

Yoga in the Modern World

Contemporary Perspectives

**Bülent Diken and
Carsten Bagge Laustsen**

Routledge Hindu Studies Series

Yoga in the Modern World

Today yoga is a thoroughly globalized phenomenon. Yoga has taken the world by storm and is even seeing renewed popularity in India. Both in India and abroad, adults, children and teenagers are practicing yoga in diverse settings; gyms, schools, home, work, yoga studios and temples. The yoga diaspora began well over a hundred years ago and we continue to see new manifestations and uses of yoga in the modern world.

As the first of its kind this collection draws together cutting edge scholarship in the field, focusing on the theory and practice of yoga in contemporary times. Offering a range of perspectives on yoga's contemporary manifestations, it maps the movement, development and consolidation of yoga in global settings. The collection features some of the most well-known authors within the field and newer voices. The contributions span a number of disciplines in the humanities, including anthropology, philosophy, studies in religion and Asian studies, offering a range of entry points to the issues involved in the study of the subject. As such, it will be of use to those involved in academic scholarship, as well as to the growing number of yoga practitioners who seek a deeper account of the origin and significance of the techniques and traditions they are engaging with. It will also—and perhaps most of all—speak to the growing numbers of ‘scholar-practitioners’ who straddle these two realms.

Mark Singleton teaches at St. John's College, Santa Fe, USA. He works on the history of ideas within transnational modern yoga, and he is a contributor to the *Encyclopedia of Hinduism* (Routledge 2008).

Jean Byrne is affiliated to the University of Queensland, Australia. She lectures in Eastern Philosophy and runs The Yoga Space in Perth, Australia.

Routledge Hindu Studies Series

Series Editor: Gavin Flood

University of Stirling

Former Series Editor: Francis X. Clooney, SJ

Harvard University

The Routledge Hindu Studies Series, in association with the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies, intends the publication of constructive Hindu theological, philosophical and ethical projects aimed at bringing Hindu traditions into dialogue with contemporary trends in scholarship and contemporary society. The series invites original, high-quality, research-level work on religion, culture and society of Hindus living in India and abroad. Proposals for annotated translations of important primary sources and studies in the history of the Hindu religious traditions will also be considered.

Epistemologies and The Limitations of Philosophical Inquiry

Doctrine in Mādhva Vedānta

Deepak Sarma

A Hindu Critique of Buddhist Epistemology

Kumārila on Perception: The 'Determination of Perception' Chapter of Kumārila Bhaṭṭa's *Ślokavārttika* – Translation and Commentary

John Taber

Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta

A Way of Teaching

Jacqueline Hirst

Attending KṚṢṆA's Image

Caitanya Vaiṣṇava Mūrti-sevā as

Devotional Truth

Kenneth Russell Valpey

Advaita Vedānta and Vaiṣṇavism

The Philosophy of Madhusūdana Sarasvatī
Sanjukta Gupta

Classical Sāṃkhya and Yoga

An Indian Metaphysics of Experience
Mikel Burley

Self-Surrender (prapatti) to God in Śrīvaiṣṇavism

Tamil Cats or Sanskrit Monkeys?
Srilata Raman

The Caitanya Vaiṣṇava Vedānta of Jīva Gosvāmī

When Knowledge Meets Devotion
Ravi M. Gupta

Gender and Narrative in the Mahābhārata

Edited by Simon Brodbeck and Brian Black

Yoga in the Modern World

Contemporary Perspectives

Edited by Mark Singleton and
Jean Byrne

First published 2008

by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada

by Routledge

270 Madison Ave, New York, NY 10016

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2008.

“To purchase your own copy of this or any of Taylor & Francis or Routledge’s collection of thousands of eBooks please go to www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk”

© 2008 Mark Singleton and Jean Byrne selection and editorial matter;
individual contributors their contribution

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Yoga in the modern world: contemporary perspectives / edited by Mark Singleton and Jean Byrne

p. cm. – (Routledge Hindu studies series)

1. Yoga. I. Singleton, Mark 1976– II. Byrne, Jean, 1972–

B132.Y6Y535 2008

181'.45–dc22

2007051681

ISBN 0-203-89499-5 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN10: 0-415-45258-9 (hbk)

ISBN10: 0-203-89499-5 (ebk)

ISBN13: 978-0-415-45258-8 (hbk)

ISBN13: 978-0-203-89499-6 (ebk)

