seeking - could easily be accused of universalism and essentialism. I believe that by using the notion of *default* (people can override impulses if they choose so) I can save my skin.

417 The similarity between religious ecstasy and creativity has been noticed for almost a century see Geel (1982).

418 For a multi-disciplinary and multi-centred approach to consciousness see Glucklich (2001) and Dennett (1993) which has inspired many of the thoughts in this chapter.

419 Lewis (1981) in his classical account of ecstatic religions has a similar approach. He also defines a common underlying form of ecstatic altered states of consciousness and then sets out to analyse how these ecstatic religious practices interact with specific societies and their specific conflicts. For an multidisciplinary overview of ecstatic religion see Holm (1982).

420 For more about hypnotic trance and meditation as an ASC, see S. Chowdhary and J.K. Gopinath: *Clinical Hypnosis and Patanjali yoga sutras*, in Indian Journal of Psychiatry 2013, vol. 55, issue 6.

421 The map is only thought to be a tool that allows us to discuss and compare different technologies of consciousness. Scholars like Walsh (1993) have drawn much more detailed phenomenological maps of ASC working with up to 11 dimensions, which he uses for the same purpose as I do. However, I did not find it necessary to use such complexity to get my points across.

422 Grof is well known for his research into ‘mind-altering-techniques’ and ‘mind-altered-states’, which he calls *holotropic consciousness* – i.e. consciousness moving towards wholeness (Grof 1993 and 2000).

423 Psycho-analytically oriented scholars like S. Grof interpret and differentiate such mind states in a range of ways such as projections of repressed aspects of unconscious mind; near death experiences; perinatal experiences; transpersonal experiences; condensed experiences etc. (Grof 1993 and 2000).

424 In a recent essay on the YS, the yoga specialist Larson (2012) only briefly mentions that there is a chapter on supernatural powers. The largest part of the essay consists of clarifying and detailed explaining the countless mind states of YS.

[425](#) Some studies have been conducted by Jack Brown and Daniel Engler in K. Wilber, J. Engler & D.P. Brown (eds) (1986): *Transformations of Consciousness* and in J. H. Austin: *Zen and the Brain* (2001).

[426](#) The essay quoted from above is found in a volume edited by Whicher and Carpenter, which is actually called: *Yoga – The Indian Tradition*. Already the title indicates the proposal which has not been investigated and confirmed, that there exists such a thing as a *yoga tradition*.