

Modern Yoga Research: Insights and Questions¹

Karl Baier, University of Vienna

Modern Yoga: here to stay

It has now become commonplace to observe that there is a yoga boom worldwide. This global dissemination started more than 100 years ago. Anyone visiting Pierre Bernard's flourishing New York Yoga Centre in the 1920s could see that this was not just the short-lived, alternative religious fad of an Indophile minority. During World War II, most people were of course concerned with more pressing matters. But not long after the war, yoga continued to develop at a rapid pace up to the 1960s. Various schools and trends sprang up around the globe, and this was followed by a phase of consolidation, with schools also increasingly offering properly structured training courses.² This professionalisation was linked to accelerated institutionalisation. National and international federations arose alongside the schools and religious communities propagating yoga, and they increasingly acted on a global scale. Parallel to this, the number of yoga teachers grew steadily, along with a tendency to elaborate personal styles of yoga without strong links to particular schools. The late 1980s and 1990s brought wide social acceptance, linked to a further boost in popularity.

Today yoga has reached the core of western societies and is practised as keenly by the middle classes in South and East Asia as it is in Latin America. Moreover, there is an increasing dissemination of yoga within the liberally minded strata of Islamic societies. We see that yoga conferences, centres and courses form part of globalised urban culture in islamic countries, though the offerings are still somewhat limited. There is the fact that the Egyptian Mufti Ali Gomaa declared yoga to be a sinful practice in 2004, after he had the matter examined by a fatwa council. In 2008 a fatwa was pronounced against yoga in Malaysia and soon afterwards also in Indonesia. However, these repressive actions, which until now seem to have had little impact, and can be considered a sign that yoga is spreading in these countries.³ In Morocco and Saudi Arabia there is great interest in Yoga

¹ I am grateful to Elizabeth De Michelis for carefully reading and commenting upon the original draft.

² Compare this to the classification of periods of modern yoga in West Germany in Christian Fuchs, *Yoga in Deutschland: Rezeption – Organisation – Typologie*, Stuttgart 1990, 93–122; and in Britain, Elizabeth De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga: Patañjali and Western Esotericism*, London 2004, 190–194.

³ The fatwas against Yoga are discussed by Robert Brant, *Malaysia Clerics issue Yoga fatwa*, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7743312.stm>> [17.2.2011]; Jason Tedjasukmana, *Indonesia's fatwa against Yoga*, <www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1874651,00.htm> [17/02/11] and Azadeh Moaveni, *Should a Pious Muslim Practice Yoga?*, <www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1862306,00.html> [17/02/11]. Martin Ramstedt, *A Fatwa against Yoga: Mitigating Conflict in the Face of Increasing Fundamentalism in Indonesia*, in: *Interreligious Dialogue. The Website of the Journal for Interreligious Dialogue*, Issue 5 (Winter 2010), <dialogue.org/journal/> [17/02/11] analyses the background of the Indonesian fatwa.

especially among upper class women.⁴ And also in Iran we find a modest yoga scene, which can easily be traced on the internet.⁵

A few years ago *The Wall Street Journal* estimated the stock market value of the international yoga industry at 42 billion dollars. In September 2010, Stefanie Syman published an article with the title 'Yoga Sold out' in the same newspaper, and it sounds like a swan song for the economic growth of this industry: 'Like "Star Wars" or Matisse, the merchandising, advertising and profiteering of yoga has run the full gamut, from action figures to deluxe vacations to how-to-do-books that apply yoga to almost every human endeavor [...]. Now, there is nothing left to exploit.'⁶ But she comes to the conclusion that – even if the possibilities for commercialisation have been largely exhausted – we will also live with yoga in future, if only because it has been irreversibly stored in the memory of the worldwide web, always ready to be remembered, even when other fashions might have pushed it into the background.

Problems of academic responsibility

Scientists begin to take interest in a phenomenon at the latest when it becomes noticeable as an economic and cultural factor, as is the case for yoga now. A success that has lasted many decades indicates that Modern Yoga reflects deeper sensibilities and ways of thinking. One can expect to find out something about how people live under the conditions of modernity from researching yoga, which is reason enough for the cultural, social and historical sciences to take an interest.

In our case this happened somewhat late. At first, Modern Yoga was generally not perceived in its modernity but as an old religious tradition, which was being received in more or less unchanged form in the West. Indologists paid little attention to contemporary yoga as they concentrated largely on Sanskrit philology and pre-modern Indian literature. Their contribution to yoga research lay in editing and translating older yoga texts.

Many academics involved in studying religion turned up their noses at Modern Yoga as a popular cultural phenomenon, and seemingly failed to see the religious dimension of the contemporary yoga movement. Since then, scholars of religious studies have become more accustomed to finding fields of activity in increasingly secular environments, and in 'post-religious' forms of religiosity. But it took a while for this to happen.

⁴ The influence of Yoga in contemporary Morocco is investigated by Patrick Haenni – Raphael Voix, *God by all Means... Eclectic faith and Sufi resurgence among the Moroccan Bourgeoisie*, in: Martin van Bruinessen – Julia Day Howell (Eds.), *Sufism and the 'Modern' Islam*, London 2007, 241–256. Most of the Saudi Arabian Yoga activities still happen on an informal level. One can find at least one Saudi Arabian Yoga school on the net: <www.saudiarabiayoga.com> [17.2.2011]. Nouf Al-Marwaai, the founder of this school, has been involved in starting public discussions on Yoga in Saudi Arabia. See <www.saudigazette.com.sa/index.cfm?method=home.regcon&contentID=2010072478959> [28/08/11].

⁵ See <<http://www.yogafinder.com/>> [17.2.2011].

⁶ <<http://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2010/09/26/how-yoga-sold-out/>> [14/02/2011].

Another university discipline, Christian theology, became aware of Modern Yoga as a religious phenomenon earlier. Theologians dealt with it mainly in the context of the (apologetic) study of new Indian religions and Guru cults.⁷ But in this field there was only very little reflection on the modernity of contemporary yoga, as the tendency was to see yoga as a timeless pursuit rooted in traditional Hinduism. Thus, the following observation on a meditation instruction by Swami Sivananda: ‘His lyrical presentation of the path of yoga is in fact distinct from the style of the classical Indian yoga texts, which mainly favour technical descriptions. When examined more closely, however, Sivananda sets out what constitutes the essence of Indian yoga’.⁸

In sum the humanities, theology and social sciences responded rather late and the earliest researches into Modern Yoga were to be found in another domain.

Yoga in the laboratory

The oldest forms of research into Modern Yoga were investigations of a medical, psychosomatic or empirical–psychological kind, and these have defined the face of yoga research – and also yoga itself – in the modern era, long before Modern Yoga studies became an independent research field. Testing measurable results of yoga exercises under replicable experimental conditions is aimed at exploring potential therapeutic uses, as well as at testing the efficacy of yoga more generally. Because research into meditation often overlaps with yoga research, they are sometimes treated together, not least because there are more empirical studies on meditation than on yoga, which we will touch on later.⁹

Haṭha yoga texts and older Indian yoga literature stated that the practice of yoga could heal disease, promote health and increase one’s lifespan.¹⁰ The view that yoga can and should be investigated using modern western medical–psychological methods, goes back to the time of the British Empire, which resulted in the spread of western–style medicine

⁷ Regarding the distorted view that arises if one sees Modern Yoga mainly through this lens, see Christian Fuchs, ‘“Sektenproblematik” in der deutschen Yoga–Szene? Versuch einer Bestandsaufnahme’, in: *Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft* 4 (1996) 38–45.