In memory of Primoz Pecenko

Contents

<i>About the editors</i>	ix
<i>Prefatory note</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xii
Introduction	1
MARK SINGLETON AND JEAN BYRNE	
PART I	
Mapping the Terrain of Modern Yoga Studies	15
1 Modern Yoga: History and Forms	17
ELIZABETH DE MICHELIS	
2 <i>Yoga Shīvir</i> : Performativity and the Study of Modern Yoga	36
JOSEPH S. ALTER	
3 “Adapt, Adjust, Accommodate”: the Production of Yoga in a Transnational World	49
SARAH STRAUSS	
PART II	
Posturing for Authenticity	75
4 The Classical Reveries of Modern Yoga: Patañjali and Constructive Orientalism	77
MARK SINGLETON	
5 The Reflexivity of the Authenticity of <i>Haṭha</i> Yoga	100
KENNETH LIBERMAN	

PART III

Spirituality, Sexuality, and Authority: Understanding the Experience of Contemporary Yoga Practice	117
6 Empowerment and Using the Body in Modern Postural Yoga KLAS NEVRIN	119
7 “With Heat Even Iron Will Bend”: Discipline and Authority in Ashtanga Yoga BENJAMIN RICHARD SMITH	140
8 The Numinous and Cessative in Modern Yoga STUART RAY SARBACKER	161
9 From Fusion to Confusion: A Consideration of Sex and Sexuality in Traditional and Contemporary Yoga MIKEL BURLEY	184
<i>Index</i>	204

About the editors and contributors

Editors

Mark Singleton works on the history of ideas within transnational modern yoga. His recent publications include a special yoga issue of *Asian Medicine, Tradition and Modernity* (ed., 2007) and various entries on modern yoga for the Routledge-Curzon *Encyclopedia of Hinduism* (2008). A major study of the contexts of postural yoga in the modern age is forthcoming. He teaches at St. John's College, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Jean Byrne conducts research on the intersection of feminist philosophy and nonduality through the University of Queensland. She has lectured in Buddhist philosophy at The University of Queensland and Bond University and now runs *The Yoga Space* in Perth, Australia. She is also an authorized Ashtanga Yoga teacher.

Contributors

Joseph S. Alter teaches anthropology at the University of Pittsburgh. His research is in the field of medical anthropology, and his most recent publications are *Yoga in Modern India: the Body Between Science and Philosophy* (Princeton University Press, 2004) and *Asian Medicine and Globalization* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005). He is currently working on a book on nature cure and modernity in contemporary India.

Mikel Burley teaches in the Department of Philosophy and the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Leeds. His publications include *Classical Sāṃkhya and Yoga: An Indian Metaphysics of Experience* (Routledge, 2007), *Haṭha-Yoga: Its Context, Theory and Practice* (Motilal Banarsidass, 2000), and several journal articles on both Indian and Western philosophy. He is also a qualified Yoga instructor with the Devon School of Yoga.

Kenneth Liberman is Professor of Sociology at the University of Oregon, where he also teaches courses on yoga. He was Fulbright Professor at the University

of Mysore and has lived for three years in Tibetan monastic universities. His books include *Dialectical Practice in Tibetan Philosophical Culture* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), *Husserl's Criticism of Reason* (Lexington Books, 2007), and *Understanding Interaction in Central Australia* (Routledge, 1985).

Elizabeth De Michelis holds the Gordon Milburn Junior Research Fellowship at the Theology Faculty and Oriel College, University of Oxford, United Kingdom. She is currently researching the ancient and modern history of yoga and meditation in Hindu, Buddhist, and contemporary transnational contexts. She is especially interested in problems of knowledge transmission and authority validation, philosophy and texts, East-West dialogue and exchanges, and Indic-inspired aspects of Western esotericism.

Klas Nevrin is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department for History of Religions, Stockholm University (Sweden). His research interests include modern yoga and contemporary improvisational musical performance. He is currently involved with the philosophical and methodological elaboration of a performance-studies approach, informed by recent work on embodiment, emotion, aesthetics, ritual, and hermeneutical phenomenology. He is also a professional improvising pianist.

Stuart Ray Sarbacker, Senior Lecturer in Religion at Northwestern University, specializes in the history of religions with a focus on South Asia. His work is centered on the theory and practice of yoga and tantra in the traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, especially in the Indo-Tibetan region.

Benjamin Richard Smith is a research fellow at the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, The Australian National University. His research interests include aboriginal Australia, modern postural yoga, and the anthropology of photography. His recent publications include "Body, Mind and Spirit? Towards An Analysis of the Practice of Yoga," *Body & Society* 13 (2).

Sarah Strauss is Associate Professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Wyoming. She has conducted ethnographic research in India, Switzerland, and the United States on topics related to health and the environment. Recent books include *Positioning Yoga* (Berg Publishers, Oxford, 2004) and *Weather, Climate, Culture* (Berg Publishers, Oxford, 2003; coedited with Benjamin S. Orlove).

