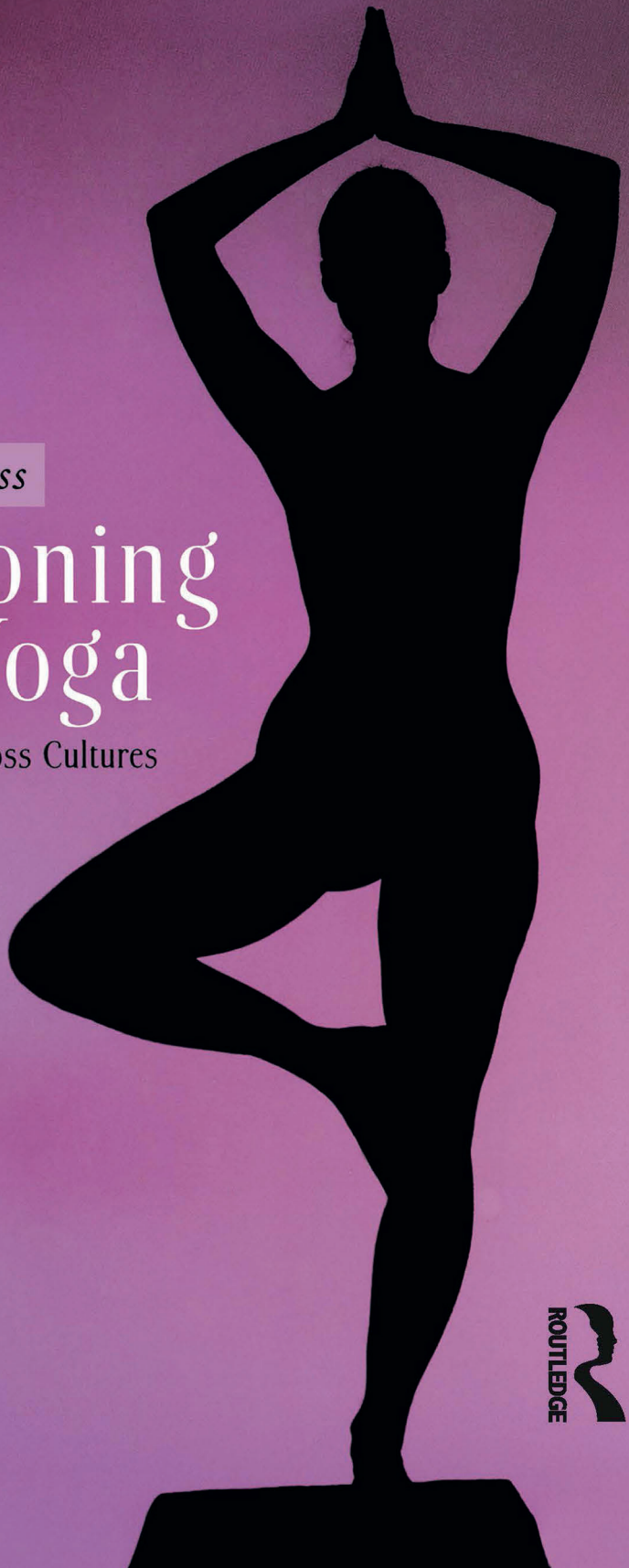


Sarah Strauss

Positioning Yoga

Balancing Acts Across Cultures



ROUTLEDGE


Positioning Yoga



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Balancing Acts Across Cultures

Sarah Strauss

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**In memory of Wilhelm Halfass (1940–2000),
a great soul and an inspiring teacher.**



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Glossary and Orthographic Note

I have not used diacritic markings for transliteration of Hindi and Sanskrit words throughout the text, but have provided them in the glossary below, along with definitions of all significant words and phrases.

