

**A History of Modern Yoga**  
*Elizabeth De Michelis (2004)*

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In the history of yoga, two facts are common knowledge. The first is that yoga began as an Indian concept. The second is that yogic practices have become some of the most ubiquitous products of cultural globalisation, with a firm footing in the contemporary west: an Internet search for the term *yoga* will turn up millions of pages. As soon as one progresses beyond those two basic facts, the puzzles begin to accumulate.

In classical Indian religious history, yoga has a fairly circumscribed range of meanings. The foundational text, Patañjali's *Yogasūtras*, firmly places the practice in a religious context. Eight successive steps lead the practitioner to the ultimate soteriological goal: *samādhi* and liberation. In the West, on the contrary, the term is characterised by its utter vagueness. Judging from the contents of the Internet sites devoted to yoga, the term can denote anything from a variety of clearly religious practices, to thoroughly secularised physical exercises. Yoga can be accompanied by abstruse beliefs in occult physiological processes. It can be a component of the ritual life prescribed by various religious movements. Yoga can also be seen as a purely instrumental technique for such down-to-earth purposes as reducing stress, losing weight and keeping physically fit. The secular aspect of modern yoga is so pronounced that the practice is in Britain regulated by the Sports Council. Furthermore, for Patañjali the practice of yoga, being arduous and time-consuming, is clearly a matter reserved for an elite of religious virtuosi. In the West, the more secular versions of yoga can be carried out by anybody, to the extent of carrying connotations of popular culture.

How did yoga make the leap from India to the West, and how could it acquire such a variety of mutually incompatible, and often quite secular, meanings? Surprisingly, these questions have only now begun to be addressed in a systematic fashion. One reason for this particular lacuna is that previous historians who have studied the encounter between Europe and India were intellectuals, who preferred studying texts produced by other intellectuals, and who manifested a distinct aversion to including occultist movements and popular culture in their field of research. The history of modern yoga thus slipped through the meshes of their historiographic nets. One of the most enduring legacies of the nineteenth century encounter

between West and East, the Theosophical Society, was summarily dismissed by one major scholar of Orientalism, Raymond Schwab, as an event “on which it is not necessary to dwell”. In his classic work on Indian yoga, Mircea Eliade adopted an even more judgmental stance, and characterised Theosophy as a “detestable ‘spiritual’ hybridism”. In her fine study *A History of Modern Yoga*, Elizabeth De Michelis is careful to avoid such normative prejudices, and is thus able to present her readers with a hitherto understudied and truly fascinating chapter of religious history.

In this history, a few dates can serve as milestones. The first is 1849, when Henry David Thoreau, as the first westerner ever to do so, wrote of his own intermittent practice of yoga. The second is 1896, when Swami Vivekananda created a specifically western yogic practice. A third is 1966, when a best-seller by BKS Iyengar, *Light on Yoga*, emphasised one single – and thoroughly reinterpreted – component of yogic practice at the expense of the others, and fixed in the minds of a generation of western readers that the essential element in yoga was a particular kind of physical exercise. The fact that the first was an apostle of counter-cultural living, the second a missionary and representative of a quite unorthodox version of Hinduism, and the third a modernist advocate of a thoroughly secularised healing ritual, is symptomatic of the relationship of modern, western yoga to its Indian predecessors.

Modern yoga arose as part and parcel of a broader movement to “modernise” Hinduism and adapt it to the temper and preoccupations of nineteenth century audiences. These redefinitions of Hinduism took their point of departure in the encounter of a small group of primarily Bengali intellectuals with Enlightenment culture and with very liberal interpretations of Christianity, and their reconstruction of Hinduism as a rational, monotheistic and universalist religion. They distanced themselves from traditional, but in their eyes outmoded concepts such as karma, reincarnation, temple rituals and image worship, and adopted contemporary western understandings of religion both as a personal and often emotional religious sentiment and as a commitment to a Puritan work ethic. By doing so, these neo-Hindu intellectuals hoped to construct a religion fit for an emerging cultured middle class and in line with modern ideals.

Unfortunately, these attempts to accommodate Hinduism to western ideals met with little sympathy from the British administration and the churches. As colonialism and Christian missionary efforts grew steadily more aggressive, several spokespersons of these Neo-Vedānta currents found it easier to communicate with representatives of esotericist and occultist movements,

than with mainstream denominations. As is well known, representatives of the Theosophical Society in particular were sympathetic to the Neo-Vedāntist cause.

