

ROUTLEDGE REVIVALS

A History of Yoga

Vivian Worthington





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Routledge Revivals

A History of Yoga

First published in 1982, *A History of Yoga* offers a comprehensive exploration of yoga's evolution, from its origins before the Vedic age through its development in Hinduism, Buddhism, Tantrism, Zen, Tibetan traditions, and modern Hatha yoga. The book provides concise summaries of yoga's major classics and profiles its most influential figures. Written for the general reader, it balances clarity and factual depth, making it an essential resource for understanding yoga's historical and cultural significance.



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YOGA



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FOREWORD

A history of yoga for the general reader - clear and readable, without the confusing complexity of the academic tract and yet with its teeth in the facts - has long been needed to serve the yoga public in the West. Vivian Worthington, a yoga teacher of many years standing, writer, and sometime Secretary General of the British Wheel of Yoga, is undoubtedly the man for the job.

No such history has hitherto appeared, as Mr Worthington explains, because of the wrong-headed approach to the subject - which has in turn engendered views even more wrong-headed. This unfortunate circle needs breaking, and this is the way to do it. The book describes the genesis and development of yoga over the centuries as it was shaped and nourished by the great sages and the classical scriptures, and also demolishes a few misconceptions about what yoga is and where it came from. The people, the books, the stream of ideas, and the impersonal currents of history are all there, recreating the living process which brought forth the greatest system of spiritual thought ever attained. This work should provide invaluable service for the growing body of yoga enthusiasts throughout the world.

Brian Netscher
Editor, 'Yoga Today'



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PREFACE

Every Saturday afternoon for three years from the age of fifteen it was my habit to go into Manchester to browse round the secondhand bookshops and the reading room of the central library. This was my equivalent of university education, denied to me for financial reasons. During those years I read my way steadily through all the major classics of Western philosophy, and found the exercise thrilling and enthralling. At Gibb's bookshop in Mosley Street the manager tried to get hold of suitable books, and bought back or exchanged for others those I had finished with.

Then one day he handed me a slim volume in faded brown covers, with the remark, 'I think you are ready for this.' It was the Principal Upanishads translated by Max Muller. The effect was stunning. It was so unlike the academic philosophies I had been struggling with over the last few years. The teachings were beautiful and uplifting, but never moralizing, and they went to the heart of the matter as far as understanding the nature of reality was concerned. Western philosophy fell into place as so many word puzzles, mostly trite, though intriguing word games. It seemed that suddenly I had come home. Back went all my other books, and for some time afterwards I avidly read anything and everything on Indian philosophy, and especially on yoga.

For me yoga was indeed a great discovery. Here was a system of thought that also included practice. It included all of the philosophies that Europe had inherited from the Greeks, but went very much further. It also included that other tradition in Europe, the occult, a corpus of teaching and practice that had been compelled to go underground in the dark ages and remain there almost up to the present day. These teachings, so shrouded in mystery and warned against as dangerous, were treated in an open and matter of fact manner that was refreshing to say the least. Yoga also offered a very satisfactory system of what might be called religion, which included the validity of mystical experience, and the practice of meditation. Added to this was a complex and most satisfying system of physical exercises to keep one fit, but also to prepare the body and mind for spiritual enlightenment, perhaps better stated as a vision of reality. Add to the above some very convincing explanations of the processes of birth and death, and the meanings behind these processes, and we have a system of yoga that has dominated my life ever since.

Preface

One problem associated with gaining such a mystical opening and vantage point fairly early in life has been a situation often spoken of, particularly by Christian mystics. This has been the difficulty of finding much of relevance in ordinary life that one can identify with or find meaningful. This situation is provided for in India by retirement from the world or taking to the begging bowl. It is not so in Europe at the present time where all are required to earn their living in the prescribed fashion. Only a few farsighted visionaries like Carl Jung have foreseen a situation where mystical experience is commonplace, and society will need to be reorganized to take account of it.

The first meeting with yoga was thrilling indeed, but I did not realize then the further treasures that were in store. True to its name, I have come to realize that yoga really does mean union, the uniting of the higher and the lower, spirit and matter. Throughout its history it has pursued this task of integration. I moved from its beginnings in the Upanishads and Indian classical yoga, largely ascetic and ethical into the deeper layers of the human psyche. First the raja yoga of Patanjali, then the emotional warmth of bhakti, and on into the deep psychological understanding of tantra. I also realized how yoga had formed the inspiration and basis of the religion of Buddhism, and how it had influenced other religions outside India.

Being drawn in to teach yoga in its many aspects, though mostly hatha, during the decade of the seventies I felt the need for a reference work covering the whole history of the movement. To my great surprise nothing existed. This was utterly baffling, but was indeed the case. No history of yoga existed, nor ever had. The reasons why are outlined to some extent in the introduction, but the feeling grew on me over the years that such a book had to be written, and as no one else seemed likely to undertake it that it was I who had to write it.