⁸ Reinhart Hummel, ‘Yoga – Meditationsweg für Christen? Probleme einer christlichen Yoga–Rezeption’, *EZW–Information* no. 112, EZW, Stuttgart X/1990, 6. This quote is not intended to mean that historical change processes do not enter the purview of this discourse at all. But there is a strong tendency to construct ahistorical identities. Organised forms of Indian religion have been presented as ‘intact’ and ‘pure’ traditions which deliberately want to implant themselves in the West. This leads to the conclusion that Christian defence forces are required to deploy their ‘pure’ tradition in this battle. Also see Reinhart Hummel, *Indische Mission und neue Frömmigkeit im Westen. Religiöse Bewegungen Indiens in westlichen Kulturen*, Stuttgart, Berlin, Cologne, Mainz 1980, 8.

⁹ See Verena Schnäbele, *Yogapraxis und Gesellschaft. Eine Analyse der Transformations- und Subjektivierungsprozesse durch die Körperpraxis des modernen Yoga*, Hamburg 2009, 102: ‘Experimental yoga research can be classified into *research into the physiological effects of yoga*, *psychological research* and *meditation research*.’ [emphasis in original] See also Elizabeth De Michelis, ‘A preliminary Survey of Modern Yoga Studies’, in: Special Yoga Issue, *Asian Medicine: Tradition and Modernity* 3, 1 (2007) 1–19: 11, note 59. Also Christian Fuchs, *Yoga. Im Spiegel der Wissenschaft*, Göttingen: Berufsverband der Yogalehrenden in Deutschland e. V. 2000, 19–24 deals with ‘Psychophysiologische Studien zur Meditation’ in one chapter.

¹⁰ See for example the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* 2, 12–13; *Hatha Yoga Pradīpikā* 2,16; *Gheranda Samhitā* 1, 8. For the multiple meanings of the term *haṭha yoga*, see Gudrun Bühnemann, *Eighty-four Āsanas in Yoga. A Survey of Traditions* (with illustrations), New Delhi 2007, 11–16.

in India. A vivid example of the dawning influence of medical concepts in yoga is a coloured drawing from Tamil Nadu, which was probably drawn in the first half of the nineteenth century and now forms part of the Ajit Mookerjee Collection of Tantric Art.¹¹ The drawing is in the form of a triptych. In the centre we see a meditating figure with the chakras or energy centres of the human body marked on it, as is usual in tantric yoga diagrams. The deities corresponding to the chakras are depicted to the right (as seen by the viewer) and on the left there is a precise representation of the spine in accordance with western medical textbooks. Here the tantric view of the body meets the medical anatomical approach.

In the first third of the nineteenth century, German Mesmerist doctors first referred to the *cakras* as nervous plexuses, interpreted their function as physiological in meditation, and understood the rise up through the *cakras* to mystical experience as a sort of self-therapy practised by yogis.¹² The Mesmerists took an early interest in psychophysical phenomena in relation to eastern and western meditation and so were the forerunners of modern meditation research and mind-body medicine. Empirical yoga research, which developed from these beginnings, largely marginalises the ritual and imaginative processes, which are the constitutive elements for the *cakras* in traditional tantrism, and naturalises yoga.¹³ James Braid, who in the 1840s transformed Mesmerism into hypnosis research, applied his medical theories, in a critical development of the Mesmerist tradition, to Indian fakirism and yoga.¹⁴ In 1851 the Indian doctor N. C. Paul linked Braid's theories and his own ideas to a detailed presentation of the practices of *haṭha yoga*.¹⁵ Theosophy took over these first initiatives in medical yoga research, in order to find evidence for the congruence of age-old yoga wisdom and the newest discoveries of western science. In so doing Theosophy had a huge effect on the change in the image of yoga in the modern world and its consequent popularity.¹⁶

The foundations of *kuṇḍalinī* yoga were known to the Theosophists since 1880. They interpreted the rise of the serpent power through the *cakras* as a natural movement of the 'nerve aura', a movement which it was believed constituted the physical aspect of human spiritual development.

¹¹ This drawing appears in: Ajit Mookerjee and Madhu Khanna, *Die Welt des Tantra in Bild und Deutung*, Bern 1978, 179.

¹² See Karl Baier, *Meditation und Moderne. Zur Genese eines Kernbereichs moderner Spiritualität in der Wechselwirkung zwischen Westeuropa, Nordamerika und Asien*, Würzburg 2009, 203–243.

¹³ See Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body. The Origins of Modern Posture Practice*, Oxford 2010, 51–52. Gavin Flood deals with the constitution of the tantric body in the interplay of meditation techniques, ritual, imagination, pictorial and written traditions that influence the experience of the body, in *The Tantric Body. The Secret Tradition of Hindu Religion*, London and New York 2006. A striking example of modern empirical *cakra* research is Hiroshi Motoyama, *Theories of the Chakras. A Bridge to Higher Consciousness*, Wheaton Ill. 1981.

¹⁴ James Braid, *Observations on Trance; or, Human Hybernation*, London 1850, first published as a series of three articles in the *Medical Times* in May 1850. Braid had already published his first ideas about Indian fakirism and related the abilities of fakirs to medically explainable trance phenomena in 1844 in the *Medical Times* under the title 'Magic, Mesmerism, Hypnotism, etc., Historically and Physiologically considered'. The *Medical Times* was available to doctors practising western medicine in India, see Arthur Edward Waite: Biographical and Bibliographical Introduction, in: James Braid, *Braid on Hypnotism. The Beginning of Modern Hypnosis*, New York 1960, 1–66: 30–31, 43–45.

¹⁵ N.C. Paul, *A Treatise on the Yoga Philosophy*, Benares 1851.

¹⁶ See the chapter on Theosophy in Karl Baier, *Meditation und Moderne*, 291–423.

Authors associated with Theosophy, such as S. C. Vasu and B. D. Basu, took over the conviction that yoga had a scientific basis and continued to link yoga to modern medicine. The medicalisation of yoga eventually gained a new quality in the 1920s as it became connected with the new culture of practising *āsanas* and *prāṇāyāma*, to which we will return below. This development was decisive for the remainder of the twentieth century and finally led to the establishment of medical and psychosomatic yoga research.¹⁷

Two followers of Guru Paramahansa Madhavdas played a key role here. Shri Yogendra (Manibhai Haribhai Desai) founded the Yoga Institute in Santa Cruz near Bombay in 1918, which was dedicated to researching the health aspects of yoga. In 1919 he founded the Yoga Institute of America near New York, and during his four-year stay in the USA, worked with alternative-minded doctors and naturopaths. He viewed yoga as a lifestyle, which would lead to physical, emotional and spiritual health, an interpretation that had a decisive influence on Modern Yoga as a whole.