Prefatory Note

The idea for this book was conceived over a spicy masala dosa in Mysore, South India in the summer of 2005, while both editors were conducting fieldwork on the transnational practices of yoga. As we reflected on the considerable influx of non-Indian yoga “pilgrims” to this relatively small city—where international students converge to study yoga, chanting, Āyurveda, and Sanskrit with resident teachers—we became acutely aware that though there are millions of people throughout the world practicing this thing called “yoga,” there is still a real lack of critical material exploring its actual, contemporary manifestations. The book stores of Mysore (and beyond) overflow with titles on yoga, but virtually none of them offered the kinds of critical reflection that could help us to understand the phenomenon we had observed in that city and in our own home countries. At the time of writing this preface three years later, it still remains difficult to find in-depth, scholarly research on the practices and belief frameworks that constitute yoga in the world today. In the course of our discussion that day in Mysore, we saw the need for a collection that would at once present a variety of possible approaches to the study of yoga in the modern age and be exemplary of the best scholarship in the field to date. This book is partially the result of that conversation.

The collection includes contributions from a number of research disciplines, including history, studies in religion, and anthropology. This diversity reflects the range of methodologies and perspectives that are being brought to bear on contemporary yoga by today’s scholars and points to the enormous and varied potential for further research. The unifying principle of this volume is therefore thematic rather than methodological or hermeneutical, and it is hoped that the various approaches represented here will function as windows onto the multifaceted, ever-evolving architecture of contemporary yoga.

As a result of this variety of approaches, the collection will appeal to those across the humanities and social sciences who have an interest in yoga, East-West dialogue, Indian religions, and philosophy. Both students and researchers will find the papers engaging and accessible, with contributions from some of the most established authors in the field, along with emerging voices. We hope that practitioners of yoga will also find this collection useful for gaining a deeper understanding of the practices and traditions in which they situate themselves.

Acknowledgements

I thank Dr. Elizabeth De Michelis for her continued support and generosity in my academic study of yoga. Thanks to the team of the former Dharam Hinduja Institute of Indic Research at Cambridge University (Elizabeth De Michelis, Dagmar Wujastyk, and Rajashree Dhanaraj) and to Professor Julius Lipner in Cambridge's Divinity Faculty for his overseeing of my work during my time at Cambridge. Thanks also to the participants in the Modern Yoga Graduate Workshop held at Cambridge University in 2005, at which several of the contributors to the present volume presented working papers. I am also grateful to Suzanne Newcombe (who was unfortunately unable to contribute) and to Klas Nevryn for their helpful comments on the project.

—M.S.

I thank Dr. Tamara Ditrich and Dr. Michelle Boulous Walker for their unwavering support of my research and the University of Queensland Graduate School for the scholarship that enabled me to undertake research in India. Thanks to my yoga teachers, Sri K. Pattabhi Jois and Sharath Rangaswamy: I am eternally grateful for their teachings. My work was made possible by numerous family babysitters who helped me find the time to edit this collection. Mostly, my greatest appreciation is for my husband, Rob, and son, Jamie (born during this project), for reminding me what is important in life.

—J.B.

Introduction

Mark Singleton and Jean Byrne

The Yoga Boom

Yoga today is a thoroughly globalized phenomenon. A profusion of yoga classes and workshops can be found in virtually every city in the Western world and (increasingly) throughout the Middle East, Asia, South and Central America and Australasia. In gyms and health clubs, elementary schools and colleges, drafty church halls, the boardrooms of multinational corporations, or dedicated yoga studios and ashrams, yoga has taken the world by storm. It is even seeing renewed popularity among the growing urban middle classes of India, albeit in innovative guises.

Though the international yoga diaspora began well more than a century ago, it is really only since the mid-1990s that it has taken on the global proportions that make it such a visible—and profitable—enterprise today. Precise practitioner statistics are hard to come by and are often unreliable, but it is estimated that in 2004 there were more than 2.5 million practitioners of yoga in Britain alone, a truly exponential increase from previous years.¹ In the United States, indications of growth are even more startling. A 1994 Roper poll commissioned for the world's most popular yoga magazine, *Yoga Journal*, estimated that more than 6 million Americans (approximately three and one-third percent of the population) were practicing yoga—1.86 million of them regularly. Almost 17 million more—or about one in ten Americans—were “interested in yoga” but had not yet tried it (Cushman 1994: 47–8). Ten years later, another national poll estimated that 15 million Americans were practicing yoga regularly (Carter 2004), while the proportion “interested in yoga” had also risen substantially. *Yoga Journal* estimated in 2003 that approximately 25.5 million Americans (twelve percent) of the population were “very interested” in yoga. A further 35.3 million people (sixteen percent) intended to try yoga within the next year, and 109.7 million (more than half the population) had at least a “casual interest” in yoga (Arnold 2003: 10). Even if we approach these statistics with caution, it is clear that yoga is booming in America and worldwide.