This is the result. It is by no means the really comprehensive history I was looking for, but a first attempt which may provide a foundation for more comprehensive later works by others. In this hope I offer it to the public.

CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE

2000 - 1000 BC	Indus valley civilization - traces of yoga practice.
1500 - 800	Aryan invasions of India. Vedas and Brahmanas.
872 - 772	Parsva, 23rd Jain saviour. Earliest Upanishads.
700 - 600?	Kapila - founder of Samkhya philosophy.
563 - 483	Gotama the Buddha.
548 - 476	Mahavira - founder of modern Jainism.
300?	Bhagavad Gita written by Vyasa. Patanjali's Yoga Sutras.
264 - 227	Emperor Ashoka spreads Buddhism in India and Sri Lanka.
80	Pali canon of Theravada Buddhism formulated.
65 AD	Buddhism introduced into China.
200 - 300?	Nagarjuna founder of Mahayana, author of Prajna-paramita
200 - 250	Jaimini - founder of Purva Mimamsa.
300?	Six Systems of Philosophy.
300 - 400	Asanga and Vasabandu - founders of Tantrism and Yogacara.
552	Bodhidharma to China - founder of Chan (Zen) Buddhism.
637	Hsuan Tsang takes Yogacara texts to China.
646	Sam Bhota takes Yogacara texts to Tibet.
637 - 713	Hui Neng reorganizes Chan (Zen) Buddhism.
686 - 719	Sankara - founder of modern Vedanta.
747	Padma Sambhava takes tantric yoga to Tibet.
1000?	Ramanuja - exponent of bhakti yoga.
1016 - 1100	Naropa teacher of Marpa. Atisha reforms Tibetan Buddhism.
1040 - 1123	Milarepa. Buddhism destroyed in India by Moslems.
1191	Eisai - founder of Rinzaï sect in Japan.
1300	Dogen - founder of Soto Zen sect in Japan.
1300 - 1400?	Nath Yogis. Goraknath. Hathayogapradipika.

Chronological table

1357 - 1419	Tson-ka-pa - founder of Gelugpas in Tibet.
1469 - 1538	Guru Nanak - founder of Sikhism. Kabir. Sufi yoga
1500 - 1600?	Geranda Samita and Siva Samita. Hatha Yoga manuals.
1615	Dalai Lama takes over rulership of all Tibet.
1830	Ram Mohan Roy brings yoga and Vedanta to Britain.
1875	Theosophical Society formed in New York.
1836 - 1886	Ramakrishna demonstrates unity of all religions.
1893	Vivekananda brings yoga and Vedanta to USA.
1872 - 1950	Aurobindo - founder of Integral Yoga.
1879 - 1950	Ramana Maharshi teaches Vicara meditation.
1893 - 1952	Yogananda spreads yoga and Vedanta in USA.

INTRODUCTION

Yoga is very ancient, certainly much older than the archaeological record, which is the only reliable one we have at present. The archaeological finds indicate a well-established system of yoga practice, which must have existed long before the figurines and seals that have been found were fashioned.

One of the difficulties of tracing a history of yoga has been that by its nature it leaves nothing behind except myths and legends of miraculous powers possessed by some of the more accomplished practitioners of the art. Only in the last thousand years or so have efforts been made to provide it with intellectual content such as would elevate it to the status of philosophy in its own right. The attempts have not been successful because yoga is not an intellectual activity. So in India it has tended to run in harness with the Samkhya philosophy, of which more later. Yoga has in fact tended all along to be anti-intellectual, even anti-religious. To be true to itself it must ever stand close to the spontaneous fount of human creativity. It is more intuitive than reasonable, more experimental than formalistic, more other-worldly than of this world, and more akin to art than to science.

For these reasons it has not been studied in its comprehensiveness in its own right, but always as part of other studies. As far as the West is concerned, where the subject has come up at all in the universities it has been submerged within the subject of Indology, or of comparative religion. From the point of view of the universities, who deal in mental concepts, mind stuff if you like, there would be very little in yoga to study anyway. This is to be expected from an activity that is meaningful only if practised. So until the present time yoga has not been studied as a subject in its own right in the universities of the Western world. In fact only about twenty yoga texts have been rendered into any European language. Some of these translations date from the end of the nineteenth century, and make for very dull reading. Most effort has been concentrated on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, followed by some of the tantras. The Upanishads have tended to be studied as Vedic, whereas they are yogic. The fact that they were adopted by the Brahminical establishment within Hinduism sometime after they were uttered, and later written down, does not mean that their original source was Vedic. The same can be said of many other works as we shall see in the course of our study. The Bhagavad Gita is certainly in this category.