Swami Kuvalyananda (Jagannath G. Gune) founded the Kaivalyadhama Yoga Institute in Lonavla in 1924, a centre that still conducts scientific research into yoga, focussing on both medical and philosophical-philological aspects. Research into the physiological effects of *āsanas* and *prāṇāyāma* in a medical laboratory started at this institute. The research results were published from 1935 in the Institute's journal *Yoga Mīmāṃsā*. A range of similar institutions subsequently followed in India. Generally speaking, empirical yoga research remained a small field, only carried out by a few pioneers until the 1950s and 1960s, such as Bagchi, Wenger and Anand's Indo-American research group.¹⁸

I could not find any detailed information on the further development of medical yoga research, but I assume that it continued in the same way as in the area of empirical-psychological studies. A quantitative survey of international publications on psychological and psychotherapeutic aspects of yoga and meditation made by Carsten Unger for the period between 1951 and August 1997, shows that there were rarely more than ten publications annually until 1967 and that the number was usually significantly smaller.¹⁹ From here on the number rises to a level of 40–50 publications annually between 1967 and 1986, with an exceptional peak of more than 80 publications in the year 1978. The most extensive study in German from this productive phase of yoga research was

¹⁷ For both of these, see Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 44–51. The history of the medical-scientific foundation of body-based yoga practice does not start with Vasu and Basu, as Singleton believes, but, as already stated, in the first third of the nineteenth century with Mesmerism.

¹⁸ B. K. Bagchi and M. A. Wenger, 'Electro-physiological correlates of some Yogi exercises', in: *Electroencephalogr. Clin. Neurophysiol.* 1957, Suppl. 7: 132–149; Bagchi and Wenger, 'Studies of autonomic functions in practitioners of Yoga in India', in: *Behavioral Science*, 1961, 6:312–323; B. K. Bagchi, M. A. Wenger and B. K. Anand, 'Experiments in India on Voluntary Control of Heart and Pulse', in: *Circulation* 24 (1961), 1319–1325. More information on empirical yoga research until the 1970s can be found in Vijayendra Pratap, *Scientific Studies of Yoga: A review*, in: *Yoga Mīmāṃsā* (1971) 13, 1–18 and James Funderburk, *Science Studies Yoga: A review of physiological data*, Honesdale PA 1977.

¹⁹ Carsten Unger, *Yoga und Meditation – psychologische und psychotherapeutische Aspekte. Eine internationale Bibliographie*. Unpublished manuscript. Ahrensburg: Himalaya Institut für Yoga Wissenschaft und Philosophie 1997. Unger's cited results have been taken from Steffen Brandt, 'Prävention und Gesundheitsförderung im betrieblichen Setting. Eine Längsschnittstudie über die psychologischen Auswirkungen des Yoga und des Autogenen Trainings', dissertation from the University of Potsdam, University of Oldenburg 2004, 14–15.

published by the Leipzig physician Dietrich Ebert.²⁰ The number of new publications fell from the start of the 1990s. This temporary surge is largely attributable to the explosion in empirical studies of meditation, which were made during the heyday of the international meditation movement, with a greater than average number of studies being devoted to Transcendental Meditation (TM). According to Klaus Grawe, the frequency of yoga and meditation publications stands in a ratio of 1 to 18, which Steffen Brandt believes is typical of the field of empirical–psychological studies.²¹

Despite the popularity of yoga, the number of empirical–scientific studies has therefore been limited until now.²² Additionally, the quality of these studies often leaves a lot to be desired as regards research plans, the composition of groups of participants and the testing methods.²³ Moreover, it is only recently that proper attention has been paid to the considerable differences between the various schools of modern (body-centred) yoga, while previously ‘hatha yoga’ was researched as a general subject.

Elizabeth De Michelis has concluded that the relevant studies generally reach the same conclusions, which has been worded as follows in a study on the use of yoga for cancer patients: ‘Results from the emerging literature on yoga [...] provide preliminary support for the feasibility and efficacy of yoga interventions for [...] patients, although controlled trials are lacking. Further research is required to determine the reliability of these effects and to identify their underlying mechanisms.’²⁴

Nevertheless it is possible to read about some of the effects of regular yoga practice in the cited texts, which one can assume with a degree of certainty will be confirmed by further studies. They include the reduction of the resting tonus and of course an increase in flexibility, the resolution or relief of chronic back pain and headaches, improvement in circulation and reduction in asthma conditions, high blood pressure and nervous troubles. The ability to manage stress and to relax increases, while the balance of the vegetative nervous system improves. There is also good evidence that yoga exercises can lead to improved poise and serenity, and reduce depression, anxiety and aggression. Self-acceptance increases and one is more sensible in dealing with oneself.

This list may help to understand the success of Modern Yoga. It encompasses several psychological and physical health problems, which are very much connected to life and work in modern urban societies. It also reflects popular expectations regarding body-centred yoga practice, concentration and meditation exercises, which appear again and again in the media and in the self-portrayal of the yoga schools, expectations which yoga fulfills according to the empirical studies.

²⁰ Dietrich Ebert, *Physiologische Aspekte des Yoga und der Meditation*, Stuttgart 1986.

²¹ Brandt: *Prävention und Gesundheitsförderung*, 23 takes over this ratio from Klaus Grawe, Ruth Donati and Friederike Bernauer, *Psychotherapie im Wandel*, Göttingen 1994.

²² Summary reports on more recent (German) studies are given by Martina Bley, *Yoga in der Gesundheitsforschung. Eine Einführung in die wissenschaftliche Erforschung des Yoga und Überlegungen zu dessen Einsatz im Gesundheitswesen*, Bern: Schweizer Yogaverband 2006; and Christian Fuchs, *Yoga. Im Spiegel der Wissenschaft*; Schnäbele, *Yogapraxis und Gesellschaft*, 105–106.

²³ Thus Steffen Brandt, ‘Yoga auf dem Prüfstand’, in: *Viveka* 31 (2004) 7–8.

²⁴ Julienne E. Bower, Alison Woolery, Beth Sternlieb and Deborah Garet, ‘Yoga for Cancer Patients and Survivors’, in: *Cancer Control* 12 (2005) 165–171, abstract, quoted from De Michelis, *A Preliminary Survey*, 15 (note 80).

The clinical gaze on Yoga is not only confined to medical sciences. It is also a phenomenon of cultural and religious history, which manifests a change in the social configuration of knowledge concerning the way in which yoga is conceived of and practised at a given time. This has been the focus of attention of Modern Yoga Studies, aimed at explaining Modern Yoga's historical emergence and related cultural historical changes.

Researching the historical origins of Modern Yoga

The term 'Modern Yoga' is in itself a historical category, or more precisely a category that defines a historical break. The proponents of Modern Yoga Studies not only define their research field chronologically as yoga in the last 200 years, but also link the discourse of Modern Yoga to the thesis that there are significant differences between the yoga of pre-modern India and present-day forms of anglophone transnational yoga.