This increase of interest in yoga has gone hand in hand with the emergence of a multi-billion dollar yoga industry.² Yoga, along with the commodities and merchandising associated with it, has become hot property in the twenty-first

century. Notorious legal battles have even been fought over exactly who owns the techniques and methods of yoga, with particular styles, sequences, or elements being patented, copyrighted, and franchised by individuals, companies, and government.³ Images of yoga are used to sell any number of products, from yoghurt to mobile phones to SUVs. Such instances have even prompted some to consider contemporary yoga, alongside other modern forms of quasi-religious belief and practice, as one more commodity fetish of late-capitalism.⁴

However, what exactly do we mean when we talk of “yoga” in these contexts? Is yoga in the modern world a single, cohesive entity subject to statistical analysis, copyrighting, and counter-copyrighting? Or rather is the profusion of styles and agendas evidence that there is no homogenous, contained entity that we can categorically identify as “modern” or “contemporary” yoga? If so, the statistics and lawsuits may be far less conceptually straightforward than those who carry them out suppose. How in this profusion of methods and goals are we to discover what we mean by yoga? And what precisely are we seeking through an examination of “yoga in the modern world”?

Examining Contemporary Yoga(s)

This collection takes as its organizing focus the theory and practice of yoga in modern and postmodern times and draws together for the first time cutting-edge scholarship on what one of our contributors terms “the production of yoga in a transnational world.” By offering a range of perspectives on yoga’s contemporary manifestations, it aims to map the movement, development, and consolidation of yoga in global settings in the modern era. This volume features both some of the most well-known authors within this field of inquiry and newer voices and offers a range of entry points to the issues involved in the study of the subject. As such, it will be of immediate use and relevance to those involved in academic study across a range of disciplines (in particular the humanities and social sciences) and to the growing number of yoga practitioners who seek a deeper, more critical account of the origin and significance of the techniques and traditions with which they are engaging. It will also—and perhaps most of all—speak to the growing numbers of “scholar-practitioners” who move between these realms and to those for whom such dichotomies are neither helpful nor relevant.

The collection is original insofar as it groups together for the first time varied and rigorous reflections on popular, transnational yoga by a group of academic scholars, some of whom also consider themselves practitioners of yoga. The contributors are professional researchers trained in philosophical, historical, and anthropological methods and (often) in the primary languages of the Indian yoga traditions. As a result, this collection offers a depth of analysis and a range of historical insight that can often be lacking in the presentation of yoga by practitioners and the popular media. It provides an important resource for all those wishing to think through the implications and history of yoga as practiced today.

The scholarly (i.e., university-based) study of contemporary yoga's popular forms is a recent undertaking, and indeed several of the authors represented here (notably Elizabeth De Michelis, Joseph Alter, and Sarah Strauss) were instrumental in first bringing it into the academic purview as a legitimate focus of inquiry. That contemporary, transnational yoga has remained below the academic radar for so long is initially surprising, given its immense popularity. There are several reasons for this relatively tardy appearance, the most significant of which may be the long-standing, mutual prejudice between those who *study* yoga professionally (as students, researchers, and teachers in university settings) and those who *do* it. Indeed, from the beginnings of the international transmission of yoga in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Western academic writers have tended to denigrate (or, more often, simply ignore) practical, contemporary expressions of yoga in favor of the purely philosophical and theoretical.

The renowned "Orientalist" scholar of Indian religions, Max Müller, encapsulates this attitude when he declares that yoga in modern times has descended into "its purely practical and most degenerate form" (Müller 1899: xx). Like a number of other scholars at this time, he laments the transition from "rational beginnings to irrational exaggerations," which leads "from intellectual to practical Yoga" (Müller 1899: 458). A parting of the ways between practice and academic research is also evident in the work of Mircea Eliade, perhaps the greatest European scholar of yoga of the twentieth century. Though a sometime practitioner himself, Eliade kept this aspect of his life largely hidden (except in his fiction), discouraged his reading public from engaging with yoga on a practical basis, and was suspicious of the popular, practical forms of his day.⁵

