

**Spiritual Authenticity in a Secular Context:
How Modern Postural Yoga is Searching for Legitimacy in All the
Wrong Places**

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Abstract: This paper examines the historical origins and spiritual context of contemporary yoga practice in the West. In an attempt to assess the spiritual significance of this somatic practice, this essay explores the way in which both critics and promoters of postural yoga frame their arguments for the value of contemporary yoga practice by showing either its disconnect from, or homogeneity with ancient Hindu traditions. By tracing the evolution of yogic practice from its scriptural origins to its contemporary manifestations, this paper argues that yoga has never been a static or perfectly defined entity. Rather, yogic practice has a long history of being re-interpreted to meet the specific spiritual needs of practitioners. Modern Postural Yoga (MPY) represents a continuation of this tradition of adaptation. Rather than being an inadequate replication of an ancient tradition, I argue that MPY is a distinctly modern practice that has been transformed to fit the contemporary spiritual needs of a secularizing and body-conscious Western society.

Key Terms: yoga; Modern Postural Yoga; New Age spirituality; physical culture; ancient Hinduism; spiritual legitimacy; cultural appropriation

Introduction: The Search for Authenticity

In the contemporary world, yoga has become a ubiquitous phenomenon. Classes and studios have sprung up in a wide variety of manifestations, from regular sessions in high-school gym classes to posh studios in cosmopolitan centres. A 2012 survey done by *Yoga Journal* estimates that approximately 20.4 million Americans regularly practice yoga, (roughly 8.7% of the adult population), while another 44% of the population, describe themselves as “aspirational yogis,” or people who are very interested in pursuing yogic practice (*Yoga in America study 2012, 2013*). Yet, as yoga becomes increasingly popular, it also becomes ever more important to analyze the curious tension that rests at the core of yogic

practice. One must negotiate the territory between contemporary yoga's somatic expression (that is, the bodily performance of postural yoga) in consumer societies, which presents yoga as a spiritual practice cum fitness regimen, and yoga's meditative and esoteric religious origins. It is only through developing a contextual understanding of contemporary postural yoga that one will be able to assess its value as a modern spiritual pursuit.

Many yoga classes and studios aim to cultivate an aura of spiritual authenticity around their practice by shrouding it in a form of New-Age theory that is inspired by Hindu religious teachings. Often instructors will cite ancient Hindu texts such as the *Bhagavad Gītā* or Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras* as the basis for their teachings, or choose to punctuate their classes with the chanting of sacred Sanskrit mantras such as the "Aum" or "Om," or by simply closing the class with a prayer or a "Namaste." However, while yoga instructors preach about the superiority of the spirit over the physical self, or the abolishment of material concerns in aim of higher metaphysical ones, nearly 80% of contemporary American practitioners describe the motivation for their practice in terms of physical concerns of fitness, weight loss, and flexibility (Yoga in America study 2012, 2013).

These polarities have sparked an obvious debate around the spiritual merits of Modern Postural Yoga (MPY). MPY is a term coined by De Michelis in *A History of Modern Yoga: Patañjali and Western Esotericism* (2004) to describe the popular contemporary style of yoga that focuses almost entirely on postures and breath control. Some groups, like *The Hindu American Foundation* in their "Take Back Yoga" campaign, assert that MPY is a practice stolen from Hinduism and perverted by Western consumer capitalism; thus, the resulting claim is that yoga has lost all religious legitimacy in its popular form (Shukla, 2012). On the other hand, there are also many non-Hindus who vehemently throw themselves into a yoga practice, touting its ability to spark moments of spiritual clarity and metaphysical self-realization, where one encounters a form of a spiritual self that is normally hidden from plain view. The most interesting thing about these dichotomized perceptions of Modern Postural Yoga is that they both frame the argument for proving or disproving MPY's spiritual legitimacy by showing either its homogeneity with, or disconnect from, ancient Hindu practices, traditions, and texts.

However, focusing solely upon an ancient and idyllic view of yoga does not allow one to properly assess the merits of the contemporary yoga phenomenon. Yogic practice is not a static and ahistorical religious entity, nor does it have a specifically delineated definition, or single ancient

source. It is a tradition that has been transmitted through various cultural and religious groups, and, as it lacks any central authority, has a long history of reinterpretation and redefinition to serve the disparate needs of these milieus. MPY is yet another re-interpretation of the yogic tradition that has been constructed both by and for the modern Western world. It is a spiritual and somatic practice which caters to the modern Western desire for a form of spirituality outside the confines of traditional religion, while simultaneously embodying the Western world's obsessive association of the physical body with one's spiritual state.