| | |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>abhyās</i> | practice |
| <i>advaita</i> | non-duality of atman and brahman |
| <i>ahiṃsā</i> | non-violence |
| <i>āsana</i> | posture, position, pose; Patanjali's 3rd stage of astanga system |
| <i>aśram</i> | monastery |
| <i>aṣṭāṅga yoga</i> | Patanjali's eight-fold path to realization |
| <i>ātman</i> | soul, self |
| <i>bhadrālok</i> | "decent people" of Calcutta |
| <i>bhakti</i> | devotion, worship |
| <i>bhakti yoga</i> | realization through worship |
| <i>bhukti</i> | pleasure |
| <i>brahmacharin</i> | student |
| <i>brahmacharin-sannyasin</i> | student-renouncer |
| <i>brahmachārya</i> | first stage of Hindu life cycle; also a life of celibacy |
| <i>brahman</i> | the Universal soul/spirit |
| <i>darśan</i> | seeing and being seen by god or guru |
| <i>darśana</i> | philosophy or school of thought; lit. way of seeing |
| <i>dharamsala</i> | rest house |
| <i>dhāraṇa</i> | concentration/Patanjali's sixth stage of astanga system |
| <i>dharma</i> | biomoral duty |
| <i>dhyānā</i> | meditation/Patanjali's seventh stage |
| <i>ghats</i> | riverbank landing places |
| <i>guna</i> | quality or constituent of nature |
| <i>guru–shishya</i> | teacher or student master–disciple pair |
| <i>gurubhaī</i> | students of the same guru |
| <i>haṭha yoga</i> | realization through physical discipline |
| <i>japa</i> | repetitive prayer |
| <i>jīvanmukhti</i> | living liberation |
| <i>jñāna yoga</i> | realization through intellectual knowledge |

Glossary and Orthographic Note

| | |
|---------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>kaivalya</i> | isolation, release |
| <i>kāma</i> | lust, desire |
| <i>karma</i> | fate, work |
| <i>karma yoga</i> | realization through work |
| <i>kuṇḍalinī</i> | divine, cosmic force/energy; Sanskrit “coiled up”, refers to the primordial energy located in the sacrum, invoked through a variety of meditative practices |
| <i>maya</i> | illusion |
| <i>mahasamādhi</i> | euphemism for death; transition to higher state; see <i>Samādhi</i> |
| <i>mīmāṃsā</i> | one of the six schools of Hindu thought |
| <i>moks(h)a</i> | release, absolute freedom |
| <i>muk(h)ti</i> | see <i>moks(h)a</i> |
| <i>niyama</i> | self-purification/Patanjali’s second stage |
| <i>prāṇa</i> | breath, vitality, energy |
| <i>praṇāyama</i> | breathing techniques/Patanjali’s fourth stage |
| <i>pratyāhāra</i> | retreat from the senses/Patanjali’s fifth stage |
| <i>pujas</i> | acts of spiritual devotion |
| <i>rāja yoga</i> | “kingly” yoga/Patanjali’s eight-stage yoga |
| <i>rajas</i> | mobility, activity/one of the three <i>gunas</i> |
| <i>rishis</i> | seers, sages |
| <i>sādhak</i> | seeker, aspirant |
| <i>sādhanā</i> | spiritual practice, quest |
| <i>samādhi</i> | highest altered state of consciousness |
| <i>samatva</i> | equilibrium, disinterest |
| <i>saṃsāra</i> | the endless cycle of life |
| <i>sāṃkhya</i> | one of the six schools of Hindu thought |
| <i>sampradāya</i> | tradition, sect, ideological community |
| <i>sannyās</i> | fourth stage of Hindu life cycle; renouncing of <i>samsāra</i> |
| <i>sannyasin</i> | one who has taken vows of <i>sannyas</i> (female version: <i>sannyasini</i>) |
| <i>satsang</i> | spiritual fellowship |
| <i>sattva</i> | clarity, purity/one of the three <i>gunas</i> |
| <i>satya</i> | truth, truthfulness |
| <i>siddhis</i> | unusual and seemingly magical powers |
| <i>swara</i> | use of breathing techniques |
| <i>tamas</i> | darkness, dullness/one of the three <i>gunas</i> |
| <i>tantra</i> | esoteric ritual practices in Hindu and Buddhist traditions, sometimes involving sexual union |
| <i>tat tvam asi</i> | “that thou art” |

Glossary and Orthographic Note

| | |
|--------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>vairāgya</i> | absence of worldly desires |
| <i>vanaprastha</i> | forest-dwelling third life stage before <i>sannyās</i> |
| <i>vedānta</i> | one of the six Darśanas of classical Hinduism, focused on the teachings of the Upanisads and particularly the Brahma Sūtras |
| <i>yama</i> | moral observance/Patanjali's first stage in Astanga system |
| <i>yogabhyās</i> | yoga practice |
| <i>y j</i> | to yoke or join/Sanskrit root of the word "yoga" |



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“Lineage” of Swami Sivananda of Rishikesh

Note: Not an exhaustive list (by any means!), but rather a genealogical representation of those members of the Sivananda *sampradaya* (tradition or sect) who are discussed in this book.