Conversely, teachers and practitioners of yoga in modern times have often been in the habit of expressing their distaste for academia, which they may view as elitist, disembodied, and irrelevant to the real task at hand (i.e., *doing* yoga). In one common variant of this attitude, "bookish knowledge" is seen to be antithetical to the purely experiential work of self-realization through yoga.⁶ Practitioners may also sometimes feel that critical academic examination of a teacher or school is antagonistic to a proper attitude of respect and reverence⁷ or may simply be reluctant to subject to analytical scrutiny what is for them a deeply personal, sacralized aspect of their lives.⁸

However, are the two approaches incommensurable, as partisans from both sides would have us believe? Is an academic approach to contemporary yoga necessarily either antagonistic or irrelevant to its practice? And is the contemporary practice of yoga worthy of the censure and suspicion with which it has often been greeted by "serious" scholarship? In fact, is it really necessary or desirable at all to perpetuate such polarities between academic and nonacademic, intellectual and experiential approaches to yoga? And what do we really mean by stating such divisions? It might be more accurate, fruitful, and beneficial to the pursuit of our inquiry, indeed, to recognize the porosity of such categories, insofar as "intellectual" inquiry commonly relies on experiential knowledge, and the practical pursuit of yoga often calls for sustained intellectual engagement.

We should also consider the extent to which supposedly “objective” theoretical and scholastic knowledge on the one hand and direct experiential knowledge on the other are both exploited (in different contexts) to construct one’s authority and status as a “scholar” or as a “practitioner.” In other words, we need to be sensitive to the degree to which parties from both “sides” may have a personal or collective interest in maintaining such dichotomies. Finally, we should recognize that academia is not a monolithic entity but the site of enormously varied perspectives, methodologies, agendas, and engagements. To confine the academic within the realm of the purely intellectual (in contradistinction to the experiential) is to ignore the range of possibilities open to academic inquirers. It is hoped that the variety of perspectives on contemporary yoga in this book go some way to demonstrating such possibilities.

The Anxiety of Authenticity

The fault most commonly found with contemporary yoga, by both scholars and “informed” practitioners, is that it is *inauthentic* with regard to the Indian traditions it claims to transmit. In this view, many of yoga’s manifestations in the (post-) modern, transnational world are simply *phony*, insofar as they speciously claim affiliation with a more or less ill-defined “tradition” of yoga, while simultaneously masking their modern accretions and innovations. Though certain markedly modern variants, such as *Yogalates*, *Yogaerobics*, or *Hot Naked Yoga*, blazon their trademarked hybridity for all to see, others explicitly project the impression that they partake of a pristine and unchanging, millennia-old lineage of yoga theory and practice. If there is one thing that recent studies on contemporary yoga have made more than clear, however, it is that in its dissemination in the Western world, yoga has undergone radical transformation in response to the differing world views, logical predispositions, and aspirations of modern audiences. Such new kinds of “export yoga,”⁹ it also seems evident, were the result of a reframing of practices and belief frameworks within India itself over the last century-and-a-half, in response to encounters with modernity and the West. Modern, popular yogas in and out of India bear the clear traces of this dialectic exchange.

To what extent, then, must scholarship based on this evidence also imply a judgment about the authenticity of the practices and beliefs it scrutinizes? Some—though not all—of the contributors to this volume posit a degree of dislocation between the so-called *emic*¹⁰ claims of practitioners and teachers and the historically determined innovations and transformations evident in contemporary yoga. Among these, a common methodological approach is to contrast modern manifestations of yoga against the Indian tradition and to thereby assess whether such practitioner claims are substantiated or not. It is hardly surprising—especially if the perceived tradition is taken as the gold-standard of “true” yoga—that contemporary forms departing from this criterion may sometimes be judged negatively in terms of their authenticity. In the most extreme conclusions produced by this approach, the incense-burning, mantra-

chanting, “stretch-and-relax” Western yogi is doomed to inhabit an empty, second-order world of simulacra and pastiche, remaining forever in thrall to the narcissistic imperatives of postmodern culture and terminally disconnected from the core Indian traditions. Though such a vision may partially resume the judgmental *modus operandi* of earlier Western scholarship, one might reasonably argue that it is not only acceptable but imperative to interrogate the auto-validating claims of popular yoga based on this divergence from the traditions they claim to be following. If certain kinds of “yoga” in the contemporary world possess a highly tenuous, often merely nominal, relationship with Indian yoga traditions, then is not one basic purpose of modern yoga studies to bring this dislocation into sharp relief? Following this line of reasoning, indeed, critical scholarship is the only way to distinguish “tradition” (itself a highly problematic, multivalent category) from popular innovation.