This distinguishes pioneer work on yoga in the modern era from Modern Yoga Studies in a more precise sense.²⁵ Norman S. Sjoman was the first, as far as I am aware, to decisively distinguish a modern tradition of yoga practice from the older textual tradition of yoga.²⁶ The two groundbreaking works of Elizabeth De Michelis and Joseph Alter appeared in the year 2004.²⁷ De Michelis starts her book with some questions that open up this new field: 'What is classical yoga (i.e. the older forms of yoga from the Indian subcontinent, consisting of a pluri-millennarian tradition)? [...] How does Modern Yoga differ from these older forms? And how did it develop its peculiar characteristics? [...]'²⁸ Joseph Alter presents his work as a social anthropological study on the history of modern India: 'This is a book about Modern Yoga written from the vantage point of an anthropologist. Its purpose is to understand social change and change in some of the structures of meaning that have taken place in India as a result of colonialism and postcolonial transnationalism.'²⁹ These perspectives are distinguished from both an Indological approach and an essentialist interpretation of yoga. 'Yoga in Modern India should not be read as a study of Yoga philosophy or as a study of Yoga from the vantage point of a Sanskritist. Because the focus of analytic attention is on how Yoga has been made to make sense over the course of the past century, there is no sense in which this book seeks to define Yoga's authentic form or delimit its authoritative canon.'³⁰

²⁵ The early studies by Christian Fuchs, *Yoga in Deutschland: Rezeption - Organisation - Typologie*, Stuttgart 1990; and Karl Baier, *Yoga auf dem Weg nach Westen. Studien zur Rezeptionsgeschichte*, Würzburg 1998, as well as Silvia Ceccomori, *Cent Ans de Yoga en France*, Paris 2001, look at the reception history and do not yet develop any explicit concept of Modern Yoga.

²⁶ See Norman S. Sjoman, *The Yoga Tradition of the Mysore Palace*, New Delhi 1999, 39–40.

²⁷ De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*; Joseph Alter, *Yoga in Modern India. The Body between Science and Philosophy*, Princeton, Oxford 2004.

²⁸ De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 1.

²⁹ Alter, *Yoga in Modern India*, xiii.

³⁰ Alter, *Yoga in Modern India*, xiv.

Many detailed studies opened up the field of Modern Yoga history and its more recent manifestations in subsequent years.³¹ They confirm the soundness of the paradigm of a basic transformation of yoga.³² It is now certain that Modern Yoga cannot be viewed as the result of a one-sided reception of traditional Indian forms of yoga in the West. This is a transnational cultural asset, which arose from an intercultural and inter-religious contact between European-American modernity and India. Yoga was itself modernised in India before it was exported worldwide, which is why it was so successful in foreign countries that were marked by European-American modernity.

This success cannot be adequately explained by the 'filling a gap' model, which is still often used in historical reception analyses. The importation of yoga and other Asiatic practices did not simply fill a spiritual deficiency in the west. Rather, there were a number of 'welcoming structures' within European-American culture and especially within its cultic milieus, which not only responded positively to the integration of an already modernised Indian yoga but elaborated a kind of "modern yoga" before the advent of modern yoga from India. The task of reconfiguring religion and religious practices under modern living conditions led to the elaboration of similar theoretical concepts, exercises and habit formations in India and in the West.³³

However, one should certainly not ignore the differences. The modernisation of yoga does not mean the same for Indian modernity as it does for North American or European modernity.³⁴

It is reasonable to start the history of Modern Yoga with the renewal of yoga in the neo-Hindu associations of the Arya Samaj and Brahma Samaj.³⁵ A negative image of yoga predominated in India before this renaissance, which continued to exercise a strong influence well into the twentieth century. The grounds for this negative image in India have been well researched. The image of the yogi was identified with the Nāth siddhas who practised *haṭha yoga*: they came from lower social classes and their teachings and practices were deemed heterodox by orthodox Hindus; they were considered magicians with unnatural and dangerous powers.³⁶ And between the fifteenth and the early

³¹ On the state of the art, see the contributions in Mark Singleton (ed.), *Special Yoga Issue, Asian Medicine: Tradition and Modernity* 3, 1 (2007), and Mark Singleton & Jean Byrne (ed.), *Yoga in the Modern World*, London and New York 2008.

³² Suzanne Newcombe offers an overview of recent studies in 'The Development of Modern Yoga: A Survey of the Field', in: *Religion Compass* 3/6 (2009), 986–1002.

³³ On the concept of welcoming structures, see Baier, *Meditation und Moderne*, 28, 485.

³⁴ This is a fundamental idea of Sarah Strauss, in *Positioning Yoga. Balancing Acts Across Cultures*, Oxford and New York 2005. I will say more on this book in the final section of this paper.

³⁵ De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 2–4, dates the start of Modern Yoga to the years 1849 and 1896. In 1849 Henry David Thoreau admitted that he practised yoga and therefore yoga appeared probably for the first time as an option for westerners. 1896 was the year when Vivekananda's *Rāja Yoga* was published, which according to De Michelis most of all laid the foundations for Modern Yoga. The significance she gives to *Rāja Yoga* appears a little exaggerated to me and she has tempered this since. Vivekananda's yoga did not start the neo-Hindu modernisation of yoga, but rather triggered its international dissemination. Also the first date underlines the transnational nature of yoga practice as a characteristic of Modern Yoga. The philosopher Karl Christian F. Krause may well have preceded Thoreau by several decades as regards the propagation of yoga practice to westerners. See on this Baier, *Yoga auf dem Weg nach Westen*, 90. Whether it was Thoreau or Krause, both are very isolated predecessors of western yoga practice. The roots of globalising Modern Yoga are rather to be found in neo-Hinduism before Vivekananda, and partly in the theory and practice of Theosophy as influenced by Mesmerism.

³⁶ See David Gordon White, *Sinister Yogis*, Chicago 2009.

nineteenth centuries armed groups of Nāth yogis and other warrior ascetics controlled trade routes in North India, being only eventually defeated by British colonial powers.³⁷ Naturally, this did not help to create a positive image of yoga.

Under the influence of the European Enlightenment and Christianity, members of neo-Hindu movements criticised many aspects of traditional Hinduism. The new religious movements, which suited the values of the prosperous Hindu middle classes educated under the British system, propagated a mystical internalised and at the same time worldly-oriented religiosity. Their leaders and followers once again had recourse to yoga, albeit not to tantric forms or to the suspect spirituality of sinister yogis, but to writings such as the *Bhagavadgītā* and the *Yogasūtras* of Patañjali.

It was probably Dayanand Saraswati, the founder of the Arya Samaj, who reaffirmed and popularized the authoritative role of the *Yogasūtras*, a trend strengthened by the work of orientalist, and transmitted via Theosophy and Vivekananda in numerous forms of Modern Yoga.³⁸ The Brahmo Samaj propounded the concept of a natural, rational religion – consisting of four disciplines: Karma Yoga (work), Bhakti Yoga (worship of God, love), Rāja Yoga (meditation) and Jñāna Yoga (philosophy). This four-fold yoga became known all over the world thanks to Vivekananda. As De Michelis has shown, in his book *Rāja Yoga* – which became very popular – Vivekananda linked the *Yogasūtras* to Neovedanta in the style of Ram Mohun Roy, mixing a Mesmerist-flavoured cosmology and ideas from New Thought with the concept of *prāṇa*.³⁹

Vivekananda presented his interpretation of yoga, which – in spite of internal tensions – was extremely attractive to his contemporaries, as an empirical science of the soul, as an age-old mystical wisdom compatible with modern thought. In doing so, he influenced most of the other neo-Hindu proponents of Modern Yoga, in particular Swami Sivananda and his disciples. The organisations he brought into being, the Ramakrishna Mission and the Vedanta Societies, became a model for internationally active neo-Hindu yoga organisations.