Ramakrishna (b. 1836 – d. 1886)

Vivekananda (b. 1863 – d. 1902)

[*Sivananda was inspired by Vivekananda’s writings.*]

Sivananda – considered “self-realized” saint;

given *sannyas* upon arrival in Rishikesh (b. 1887 – d. 1963)

Mircea Eliade (early student, pre-Divine Life Society (DLS) incorporation; b. 1907 – d. 1986)

Chidananda (current president of DLS in Rishikesh; b. 1916)

Jayananda*, DLS – USA

Lilias Folan, TSI (Town Sports International)-Yoga

Krishnananda (general secretary of DLS in Rishikesh; b. 1922 – d. 2001)

Sumit* (Yoga Center in Rishikesh)

Ram* (Rishikesh; also heavily influenced by Vivekananda’s writings)

Vishnudevananda (Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centers/Ashrams – HQ Val Morin, Quebec, but many other global locations; b. 1927 – d. 1993)

Swamiji* (1990s – hotel in Rishikesh; now living in United States)

Satchidananda (Integral Yoga Institutes/Yogaville Ashram, Virginia, b. 1914 – d. 2002)

Dean Ornish, MD (Sausalito, CA, USA)

Omkarananda (Divine Light Zentrum, Winterthur, Switzerland; Omkarananda International Ashrams/Schools, Europe and India; b. 1930 – d. 2000)

Sivananda-Radha (Yasodhara Ashram, BC, Canada; b. 1911 – d. 1995)

Chinmayananda (started Chinmaya Mission as well as VHP; b. 1916 – d. 1993)

Venkatesananda (DLS – South Africa, b. 1921 – d. 1982)

Jyotirmayananda (Yoga Research Foundation, Miami, FL, USA; b. 1931)

Satyananda (Bihar School of Yoga, India, and other international affiliates; b. 1924)

* = *pseudonym, based on request or other need for protection from publicity*



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Preface

A Note to Anthropologists and Interested Others . . .

In this book, I have tried to tell a fairly simple story about the ways that certain ideas and practices of yoga, primarily those of Swami Sivananda of Rishikesh, have moved from India to elsewhere in the world and back. In the telling, I explain how, over the past century, the practice of yoga has transformed from a regional, male-oriented religious activity to a globalized and largely secular phenomenon. The story can be read in different ways that make it useful to different kinds of readers – both those who are at home in the academic circles that comprise the social sciences, and those rooted more squarely in the wider world.

Students of anthropology who may be reading this book for a class will find descriptions of multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork that follow the paths of transnational cultural flows of the ideas, practices, and people who comprise one particular “brand” of yoga, that of Swami Sivananda of Rishikesh, India. If I have succeeded in my task, you will feel that you have come to inhabit a world that is both similar to and quite different from the one you wake up to on a daily basis. You will recognize the value of cultural anthropology’s primary methodology, participant-observation, as well as the necessity of informed historical context for making sense of the richness of ethnographic data. By following the twists and turns of the ethnographer’s path, you will come to understand that, for any given subject, many different stories could be told. You will, I hope, look at the ordinary world around you in a slightly different way for having read this book, and see that in order to make peace with ourselves and others, we need to be able to put into practice that fundamental tenet of anthropology, cultural relativism, and see the world from another vantage point.

Anthropologists and other scholars may find utility in learning the details of one specific example of a transnational cultural process that shares both similarities and differences with other instances of that which is often reduced to the simple rubric of “globalization.” By telling the story of Sivananda’s yoga as it was developed and disseminated through India and other parts of the world, I try to convey the ways that a variety of what Raymond Williams (1988) has called “keywords” – modern, nationalist, liberation, wealth (in its original sense of well-being) – have converged to produce a particular cultural form that is recognizable in many parts

Preface

of the world today as “yoga.” The peculiarly transnational construction of this cultural form, dependent as it has been on the forces of colonialism, nationalism, and globalization, sheds light on the distinctive values and remedies that resonate with people who call themselves modern.

Readers who are also yoga practitioners, many of whom are my colleagues in academia as well as the production staff who assembled this book, may seek histories both personal and practical that will help them understand things that they have learned in various yoga classes. In addition to the theoretical and methodological points highlighted earlier, those who have practiced yoga may find in this book an extended community to which they themselves belong, and find value in that membership.

To all, I wish you the lessons that I have learned through the lengthy process (now at fourteen years and counting) of engaging in research on yoga and yoga practitioners: that breathing (really, truly, deeply) makes a difference; that like-minded others can be found in the most surprising places; and that by staying with it, following through, and embracing that which may seem at first too different, too meaningless, too ordinary, we can find ourselves engaged in a bear hug with the essence of our own humanity.