As western and Indian religious currents combined, they resulted not least in the creation of various kinds of lay “spirituality”. Whereas elite and folk forms of religion had typically been quite distinct in pre-modern Indian religion, versions of the ascetic and meditative elite religious ideal were now to be made accessible to much broader groups of people. The spiritual retreat or *ashram*, which many readers will no doubt regard as an ancient and quintessentially Indian institution, was one characteristic product of this nineteenth century hybrid culture.

One particularly influential neo-Hindu current was the Brahma Samaj movement, founded in Calcutta in 1828 by Ram Mohan Roy. Brahma Samaj spokespersons synthesised Hindu and western religiosities by means of a highly selective appropriation of both. Almost unique among Hindu movements, the Brahma Samaj rejected the authority of the Vedas. Instead of revelation, spokespersons for the Brahma Samaj embraced Enlightenment values such as rationalism, cosmopolitanism, deism and science. However, they also accepted ideas such as spiritual evolution and the primacy of man’s intuitive faculty, two characteristic elements of nineteenth century esoteric and Romantic thought. In a move eerily reminiscent of modern New Age attitudes, some went as far as to proclaim that the Vedic and Hindu sacred texts should only be accepted if they felt true to “the pure heart, filled with the light of intuitive knowledge”.

One of the most influential Brahma Samaj leaders, Debendranath Tagore, exemplifies the tensions inherent in the eclectic culture of these Bengali intellectuals. He spent three years in solitary contemplation in the Himalayas and had a lively interest in Indian mystical traditions, but was also versed in the thought of European philosophers such as Hume and Kant. This uneasy mix of Enlightenment and Romanticism, intuition and rationality, mysticism and scientism, would not hold indefinitely. In time, the Brahma Samaj movement would split over doctrinal issues, with different spokespersons advocating either more rationalism or more esotericism.

Modern yoga was born in the more esoteric wings of this milieu. In De Michelis’ narrative, a crucial episode in the development of modern yoga took place when (neo-)Hinduism met western esotericism in the person of the Bengali patriot and prophet Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902). Under his aegis, sections of the Brahma Samaj had by the end of the nineteenth century

moved a considerable distance in the direction of the occult. While traditional, hagiographic accounts have stressed Vivekananda's spiritual heritage in the Hindu mystic Ramakrishna's quite traditional teachings, historical research indicates that Vivekananda was largely a self-made man, a kind of religious entrepreneur. Vivekananda's exegesis of yoga had a similarly innovative bent. Ostensibly structured as a verse-by-verse commentary to Patañjali's classic text, the *Yogasūtras*, Vivekananda's most influential book, *Raja Yoga*, published in 1896, in fact constituted an attempt to radically reformulate the traditional practice of *astāngayoga*.

Vivekananda's doctrinal unorthodoxy was to a considerable extent a product of his biography. When the World Parliament of Religions was held in 1893, Hinduism was represented by the neo-Vedāntist Vivekananda. By the time his seminal *Raja Yoga* was published, Vivekananda had stayed on for three years in America, where he had been adopted as resident guru by the local cultic milieu. His interaction with local 'seekers' had soon made one thing clear to him. In 1894 he wrote to one of his fellow monks back in India: "You should know that religion of the type that obtains in our country does not go here. You must suit it to the taste of the people."

Who, then, were the people Vivekananda referred to, the audience he hoped to reach? De Michelis follows Vivekananda's way through the many spiritualist, occultist, mesmerist, New Thought and Christian Science circles of *fin de siècle* Boston. Vivekananda was primed by his Brahma Samaj background to absorb the ideas and the language of these groups. Within the space of just a few years he had managed to reinvent yoga as a practical, scientific and experiential path, open to lay practitioners. In Vivekananda's own words: "Out of bewildering Yogi-ism must come the most scientific and practical psychology".