In considering such opinions, however, and given that the majority of scholars working on *modern* manifestations of yoga are from “the West,” it also seems imperative to take into account postcolonialism’s contributions to our understanding of the politics of knowledge and our aims and responsibilities as inquirers into Indian culture and tradition. Though there is no space to go into the matter in any depth here, these questions are further complicated by the multifarious, transnational, and transcultural nature of our object of inquiry: yoga in the modern world.¹¹ What ethical and cultural responsibilities do scholars have as they negotiate Western and Indian contexts of contemporary yoga? And to what extent are the widely divergent lexical uses of the word *yoga*, and the authority of “the tradition,” exploited rhetorically by scholars (and indeed practitioners) to further their own professional or personal ends? The very breadth of the word’s semantic field should give us pause to examine the agendas which attach to the term *yoga* in all its plurality, both in popular and scholastic discourses. Indeed, it might be helpful to think more generally of *yogas*, with a multiplicity of definitions and interpretations, rather than of a single *yoga* that we would seek to define and circumscribe.

Equally vital as a counterbalance to the gold-standard approach is a recognition of the plurality and mutability of (chronologically) premodern forms of yoga themselves. That is to say, “the Indian tradition” has itself been subject to often radical historical forces, adaptations, mutations, and fragmentation, just like contemporary yoga. To consider yoga in the modern period as primarily *divergence from* is to oversimplify the vectors of continuity and rupture within Indian yoga traditions themselves and to project an impression that they exist somehow outside of history. Such polarization of traditional and contemporary yoga (and their connotations of “real” and “less real”), therefore, fails both to recognize the heterogeneous, manifold, and changing nature of the former and to do justice to the real continuities that obtain in the latter.

Furthermore, do we not have an obligation to consider yoga’s modern manifestations in and of themselves, rather than solely in negative contrast to real Indian yoga traditions? Geoffrey Samuel has recently argued that “[m]odern yoga has become a significant part of contemporary western practices of bodily

cultivation, and it should be judged in its own terms, not in terms of its closeness to some presumably more authentic Indian practice” (Samuel 2007: 178). In other words, the unmistakably syncretic, (post-)modern and transnational phenomena that are termed “yoga” today should not be dismissed or condemned simply on account of their dislocation from the perceived tradition. Also important to consider is the fact that the concern for authenticity among scholars is often shared (in similar good faith, if in a different modality) by many yoga practitioners themselves. Often at the forefront of such practitioners’ minds is not only the authenticity of the practices they engage in but their own authenticity with regard to themselves and their place and purpose in the world. Though it is by no means the case for all modern practitioners, it seems clear that for many, yoga is seen as the privileged site of an authenticity otherwise unavailable or deficient in their daily experience and is felt to provide, as one of our contributors puts it, a more “authentic” way of being. Of course, though good faith with regard to oneself and the world can never on its own be a gauge of historical and philosophical fidelity, and though the category of authenticity raises its own prickly ontological problems,¹² its consideration does nonetheless bring a vital ethical dimension to the study of modern yoga. As one contribution to this volume makes clear, and as the methodological approach of another implies, to dismiss practitioners’ testimony merely on the grounds of divergence from tradition can be to ignore vital aspects of the very experience of modern yoga.

Putting the Modern in “Modern Yoga”

The unifying focus of this collection is the manifestation of yoga in modern, transnational contexts. However, can we really refer to an entity called *modern yoga* and assume that we are talking about a discrete and identifiable category of beliefs and practices, standing in contrast to traditional yoga? One previously mentioned consequence of this approach may be that expressions of yoga in recent times are viewed predominantly in terms of rupture and innovation rather than continuity. Another is that historical detail, inconsistency, and variation can find themselves subsumed by typology. In other words, typology can take precedence over historical detail when it exceeds its provisional, heuristic mandate and becomes received opinion. To some extent, this has already been the fate of the term *Modern Yoga* and its subdivisions. These conceptual entities, which did not exist prior to Elizabeth De Michelis’s pioneering work on the topic (De Michelis 2004), have already become the predominant nomenclature among scholars of contemporary, transnational yoga. Though they have proven invaluable in delineating a field of inquiry, they should perhaps be used with prudence by students coming to the topic for the first time and should be recognized as provisional and workable constructs (as intended by their deviser) providing one entry point to the study of yoga of the recent past.