As regards yoga practice, Vivekananda described it as a form of meditation centred on breathing exercise, by means of which one should concentrate and raise the flow of *prāṇa* using a sort of simplified *kuṇḍalinī* yoga. Various other forms of meditation were built on this basic exercise.⁴⁰

Vivekananda also discusses the importance of physical health, but does not recommend āsana practice, but rather modern gymnastics. The transformation of yogic posture

³⁷ William R. Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires*, Cambridge 2006.

³⁸ For the modern construction of Patañjali as a yoga classic, see Mark Singleton, *The Classical Reveries of Modern Yoga. Patañjali and Constructive Orientalism*, in: Singleton and Byrne (ed.), *Yoga in the Modern World*, 77–99.

³⁹ De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 149–180. The paramount significance of New Thought for Modern Yoga has been developed further in Mark Singleton, 'Suggestive Therapeutics: New Thought's Relationship to Modern Yoga', in: Special Yoga Issue, *Asian Medicine: Tradition and Modernity*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2007) 64–84, and Baier, *Meditation und Moderne*, 485–498.

⁴⁰ For a more detailed analysis of the exercises described by Vivekananda, see Baier, *Meditation und Moderne*, 472–485.

exercises into a successful modern practice is another trend in the history of the Modern Yoga, which first took off after Vivekananda's death.⁴¹

The medicalisation of yoga, which played an important role in this respect, has already been treated in an earlier section. Following on from this, we are concerned with the cultural and historical contexts within which these body-centred Modern Yoga exercises are to be understood. Mark Singleton wrote the groundbreaking study on this subject.⁴² He emphasises that modern exercises link up to the *āsanas* of traditional haṭha yoga, but that the innovative element predominates.

'The practice of *āsanas* within transnational anglophone yogas is not the outcome of a direct and unbroken lineage of hatha yoga. While it is going too far to say that modern postural yoga has no relationship to *āsana* practice within the Indian tradition, this relationship is one of radical innovation and experimentation. It is the result of adaption to new discourses of the body that resulted from India's encounter with modernity.'⁴³

Even in later phases of *haṭhayoga*, where *āsanas* gain in importance, they only had a subsidiary function and most of them were closely linked to other exercises.⁴⁴ The early history of *āsana* practices as independent of this context is still little known. Although a relatively ancient *haṭhayoga* transmission speaks of 84 *āsanas*, the first proven complete lists of postures names date back to the seventeenth century, and the first text which adds descriptions to these names, to the eighteenth century. These lists differ markedly from each other. One cannot derive any tradition from these lists, from which one could derive the modern *āsana* systems.⁴⁵

It appears that even before India became a British colony, people had started practising yogic postures and breathing exercises mainly for health benefits, independently of meditation practice. Perhaps body-centred yoga exercises and traditional physical exercise systems such as wrestling influenced each other in this process. This was then supplemented by western sport and gymnastics in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as well as by the promotion of physical fitness from the international physical exercise movement. Modern exercises mainly arose from the dialogue between colonial India and the international rise of physical exercise culture during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), with its programme of educating the whole person by means of physical training, played an important role in the modernisation of physical exercise in India.⁴⁶ Programmes and courses were promoted in

⁴¹ For Vivekananda's negative attitude towards *haṭha yoga*, see Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 70–75. Swami Abhedananda, who was appointed by Vivekananda as the official swami for the New York Vedanta Society in 1897, took a different attitude. He instituted regular yoga classes, where he taught *āsanas* and a wider range of *prāṇāyāmas* with great success.

⁴² Singleton, *Yoga Body*.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁴⁴ On the changing role of the *āsanas* in yoga manuals from different times, see Bühnemann, *Eighty-four Āsanās*, 17–24.

⁴⁵ See the summary by Bühnemann, *Eighty-four Āsanās*, 143–144.

⁴⁶ See Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 91–94

the context of the YMCA which, combining genuine Indian and western physical exercise methods, gave a stimulus to the development of modern body-centred yoga.⁴⁷

The western-educated Indian middle classes were impressed by the nationalist gymnastic movements in Europe and hoped to contribute to overcoming the perceived physical degeneracy of the individual and of Indian society by means of a vigorous Indian physical culture. After his stay in the United States, Vivekananda promoted the importance of building up physical strength for the spiritual development of Hindus. A militantly nationalistic physical culture movement arose, in which yoga exercises mixed with gymnastics were practiced as training for the independence struggle.⁴⁸

The intention of opposing western physical culture with a genuinely Indian type of training should not be underestimated as a factor in the emergence of āsana-centred yoga. Connections were made with the appeal of the very popular gymnastics systems of Ling, Niels Bukh and others in India, which sought to integrate the body, soul and mind through their exercises, and also with the sacralisation of the body and physical exercises found in modern physical training systems, for example in early forms of body-building and the 'harmonial gymnastics' of Genevieve Stebbins.⁴⁹ The spiritually charged relaxation practices of Modern Yoga – which are themselves a hybrid – have also contributed to western relaxation teachings and New Thought affirmation practices.⁵⁰ The different Indian syntheses of traditional āsana and *prāṇāyāma* practice, modern physical training and relaxation, were presented as holistic methods with spiritual content that were superior to western physical exercise systems.

Swami Kuvalyananda and Sri Yogendra, whom we encountered above as pioneers of medical research on yoga, are the main actors in this nationalistic physical culture, which also appears as an increasingly confident and markedly spiritual player on the international market of modern, holistically oriented physical culture.

Another centre for the development of modern āsana practice was the Mysore palace: open to western culture, it had fostered a tradition of āsana practice that went far back into the nineteenth century, and which was also mixed with various forms of gymnastics.⁵¹ The Sanskrit scholar Tirumalai Krishnamacharya worked there as a yoga teacher from 1924. Three of his disciples became world-famous and started their own yoga schools: B.K.S. Iyengar (Iyengar Yoga), Pattabhi Jois (Ashtanga Yoga) and T.K.V. Desikachar (Viniyoga).

Meanwhile, in the United States the adventurous Pierre Bernard worked as a pioneer of physical yoga practice. In the late 1880s he had received teaching from the tantric yogi Sylvais Hamati, sometime resident of the United States, and not only experimented in a potentially scandalous manner with ritual sex at the higher levels of his 'Tantric Order',

⁴⁷ See *ibid.*, 91–94.

⁴⁸ See *ibid.*, 101–106.

⁴⁹ On body-building, see Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 88–90. On Genevieve Stebbins, who is particularly interesting in relation to Modern Yoga, see Baier, 454–467 and Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 143–147.

⁵⁰ See Mark Singleton, 'Salvation through Relaxation: Proprioceptive Therapy and its Relationship to Yoga', in: *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (2005) 289–304.

⁵¹ See Norman S. Sjoman, *The Yoga Tradition of the Mysore Palace*, and Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 175–210.

but also linked the study of Indian philosophy with the teaching of meditation and postural and breathing exercises in his yoga schools, thus creating one of the most developed forms of Modern Yoga of his day.⁵²

Typological issues

Based on what we have already said, Modern Yoga can generally be defined as a system of exercises with a holistic intent, which has arisen and continues to arise from the interaction of Indian culture and Euro-American modernity since the nineteenth century. The schools and tendencies covered by this definition can be classified in different ways. There is a basic distinction – which is usually assumed – between Modern Yoga schools that are only active in India and are mainly presented in Indian languages, and primarily English-speaking transnational yoga, which has been researched far more thoroughly. While this distinction holds true, it is not set in stone, and in some unrepresentative (at least for the moment) cases the two types may overlap.

