

Report on Modern Yoga Workshop

Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge
21-23 April 2006

By Benjamin Smith (Australian National University, Canberra)

Following a global explosion in the popularity of yoga, scholars have recently undertaken a number of studies on this topic. The fruits of these studies include recent anthropological monographs by Alter (2004) on modern yoga in India, and Strauss (2004) on yoga's 'transnationalism', focusing on 'Western' practitioners in Germany, America and India. De Michelis (2004) has also published an anthropologically-informed study of the development of 'modern postural yoga'. These monographs now look set to be the first in a series of new studies of contemporary yoga practice. In April 2006 a number of yoga scholars – many currently undertaking doctoral research - gathered for an inter-disciplinary conference on modern yoga convened by Elizabeth De Michelis, Suzanne Newcombe and Mark Singleton.

The workshop was collegial in character, as one would hope of a relatively new and rapidly developing field of study closely informed by, but distinct from, the well-established field of classical yoga scholarship. This collegiality was fostered by the convenors' decision to have participants summarize and comment on other participants' papers rather than present their own work, following the earlier electronic circulation of papers.



Participants at the Modern Yoga Workshop

After the previous night's informal gathering of participants, the conference began with Elizabeth De Michelis' notes on the relationship between what she has labelled 'modern postural yoga' and the medieval Indian *hatha yoga* tradition. De Michelis noted the emphasis both on embodied practice and

transcendence in the *hatha yoga* tradition (a distinction also made in Sarbacker's (2005) recent work on numinous power and cessative teleology in yoga). Despite similarities with hatha yoga, it seems that the radical aims of transcendence are mostly absent in modern yoga. Whilst late-modern cosmopolitanism and consumerism seem to have been fertile ground for the growth of interest in yoga, these cultural contexts are simultaneously at odds with at least some aspects of classical yoga traditions. The resulting tensions are evident in the responses of many practitioners to recent moves to franchise or copyright styles of modern yoga teaching.

Anthropological theory can make a significant contribution to the analysis of 'tradition' in modern postural yoga. It would be useful, for example, to employ an ethnographic approach to tease out claims about tradition amongst modern yoga teachers and practitioners. In particular, such an approach might unpick the relationship between authority and claims of traditional continuity, the lack of clearly recorded information on the genealogies of modern yoga practice, and the space that this lack of recorded knowledge leaves for the 'invention' of yoga traditions. In modern Indian traditions such an investigation might be usefully supplemented by attention to classical modes of 'rediscovery' of religious traditions through ancestral revelation, and their secular continuation through asserted archival discoveries of yoga manuscripts. This approach would certainly be fruitful in the case of the South Indian Krishnamacharya lineage, which includes B.K.S. Iyengar, K. Pattabhi Jois and T.K.V. Desikachar, three of the most prominent global figures in contemporary yoga.

Despite widespread presumptions of continuity with Indian traditions, the history of modern yoga involves an ongoing interplay between Western and Indian ideas and practices. This interplay included the influence of eugenics and various forms of pseudo-Darwinism on modern yoga, influences that lay at the heart of the renaissance of yoga in India, and its transmission abroad, in the early years of the 20th century. Mark Singleton's paper dealt with the influence of eugenics on modern yoga, focusing on a number of key strands in this history. These included the (mis-)reading of Darwin's work by eugenicists and the resulting notions of voluntary evolution which figured strongly in Indian eugenic thought. Singleton's paper also identified key figures in the development of evolutionist and eugenic ideas within the yoga 'renaissance', including Vivekananda, Annie Besant, Aurobindo Ghose, and Shri Yogendra of Bombay's Yoga Institute. The passage from 'evolutionism' to modern postural yoga has seen the continuation of aspects of these earlier ideas.

Elliott Goldberg's paper examined the recent history of *surya namaskar* ('sun salutations'), most likely an import from classical Indian wrestling traditions into modern forms of physical culture and yoga. Among the practices that contemporary yoga schools claim as traditional, *surya namaskar* seem more likely to be an import to modern yoga by way of the Indian physical culturists K.V. Iyer, who opened India's first Western-style gymnasium in Bangalore in 1922, and Bhavanrao Shrinivasrao (alias Balasaheb Pant Pratinidhi, the Rajah of Aundh, who published widely on physical culture in English and Marathi). Goldberg's work sheds light on the deeply intercultural development of modern yoga practice, and related Indian practices that emerged as part of a global boom in physical culturalism in the early 20th century. Presenting some possible routes for the uptake of *surya namaskar* into schools of modern yoga (likely to have occurred in the early-20th century with Bhavanrao's *The 10 Point Way to Health*, a popular primer published in 1928 in India and to great success in England in 1938), Goldberg also highlighted a number of claims about *surya namaskar* (e.g., the 'scientific' character of the practice, and its ability to promote health, alongside claims of its 'spiritual' character). These claims were already apparent in the early 1900s, and they persist among contemporary yoga practitioners.

Papers by Klas Nevrin and Benjamin Smith both examined the practice of modern yoga, focusing on the embodied experiences of practitioners. Drawing links between studies of embodiment, including the work of Csordas and Bourdieu and recent work by neurophilosophers, Nevrin's paper sought a non-dualistic approach to the embodied experience of yoga and the relationship between felt experience and meaning. Presenting a discussion of the importance of context in relation to the practice of yoga, Nevrin suggested that particular links between consumer culture and yoga were apparent amongst 'Western' practitioners. These links include an emphasis on various forms of empowerment, evident in particular in the use of yoga to manage the physical and mental strains of late modernity.