Vivekananda created this "scientific psychology" by blending several distinct Indian cosmologies and a variety of western concepts, rationalist as well as occultist, into a truly innovative praxis and set of doctrines. Samkhya philosophy merged with mesmerism, Patañjali with vitalism and *Naturphilosophie*. As one of many examples of the process, *Pranayama*, breath control, one of the eight elements in Patañjali's description of yoga, became transformed from largely being a technique for controlling the unruly mind, to a means of circulating a kind of mesmeric-vitalist fluid, *prāna*, through the postulated channels of occult human physiology. Just as in the mesmerist writings on animal magnetism, *prāna* is identified as a subtle form of matter, which needs to be evenly distributed throughout the body in order to maintain perfect health.

To the historian, Vivekananda may appear as the creator of a rather idiosyncratic religious innovation. To his followers and to later western writers on yoga, he represented quite the opposite, namely the faithful transmitter of an ancient Indian spiritual tradition. Vivekananda's books on yoga (after the publication of *Raja Yoga*, three further volumes appeared) were treated as canonical texts. A host of twentieth century authors have thus elaborated their own versions of modern yoga, taking Vivekananda's views as their unquestioned point of departure. Some focus particularly on the medical effects of the practice, emphasising either the physical benefits of the postures or the positive contributions of yoga and meditation to the practitioner's mental well-being. Others have developed the esoteric and religious aspects, and theorise widely on the properties of the occult anatomy: prana, chakras, kundalini forces, and the like. Others again will blend these approaches, or in eclectic New Age style form new syncretisms with yet other traditions.

A detailed survey of these developments would require yet another massive volume. Hence, the author has chosen to largely concentrate on one particular strand: postural yoga, as developed by BKS Iyengar (b 1918). Millions of people have become acquainted with Iyengar's methods, either through his books or via yoga classes. The author's choice to largely limit her discussion of the contemporary scene to this specific current of yoga is thus a sensible one. Furthermore, it implicitly demarcates a fruitful field of future research, namely a history of the many other understandings of yoga in the west, such as the more distinctly religious and occultist varieties.

In Iyengar's approach to yoga, we see once again the impact of personal biography on doctrine and practice. Having been a sickly child, Iyengar assiduously trained the yogic postures, *āsanas*, and attributed his full recovery to this practice. He perfected the physical techniques and introduced a new element of aesthetic awareness to them. This combination of a medical attitude to yoga and of consummate showmanship would become a hallmark of Iyengar's particular approach.

After a successful career as a yoga teacher in India, Iyengar's book *Light on Yoga* (1966) gave him international fame. The do-it-yourself, down-to-earth, scientific format already in evidence in Vivekananda's text is even more pronounced in Iyengar's volume. The various *āsanas* are presented with photographs, detailed instructions and indications of various physical conditions for which each posture is said to be an effective remedy. Although Iyengar remained personally committed to a theistic and more specifically Vaishnava form of religiosity, *Light on Yoga* as well as his next books

downplayed the specific religious connotations of yoga, and continued placing the emphasis on the more secular benefits of *āsana* practice as a path towards health and self-discovery. In this secularisation and modernisation lies the success of Iyengar yoga. By avoiding a too obvious commitment to any one model of interpretation, by emphasising the cultivation of the self, and by promoting values such as physical fitness and psychosomatic well-being, Iyengar yoga reveals itself as a corpus of secular rituals perfectly in tune with the preoccupations of contemporary westerners.

As De Michelis notes in the concluding chapter of her study, Iyengar yoga sessions are rituals even in the technical sense of the word. By reading a yoga session through the theoretical lens provided by Arnold van Gennep's well-known model of ritual, a characteristic structure appears. As practitioners enter the yoga hall, they separate themselves from the world around them. A mat marks off a ritual space. As they perform the various *āsanas*, they will enter a state of deepening concentration. Once the more strenuous series of postures are completed, it is time to lie completely still for a session of guided relaxation. The liminality of this stage is further accentuated by the Sanskrit terminology: what to an outsider looks like "doing nothing", is emically understood as performing a *śavāsana* or corpse posture. After a brief re-emergence phase, practitioners are ready to return to the everyday world, filled with a new sense of vitality.

*A History of Modern Yoga* is a finely crafted and well written study, which will appeal to scholars working with various facets of contemporary religion. While western appropriations of Eastern religious concepts have been increasingly documented in recent years, the author's research gives readers an unusual glimpse into the appropriation by Eastern gurus of western religious ideals. In brief, Elizabeth De Michelis is to be congratulated on having made a substantial contribution to a topical field of study.

Olav Hammer