De Michelis proposed a scheme of five types of yoga in relation to transnational yoga, and some researchers have followed her in using this classification. This typology was created as a heuristic tool, a first attempt which did not seek to do justice to the full complexity of Modern Yoga. As we will see, De Michelis herself put forward a revised version in a later article.

According to the typology of *A History of Modern Yoga*, Vivekananda's interpretation is the basis for everything else and is therefore simply termed 'Modern Yoga'.⁵³ In accordance with this scheme, various schools of 'Modern Psychosomatic Yoga' developed, which offered exercises for the body, soul and mind (Santa Cruz, Kaivalyadhama, Sivananda and the Himalaya Institute of Swami Rama).

Two further forms appeared in subsequent decades. Modern Postural Yoga (Pattabhi Jois, Iyengar) concentrated on physical exercises, while Modern Meditational Yoga (TM, Sri Chinmoy, Buddhist groups) emphasised meditation and concentration methods. With both these types of Modern Yoga, the doctrinal side, according to De Michelis, was limited to very general religious-philosophical foundations. It was assumed that understanding would come more from experience than from theoretical studies, and it was left to individual practitioners to find something meaningful in the exercises and the experiences that arose from them.

The last type is Modern Denominational Yoga (ISKCON, Bhagwan movement, Sahaja Yoga, late TM). This developed later, in De Michelis's view, and only became fully distinct in the 1960s, thanks to committed neo-Hindu gurus and groups, who integrated elements

⁵² For this see Robert Love: *The Great Oom. The Improbable Birth of Yoga in America*, New York 2010. North America played a key role in the development of Modern Yoga. Stefanie Syman offers an overall presentation of the history of yoga in the USA until the start of the twenty-first century in *The Subtle Body. The Story of Yoga in America*, New York 2010. Both books tend to be anecdotal, but they contain useful information.

⁵³ De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 187–189.

taken from other forms of Modern Yoga into their teachings. These groups have sect-like tendencies and are rooted in strong belief and organisational structures. They would, however, contribute little to mainstream yoga and were not primarily concerned with it.

This classification system is problematic for a number of reasons. In the first place it is clear that it is linked to assuming solid historical dependencies. It remains to be seen whether this was De Michelis's intention, but her presentation in any case gives the impression that Modern Yoga is a project that was essentially launched by Vivekananda and then became differentiated in various ways, without the individual branches entirely losing their connection to their historical source. Thus, she writes: 'After Vivekananda's 1896 formulation, Modern Yoga developed into various schools dedicated to body-mind-spirit "training" [...]. Within a couple of decades, further specialization had occurred, with some schools putting greater stress on the cultivation of physical practices, and others on the cultivation of more mental ones.'⁵⁴

While the classification follows a model that differentiates the possibilities of Vivekananda's initial impulse, as linked to an anthropological concept (a whole body-mind-spirit program is first taken over by various schools and then differentiated into body training and mind-spirit training), denominational yoga is seen as different. De Michelis defines it as a late phenomenon that borrows individual elements from earlier forms of Modern Yoga, but the relationship to those forms remains unclear. She brings in a new category with the term 'denominational', which no longer relates to the anthropological concepts of body, mind and spirit, but rather starts from a sociological point of view, having in mind the guru cults and new Hindu religions, which blossomed in the 1960s and 1970s and attracted many people to their yoga offerings.

De Michelis's typology therefore starts out from two primary characteristics that make up types: different forms of practices, that are broken down according to an anthropological system, are contrasted with other types based on the social structure of the groups of practitioners, which is however only used as a definer in the case of denominational groups, and otherwise only occasionally functions as a secondary characteristic when describing the specific types in more detail.⁵⁵

De Michelis revised her original categorisation in an article from 2007 in which she abandoned the tendency to derive all of Modern Yoga from Vivekananda's *Rāja-Yoga*.⁵⁶ She now speaks of 'early modern psychosomatic yoga', which was first developed in Vivekananda's *Rāja-Yoga* and which also includes Sivananda's Yoga and the schools started by his disciples, such as Swami Rama's Himalayan Institute and Kripalu Yoga. The basis for this form is in every case a specific interpretation of the eight-fold path of Patañjali, with the addition of various neo-Hindu and Western esoteric elements. This means that Vivekananda is now only the founder of one strand of Modern Yoga.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ See De Michelis, *Preliminary Survey*, 5–6.

⁵⁶ Elizabeth De Michelis, 'Modern Yoga: History and Forms', in: Singleton and Byrne (ed.), *Yoga in the Modern World*, 17–35: 21–22.

In accordance with Mark Singleton she puts forward the 'neo-Hindu style of Modern Yoga' as a type of yoga independent of Vivekananda, the particular feature of which is that it is greatly influenced by martial arts and gymnastics. This type also arose at the end of the nineteenth century and had its heyday in the 1920s. It includes elements of Hindu nationalism and theories of Hindu superiority. This corresponds to the modern-day Bharatiya Yog Sansthan. One can interpret the Santa Cruz Yoga Institute and the Kaivalyadhama Institute in Lonavla as combinations of types 1 and 2.

Her second system of categories adheres as before to the categories of 'postural' and 'meditational yoga'. De Michelis now gives Yogananda's Self Realization Fellowship and, in the modern era, the Brahma Kumaris as examples of the second type. The schools of meditational yoga are strongly dependent on their gurus and are rather isolated from other yoga movements and the rest of society. These groups tend to develop into denominational forms of yoga, with TM being a good example. There is no basic change in her description of denominational yoga.

In order to arrive at a more plausible system of categories, I propose to start from three basic types.⁵⁷ First, the category of denominational yoga should be extended to all neo-Hindu communities, which give yoga training a prominent place in their programmes. TM and the Self Realization Fellowship belong to this type, as do Brahma Kumaris and Sivananda Yoga. Vivekananda's yoga and the yoga of the organisations he founded are paradigms for this, but elements of the third type have entered into their contemporary forms.

Second, we can distinguish a secularised variant of the denominational type, which is represented by various national (e.g. the British Wheel of Yoga) and international yoga associations (e.g. European Union of Yoga), and private Yoga schools. The proponents of this kind of yoga are not organised into neo-Hindu faith communities, but they also draw on traditional Indian Yoga literature. The physical side of yoga again plays an important role under the influence of the third type. Various forms of meditation are however also practised as in type 1. Devotional practices involving worship of certain deities and gurus, as well as initiation scenarios do not, however, play a major role here.

The third basic type is identical to De Michelis' Modern Postural Yoga. This is nowadays the most popular and also most secular form of Modern Yoga and influences both other types. The Hindu background is largely ignored and practitioners concentrate on physical practice. There are also elements of guru devotion and recitations of religious invocations, but they play a more marginal role than in type 2. Participants in these groups have or have had occasional contacts with the other forms of Modern Yoga, which is something that should be researched more deeply, as well as the fluctuation between the different movements in general.

⁵⁷ See Karl Baier, 'Yoga. Geschichte und Verhältnis zum Christentum', Workbook no. 26, Department for Worldview Issues, Archdiocese of Vienna, Vienna 2009, 23-42.