Nevrin's emphasis on bodily experience was echoed by Smith's paper, which presented initial ethnographic research on the practice of modern postural yoga by 'Western' practitioners in Australia and India. Focusing on the embodied experience of the practice of *yogasana* (yoga poses), Smith

suggested that practitioners experience the practice of yoga as an intensification of bodily awareness. Amongst serious yoga practitioners, the resulting ‘encounter’ with the one’s body leads to a series of pronounced experiences of the embodied ‘self’, many of which lie at the heart of practitioners’ claims about yoga’s ‘spiritual’ character.

Claims about ‘intellectual property rights’ have become increasingly prevalent in recent years in relation to forms of ‘local’ or ‘Indigenous’ knowledge. Similar claims, examined by Alison Fish’s paper, have been made in relation to yoga traditions. In particular, Fish’s paper dealt with recent attempts made by Bikram Choudhury, the Los Angeles-based founder of Bikram’s Yoga College of India, to copyright the 26-pose sequence and other aspects of the practice taught worldwide in his schools. Bikram’s assertions of intellectual property rights in his style of yoga has led to counter-claims by various parties, including Open Source Yoga Unity, a coalition founded by an American lawyer and yoga practitioner. Bikram’s actions have also spurred the Indian government to act on longer-running concerns about the ‘piracy of its cultural heritage’. The recently established Delhi-based Task Force for the Preservation of Traditional and Cultural Knowledge is now developing a ‘comprehensive digital yoga library’, intended as ‘a definitive source of yogic knowledge’, that will be used as the basis for legal contestation of acts of ‘piracy’, and for determining the ‘cultural authenticity’ of various forms of yoga.

As Marilyn Strathern (1999: 161) rightly notes, intellectual property rights have become a vehicle for experimenting with new conceptualisations of ownership. Such experimentation is taking place among both lawyers and non-lawyers in the context of modern yoga. The rubric of ‘tradition’ – as well as that of ownership – is again at play here. On the one hand, the Indian government’s attempts to protect ‘traditional yogic knowledge’ draw on a notion of tradition that obfuscates the intercultural development of modern yoga (for example, the influence of Western gymnastics on modern postural yoga). (As Fish notes, these attempts may also profoundly affect the future development of forms of yoga practice). On the other hand, claims to tradition have been brought to bear by Choudhury’s opponents to defend (mostly non-Indian) rights to teach and practice yoga. These counter-claims, whilst drawing on black-letter law, are commonly driven by the problematic belief that yoga is an age-old tradition marked by a lack of claims to ownership and the public availability of knowledge (claims problematized by the high levels of secrecy and control arguably still exercised by many Indian *gurus*).

The recent history of yoga in Britain, in particular the popularity of yoga from the late 1950s until the end of the 1970s, was the subject of Suzanne Newcombe’s paper. Countering claims about the increasing secularism of post-war Britain, Newcombe suggested that the popularity of yoga was one way in which Britons maintained a religious orientation, whilst rejecting the organised religion of the Christian churches. Connections between socio-historical context and the practice of yoga and meditation were also made in Raphaël Voix’s paper. Voix examined the effects of the re-Islamization of the Moroccan bourgeoisie on the practice of yoga and Zen Buddhism, which had previously been popular amongst a number of cosmopolitan Moroccans. Meditative practices – including those which utilize bodily techniques – appear to have become increasingly identified with Islam (in particular with Sufism), with practitioners explicitly linking these practices to Islamic traditions whilst simultaneously reshaping their own practice. These changes have apparently occurred in response to the increasing public conservatism of Moroccan Islam. However, rather than mirroring a wider conservative turn, Voix argued that the ‘new age’ form of such practices and their associated discourses have allowed the maintenance of particular kinds of individualized subjectivization, including aspirations for ‘self-realization’, at odds with the wider Islamized socio-political milieu. Newcombe’s and Voix’s papers make it clear that, rather than representing a homogenous ‘tradition’, modern yoga involves numerous trajectories across a series of scales (from the societal to the individual) within which both the meaning and practice of yoga are re-shaped in relation to the particular social and cultural situation of practitioners.

Moving beyond the textual and classical focus of earlier yoga studies, the papers at this workshop demonstrated the varied forms and contexts of the practice of yoga, and the richness of modern yoga as a research topic. The focus on practice in many of these studies has placed ethnography, and related field-based methods, at the heart of current yoga scholarship. At a time when anthropology continues to be regarded with suspicion by other disciplines – either on the basis of charges of orientalism, or a purported lack of methodological or scientific rigour – a workshop of this kind, where the work of anthropologists provided a basis for a series of inter-disciplinary engagements, was particularly refreshing.

References

- Alter, Joseph S. 2004 *Yoga in Modern India: The Body between Science and Philosophy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- De Michelis, Elizabeth 2004 *A History of Modern Yoga*. London and New York: Continuum.
- Sarbacker, Stuart R. 2005 *Samadhi: The Numinous and Cessative in Indo-Tibetan Yoga*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Strathern, Marilyn 1999 *Property, Substance and Effect: Anthropological Essays on Persons and Things*. London: Athlone.
- Strauss, Sarah 2004 *Positioning Yoga: Balancing Acts Across Cultures*. Oxford: Berg.