Another problem that arises in this context is how to understand the term *modern*. Does it refer uniquely to a chronological moment in history (say, from the

late eighteenth century onward) or, in a more restricted sense, to the complex of socioeconomic, religious, political, and psychological circumstances often, and problematically, labeled *modernity*? Modernity does not simply, as David Smith points out, mean the modern age, but “the theorization of modern times, the quasi-theological sociological reductionism which is a reified caricature of modern times” and which includes as key features “rationalization, the autonomous individual, capitalism and the nation-state” (Smith 2003: iii). Though there is insufficient space to enter into the vexed and on-going debate about modernity’s (and postmodernity’s)¹³ defining characteristics, it is important to note the polyvalences of the terms themselves, especially as they relate to yoga. To what extent is modern yoga a participant in, and product of, the forces of modernity? How are we to situate the practices and belief frameworks of transnational yoga in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in relation to the intellectual, religious, scientific, and cultural histories of post-Enlightenment, industrialized Europe—or for that matter to “modern” India”? For instance, how (if at all) has the ostensibly prevailing ethos of secularized individualism—with its concomitant associations of self-development and personal potential—interacted with and altered the structural universe of Indian yogas? And if such features can correctly be identified as characteristically modern, how are we to understand the current “postmodern condition” of “Western” society, with its purported dislocations of identity, distrust of “grand narratives” (Lyotard 1979), and penchant for eclecticism and pastiche (Baudrillard 1981) in relation to the practices of yoga? Many of the contributors to this volume have, here and elsewhere, given careful and lengthy consideration to these issues,¹⁴ but it seems to us that the history of yoga in its dialogic relation to modernity and postmodernity (and their semantic first-cousins modernism and postmodernism) still remains to be written.

Overview of the Collection

The collection is divided into three sections. The first, entitled Mapping the Terrain of Modern Yoga Studies, opens with Elizabeth De Michelis’s introduction to modern yoga’s history, forms, and scholarship. Following this is Joseph Alter’s exploration of the methodological and ethical problems inherent in the study of modern yoga, via the example of yoga camps (*shivir*) in contemporary India. Finally in this section, Sarah Strauss examines the life and work of Swami Sivananda and the Divine Life Society, considering the adaptations and transformations undergone by yoga during the course of its contemporary, transnational passages.

The second section, Posturing for Authenticity, engages with questions of legitimization and historicization in modern yoga. Mark Singleton traces the ways in which Patañjali’s *Yogasūtras* became the primary authority for modern yoga and suggests that the notion of a “Classical Yoga” is to some degree itself a product of early modern scholarship. In a similar vein, though radically different in approach, Ken Liberman explores the reflexivity inherent in notions

of “authenticity” in modern yoga practice and posits some key characteristics that determine the legitimacy of modern yoga forms.

The final section, Spirituality, Sexuality, and Authority: Understanding the Experience of Modern Yoga Practice, presents a range of perspectives on the experience of modern yoga. Klas Nevrein opens with an analysis of the discursive environment in which modern yoga is practiced. Ben Smith’s contribution explores the tensions of discipline, authority, and achievement in the increasingly popular practice of Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga. Stuart Sarbacker reflects on the array of desired outcomes within modern yoga schools and the historical antecedents of these goals in terms of the “numinous” and “cessative.” Lastly, Mikel Burley examines the role of sexuality and sensuality in both modern and pre-modern yoga.

Chapter Summaries

Part 1: Mapping the Terrain of Modern Yoga Studies

Chapter 1

Elizabeth De Michelis’s study—*Modern Yoga: History and Forms*—provides a much-needed overview of the academic field of modern yoga and will be a useful starting point for those new to topic. Drawing to some extent on her earlier work in *A History of Modern Yoga, Patañjali and Western Esotericism* (2004), De Michelis presents a brief history of yoga and its academic study. Starting with the premodern era, she demonstrates that the precise beginnings of what we now call “yoga” are ambiguous. She then traces various strands of yoga’s complex history from premodern to modern times, examining the complex acculturation processes through which yoga engages in ongoing dialogue with a range of religious traditions and interpreters.

De Michelis argues that the “canonization” of modern yoga was precipitated by the publication of Swami Vivekananda’s *Rāja Yoga* in 1896. According to her, *Rāja Yoga* is a watershed in the intercultural exchange between East and West, in which Western occultism, (neo-)Hinduism, and both Eastern and Western physical cultures blend to provide the foundations for what she considers a properly *modern* yoga. The most prominent mode of modern yoga practice today is Modern Postural Yoga, which includes some of the most popular contemporary transnational styles, such as Sivananda, Ashtanga, and Iyengar yoga. This mode of practice, which first gained real prominence during the 1920s, has a strong focus on the practice of *āsana* (posture). De Michelis’s analysis of yoga’s history and acculturation in transnational contexts provides an invaluable optic with which to view the confusing terrain of yoga’s contemporary manifestations. As a thorough background to the concept and study of modern yoga, it also functions as a prelude to the other chapters in the book.