It would be useful for a future, more subtle typology to consider which parameters are most suitable to use as categories to define types, and to research the history of Modern Yoga and the recent yoga scene in this context. One could then research specific groups in relation to these parameters and possibly create new categories in the course of such investigations, or eliminate less significant ones. The categories developed in this way could then be included in a questionnaire to research the self-assessment of various movements and/or evaluate other available sources of information using this grid.

The resulting information could be used to demonstrate which are the best characteristics to consistently define the content of Modern Yoga. On this basis, it would also be possible to cluster groups with similar distributions and allocate them to specific types. The next stage would be to include the historical background to trace the origin of these types and their reciprocal influences, and so understand them better.

Researching contemporary yoga using social science methods

Last but not least, I would like to look at approaches to Modern Yoga, which make use of the methods of quantitative and qualitative social scientific research. With this we return to the starting point of this paper, since we are now looking for answers to the questions posed in the introduction: why is Modern Yoga popular and how does it relate to living conditions in modern societies and their religious landscapes? I would like to discuss three works as examples.

Suzanne Hasselle–Newcombe’s study is based on quantitative data collected by means of a questionnaire which she distributed to the 750 participants at the Iyengar Yoga Jubilee Convention held in London in 2002; 188 completed copies were returned.⁵⁸ This was an event mainly attended by committed Iyengar yoga practitioners. The educational level of the practitioners was well above the UK average, with 64% holding an undergraduate degree and 30% a postgraduate degree. Hasselle–Newcombe’s questions were directed towards exploring religious or spiritual motives and the convictions of the practitioners of this style of Modern Postural Yoga.

The majority of the respondents (60%) stated that they started to practise Iyengar Yoga because they were seeking an alternative form of ‘exercise’. Some 94% practised to maintain their mobility and 80% believed that practising yoga helped them to deal with stress. Some 68% agreed with the statement that this practice showed them a way of dealing with their emotions. For 85% practising this yoga helped them to find a purpose in life. For 47% the ‘spiritual aspect’ was an important reason to keep practising. These percentages do not vary with the number of years respondents had been practising, which leads Hasselle–Newcombe to the conclusion that this is based on a spiritual orientation

⁵⁸ Suzanne Hasselle–Newcombe, ‘Spirituality and “Mystical Religion” in Contemporary Society: A Case Study of British Practitioners of the Iyengar Method of Yoga’, in: *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (2005) 305–321.

that already existed before they started to practise. Of respondents, 83% stated that they lived a spiritual life, while only 45% of the entire UK population would say this of themselves at the time of the research. The largest group as regards belonging to a religion were those who had no religion (32% versus 45.80% of the entire population), followed by multiple allegiances (15%) and Buddhism (13%). There was only minimal identification with Hinduism. 37% of respondents stated that they practised a form of meditation in addition to Iyengar yoga practice. These practices often have a Buddhist or Hindu background, but are practised without allegiance to the religion in question.

Hasselle–Newcombe believes that this results in an overall picture that is very similar to descriptions of modern spirituality, which Ernst Troeltsch and Troeltsch's follower, Colin Campbell, developed further under the heading of 'mystical religion' or 'cultic milieu' as the most popular form of religiosity in the educated classes in post-industrial society. This is an individualistic syncretistic religiosity oriented towards personal experience.⁵⁹ In common with Peter Berger, Hasselle–Newcombe relates this type of religion to the situation of religious pluralism, where the doctrinal structures of religions are strongly relativised.

Verena Schnäbele's research is also strongly based in the field of Modern Postural Yoga. She categorises this as a 'low-threshold spiritual practice', which can be termed a secular practice because of its large degree of disconnection from a religious background as well as its openness and lack of commitment.⁶⁰ For Schnäbele the attraction of such a practice lies in its multiple facets. This type of practice can be viewed as a purely physical, health-oriented exercise as well as as a method of spiritual training. This has 'facilitated a parallel, yet diverse experience space for non-homogeneous groups of practitioners with differing expectations.'⁶¹

Verena Schnäbele follows De Michelis's idea in describing the structure of a Modern Postural Yoga yoga class as a 'healing ritual of secular religion'.⁶² The ritual theory analysis of Modern Postural Yoga is refined by including the six aspects of ritual behaviour, which have been developed by Catherine Bell.⁶³ It emerges from the interviews conducted by Schnäbele that experienced practitioners in particular, who interpreted yoga practice more as a process development than a performance-oriented practice, see a higher power at work in their system of practice, a power which intervenes in a fateful manner in one's own life story, leads to deeper self-knowledge and transforms one's

⁵⁹ Cf. Peter Van Ness, 'Yoga As Spiritual But Not Religious: A Pragmatic Perspective', in: *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (1999), 15–30. Hasselle–Newcombe supports the mystical orientation of Iyengar Yoga with quotations from its founder, B.K.S. Iyengar, according to which one can experience the infinite present within everyone by practising postural and breathing exercises. See Hasselle–Newcombe, 'Spirituality and 'Mystical Religion'', 318.

⁶⁰ Schnäbele, *Yogapraxis und Gesellschaft*, 240 ff.

⁶¹ See Schnäbele page 91 with a reference to De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 245 and 250.

⁶² De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 248.

⁶³ See Schnäbele, *Yogapraxis und Gesellschaft*, 117–127.

life.⁶⁴ The ritual of practice by which one participates in the exercise system, gives one's life a direction, meaning and a support. 'One's life is interpreted as a tale of personal development. Life appears as a "path". Events are now seen as part "of my yoga path" [...].'⁶⁵

Schnäbele is particularly interested in the social effects of the practice of Modern Postural Yoga. She does not rely on quantitative methods in her research like Hasselle–Newcombe but situates her work in the area of qualitative sociological research. She investigates the modern, metropolitan yoga scene in a 'post-industrial–neo-liberal social context', which demands more and more time and energy from the working population. The main research question is how yoga practice influences the way in which practitioners position themselves in this social structure.⁶⁶ For this reason, she concentrates on the 35–40 age group, where questions of professional establishment and lifestyle choices are particularly pressing. In accordance with the average composition of yoga classes, the 34 persons who were interviewed are mostly women with an above-average level of education. Practitioners from different schools of Postural Yoga (Bikram Yoga, Power Yoga, Iyengar Yoga and Asthanga Yoga) were interviewed, as well as from denominational yoga schools (Yoga in Daily Life, Yogi Bhajan's Kundalini Yoga) for comparative and contrast purposes.

The evaluation of these interviews shows that the practice of Modern Postural Yoga fulfils an ambivalent social function. 'Yoga practice has a dual effect: on the one hand, the practitioner achieves a greater 'inner' freedom, greater psychological distance from the internalised work ethic, and on the other hand is able to adjust better to working conditions as a result.'⁶⁷ The interviewees state that they learned to be more resilient, relaxed and flexible by doing yoga, and they could carry this over into their professional life. Beyond this, yoga is also a latent subversive practice, which encourages practitioners to organise their lives to meet their own needs and to resist being increasingly taken over by neo-liberal expectations of their behaviour.⁶⁸ Schnäbele did not however find any politically-motivated protest in her investigation of the yoga scene. Nonetheless, yoga practice as a whole calms down the restless consciousness that is constantly involved with the discursive structures of work and consumerism. Thereby the over-identification with the work world and consumerist tendencies are reduced. Yoga offers a deepened experience of the present as an alternative to this. 'The social potential of Modern Yoga is to be found precisely in this physically-based process of awareness'.⁶⁹

The consequences one can draw from this are largely to be found at the level of how the individual shapes his or her own life. This is not a search for collective political liberation

⁶⁴ See *ibid.*, 247: 'In yoga one identifies an impersonal, higher force. This makes yoga practice a spiritual exercise. Faith in yoga practice comes out in all the interviews. It is filled with specific constructions of divinity. [...] Practitioners entrust their own path to the dynamic of this higher power.'