Chapter 2

Though the burgeoning popularity of modern postural yoga in the West is undeniable, it is also increasingly evident that in India, in a very public way, practices claiming to derive from *haṭha* yoga are seeing a fervent renewal. Joseph Alter's contribution, *Yoga Shivar: Methodological and Ethical Problems in the Study of Modern Yoga*, is an examination of the "yoga camps" (*shivar*) now commonly held throughout India for a wide range of social groups, including prisoners, women, and school children. These *shivar* are generally large, free, public gatherings where students learn yoga techniques and listen to lectures promoting "Hindu" cultural values.

Reporting on his extensive fieldwork in northern India, Alter gives us an insight into the complexities of yoga *shivar*. His analysis of the spectacle of *shivar* highlights the way in which yoga, nationalism, and politics intersect in the practice of modern yoga in India (as such, this chapter reprises themes examined at great length in his other writing). While highlighting the importance of critical historicization, Alter also foregrounds the aspect of "performativity" in public yoga such as *shivar* and considers its consequences for claims to legitimacy and authenticity by yoga practitioners and sectarian groups. A sensitivity to the performative aspects of modern yoga, he argues, avoids the kinds of emic/etic, practitioner/scholar binaries mentioned earlier in this introduction. That is to say, the concept of performativity can provide a way out of the impasse of historical or philosophical inaccuracies often inherent in "emic" truth statements about the nature of yoga: Rather than dismissing such statements on grounds of fallaciousness, or accepting all such statements in an attitude of radical relativism, performativity allows us to focus instead on how and why such claims are made.

Chapter 3

Along with De Michelis and Alter, Sarah Strauss was among the first academic scholars to engage with modern yoga as a distinct field of inquiry. We have chosen to reprint here her insufficiently known 2002 article—*Adapt, Adjust, Accommodate: The Production of Yoga in a Transnational World*—in the hope that this will bring it to a wider audience. This chapter examines the way in which nationalist discourses figure in Swami Sivananada's promotion and production of yoga. Strauss demonstrates how transnational and global forces impact on the way we understand modern yoga, not just in India but throughout the world.

Part 2: Posturing for Authenticity

Chapter 4

Mark Singleton's chapter, *The Classical Reveries of Modern Yoga: Patañjali and Constructive Orientalism*, examines the construction of "authenticity" and the

“classical” in contemporary yoga theory and practice. Focusing on the centrality of the *Yogasūtras* in the discourses of modern yoga practitioners and teachers, his chapter highlights the tenacity of links drawn between the text attributed to Patañjali and contemporary yoga practice. The vision of the *Yogasūtras* as the “classical” text of yoga practice is in many ways a modern phenomenon. With reference to modern Indian music and dance, he argues that Patañjali has been co-opted by modern yoga practitioners seeking to authenticate their own practices.

Chapter 5

In a more provocative vein, Ken Liberman’s *The Reflexivity of the Authenticity of Yoga* draws on personal experience of yoga and Tibetan Buddhism to interrogate the authenticity of contemporary yoga practice. Liberman argues that in modern times, yoga and *bhoga* (sensual enjoyment) are not easily distinguishable. He questions the belief of many modern practitioners that there was once an original and pure yoga that now serves as the basis for the contemporary practice of yoga. This, he argues, is a “just-so story” that belies the true syncretism of contemporary practice. Taking inspiration from phenomenology, Derridean theory, and his own encounters with yoga and *Vajrayāna* Buddhism, Liberman’s syncretic approach draws together diverse strands of philosophical thought to determine the indispensable and authentic features of yoga practice.

Part 3: Spirituality, Sexuality, and Authority: Understanding the Experience of Contemporary Yoga Practice

Chapter 6

The final section of the book explores the experiential dimension of modern yoga practice. Klas Nevrin’s chapter, *Empowerment, Sacralization, Purification: “Spiritual” Experience in Modern Postural Yoga*, draws on research conducted among practitioners of yoga forms in the lineage of the great twentieth-century teacher Tirumalai Krishnamacharya (including Iyengar Yoga, Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga, and Viniyoga). Nevrin argues that there is a close and complex relationship between the body, the environment in which yoga is performed, and the practitioner’s total experience of a yoga practice. This confluence of factors means that modern yoga is practiced and interpreted in a variety of particular discursive frameworks, even though their effect on people’s embodied experience is generally unacknowledged by the practitioners themselves. Yet it is precisely the social and existential empowerment resulting from the practice of yoga that Nevrin believes to be central to the vast popularity of yoga in the modern world.