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 242.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 175.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 274.

⁶⁸ See *ibid.*, 287.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 288.

from distracting, other-directed employment and lifestyle conditions, but rather the restructuring of one's own life in a way that is currently termed 'downshifting'. The idea is to downsize, for example by changing one's working conditions in small steps or to reduce working hours 'as much as possible' or, more drastically, to switch to a less well-paid but calmer job, and so on.⁷⁰

All the interviews undertaken by Schnäbele show that mindful physical yoga practice counteracts everyday living conditions in modern society, which not only interfere with mindful awareness of one's body, but also reduce it to concerns of appearance and functionality. Schnäbele hopes that the deeper experience of the body that is made possible in yoga lessons will have a lasting impact on the way of life within neoliberal societies.⁷¹

Sarah Strauss' research opens up new dimensions in contemporary yoga.⁷² Her presentation gives concrete characteristics to the transcultural nature of yoga and tells us which questions and methodological issues one should expect if one wants to do justice to this transculturalism from a scientific perspective.

Her original project involved researching Indian members of the Sivananda Ashram in Rishikesh. She realised, however, that such a study would not do justice to the situation in the ashram, given that its running was influenced by various groups of middle-class westerners and Indians who at times stayed in Rishikesh to practise yoga. Therefore she gave up the idea of place-bound field research and included in her research other places in India, North America and Europe, as well as the lives of yoga practitioners connected to the Sivananda Ashram. She traced the various paths that link Rishikesh with other places in the world, sketched the life stories of various practitioners and investigated each of the different contexts in which Sivananda yoga is situated.

This resulted in a dense description of the worldwide dissemination of Sivananda yoga and the Divine Life Society, based on heterogeneous material such as ethnographical observations and interviews, photographs, archive material and media articles, historical literature and so on. Because of the sketchy style, the book gives the impression of a travelogue, which suits the topic being discussed, while not making reading any easier. With its wealth of different materials and topics one sometimes loses the thread, or one is obliged to put together an image from the many bits of the puzzle. Despite the inadequate methodological-systematic development of the material, one can find revealing observations, surprising insights and useful information at various places in the book.

Strauss considers the propagation of yoga to be part of a broad international movement over the past 100 years, which does not seek to abolish modernity, but is looking for an

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 275–284.

⁷¹ See *ibid.*, 289.

⁷² Strauss, *Positioning Yoga*.

alternative version, 'another modernity'.⁷³ The unhealthy, stressful overload of modern living needs to be cushioned and its inherent contradictions overcome. 'This modern transformation represents a shift from a regional, specialized religious discourse and practice geared toward liberation of the self from the endless cycle of lives, to a transnational, secular, socially critical ideology and practice aimed at freedom and to achieve personal well-being.'⁷⁴

As with other proponents of Modern Yoga Studies, Strauss is of the view that the theory and practice of contemporary yoga tell us more about modern transnational cultural tendencies than they do about older traditions.⁷⁵ She explicitly rejects the reception-historical model of the arising of Modern Yoga. Instead of starting from the proposition that a traditional Indian set of ideas and practices was received in the West and adjusted to fit in with 'modernity', Strauss views Modern Yoga from the perspective of the existence of various modernities.⁷⁶

Everywhere in the world, yoga is a system of exercises supported by practitioners from the educated middle class, who are looking for a global model of how to live a good life under the conditions of modernity, how to preserve personal freedom in relation to increasing socio-economic pressures, and foster general well-being.⁷⁷ One can see from the different ways that yoga is represented in the media in India, North America and Europe that neither yoga nor health and self-realisation nor middle class modernity are monolithic subjects. They take on different forms in different places with differing historical conditions, influenced by both national distinctions and by a multiplicity of local communities.⁷⁸

The conservative Hindu middle classes, who practise Sivananda Yoga in India and support the Divine Light Society still view yoga in the same way as the Indian yoga pioneers of the 1920s, as a national fitness system not imported by colonialism, which is at the same time confirmed by western science. Yoga functions as a model for how to link India's own wisdom tradition, which teaches followers how to liberate themselves from fixation on worldly western science, to success in modernised India.⁷⁹

In North America and Europe the scientific nature of yoga does not play a comparably important role, while the image of 'age-old wisdom' is very present. The emphasis in the West is not on yoga as a rational system, but rather on yoga as the union of body and mind and as a counterbalance to the predominance of the rational.⁸⁰ Yoga still retains something of the image of a 'hippy' practice in America, though the media emphasise that the urban chic aspect of yoga workouts no longer has anything to do with this. On

⁷³ See *ibid.*, 115.

⁷⁴ See *ibid.*, 22.

⁷⁵ See *ibid.*, 8.

⁷⁶ See *ibid.*, 13.

⁷⁷ See *ibid.*, 2, 19, 138, 15.

⁷⁸ See *ibid.*, 130.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 120–122. on the nationalism of Sivananda and his Divine Light Society, and also the fading out of this side of Sivananda Yoga with its western followers, see Sarah Strauss, 'Adapt, Adjust, Accommodate'. The Production of Yoga in a Transnational World', in: Singleton and Byrne: *Yoga in the Modern World*, 49–74.

⁸⁰ See Strauss, *Positioning Yoga*, 125–126.

the other hand, yoga is praised in both Swiss ecologist and New Age circles as a contribution to healing mother earth. Strauss summarises the common areas and differences within various contexts of meaning in which globalised yoga is situated:

'Yoga appeals to different national audiences for different reasons. While nearly all of the print presentations I evaluated, whether from Indian, German, or American sources, promote yoga as an antidote to the stress of modern living, other "selling points" describe yoga as a technique for strengthening national identity; authenticating (and modernizing) traditional knowledge through scientifically validated health research and practice; creating community; enhancing personal development through control of the body and mind; or recovering mythical romanticized natural origins, thereby undoing the damages done to person and planet [over the] centuries [...].'⁸¹

All three sociological interpretations of Modern Yoga show a close connection between yoga and socio-cultural conditions in contemporary society. As a multifunctional, low-key spiritual practice, yoga is very suitable for serving the globally expanding spiritual scene among the middle classes. The major themes of this scene since it began – coinciding with the point of origin of Modern Yoga – have been holistic health teachings and therapies, mysticism and meditation, alternative lifestyles and cultural critique, systems of intensive physical culture outside sport exercises, the unawakened human potential, and the unification of science and religion. All of these areas have been picked up by Modern Yoga and presented as exercise systems which people with any religious background or none can adopt at any time. It is clear that there are many reasons why Modern Yoga has arrived and is here to stay.

Vienna, November 2011



Modern Yoga Research: insights and questions by Karl Baier is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).

⁸¹ Ibid., 117.