This paper will begin by tracing the historical development of yogic practice, from its ancient sources to its most modern manifestations. The section "Scriptural Sources & The Origins of Systematic *Āsanas*" briefly outlines yoga's dynamic past in order to emphasize both the fluidity of the tradition, as well as the inconsistencies between Modern Postural Yoga and the ancient traditions from which it claims to originate. "The Philosophical Origins of Neo-Vedāntic Yoga" brings yoga into the modern era by analysing the cultural trends that transformed yogic philosophy into a school of thought that was much more syncretic with modern Western scientific and philosophical ideas. This section unveils the roots of contemporary trends that seek to both define what "real" yoga is and to assess the value of yogic practice by connecting it to ancient sources.

"India's Encounter with the International Physical Culture Movement & The Creation of the Modern Yoga Class" focuses on how *āsanas* were re-introduced into modern yoga practices in a way that stripped them of their more contentious religious aspects. This section traces how *Āsanas* were transformed from an esoteric practice into a form of holistic physical exercise that was again designed to align with modern Western conceptions of the self, spirituality, and physical fitness. This section should be considered in conjunction with "An Equivalent Practice," which looks at a Protestant physical culture regimen that existed in Europe and America before the importation of MPY. These two sections highlight that MPY does not represent a distinctly Hindu tradition. Rather, the form of postural exercise that we most often recognize today as "yoga" is a practice that has its roots as much in a modern Protestant physical culture trend, as it does in ancient Hinduism.

Finally, the section "The Western Body & Postural Yoga as a Spiritual Practice" assesses the relationship between modern Western spirituality, and our embodied selves. This section argues that Modern Postural Yoga still induces a legitimate and valuable spiritual experience in practitioners,

even if it is not the kind of experience that was envisioned by ancient Hindu yogis. Thus, while MPY is wholly consistent with the historical pattern of re-interpretation that marks yoga's development, framing MPY's spiritual legitimacy through its connection to ancient Hinduism may be the wrong way to assess the merits of this spiritual practice.

Scriptural Sources and the Origins of Systematic *Āsanas*

There are a multitude of differing views about what constitutes a genuine yoga practice. Semantically, there is not even a singular definition for the word "yoga." "Yoga" has one of the broadest ranges of meanings in the entire Sanskrit lexicon. While the root "yuj" is literally translated as "to join," "to add to," or "to attach," "yoga" has a plethora of possible interpretations (White, 2012). White (2012) accumulated a list of these translations in his article "Yoga: Brief History of an Idea," which covers topics as disparate as the act of yoking an animal, a gathering of stars or a constellation, the act of mixing together various substances, a strategy, an endeavour, a union, an arrangement, zeal, diligence, and discipline, and this is only a short excerpt from his vast list. On top of this wide range of possible interpretations, yogic practice has never been organized around a central authority. Historically, once yoga became understood as a path, method, or theory, it became a collection of multifarious teachings that were passed through various teachers and gurus. This allowed yogic praxis and theory to remain thoroughly de-centralized, and has allowed people to interpret yoga as they please for thousands of years (De Michelis, 2008). Since contemporary yoga gurus and practitioners point toward ancient Hindu texts as their sources of legitimacy, it is necessary to begin with these sources in order to appreciate the full scope of yoga's transformation from a meditative religious practice into a spiritually inclined physical regimen. The earliest recorded reference to "yoga" was in the *Rg Veda*, written around the 15th century BCE. Here yoga was understood as the yoke placed on an animal to attach it to a chariot during wartime (White, 2012). It wasn't until the 3rd century BCE that the earliest systematic account of yoga was recorded in the *Kaṭhaka Upaniṣad*. In this text, Yama, the god of death, reveals "the entire yoga regimen" to a young ascetic, presenting it as a way to overcome death and leave the world of joy and sorrow behind (Singleton, 2010). Again, the idea of yoga as a yoke is evoked, but this time, metaphorically, as the relationship between the self, body and intellect, compared to a rider, chariot and charioteer (White 2012).

The *Bhagavad Gītā* of the *Mahābhārata* is often considered a seminal yogic text. Dated between 200 BCE to 400 CE, this Indian war epic describes “yoga” as a vehicle through which one can be carried up towards the heavens and the Gods (White, 2012). It also describes the practices of the yogins of the day, which include a heavy emphasis on renunciation, breath control, and asceticism. The *Bhagavad Gītā* describes a yogin as one who is “Firm, motionless, holding body, head and neck in a straight line, focusing on the tip of his own nose, not looking around him, tranquil, free from fear, locked in the vow of chastity, controlling his mind” (6.13-14). The image presented here is of an intense religious asceticism, which can elevate the practitioner towards enlightenment.

While these texts developed the conception of yoga as a path that leads to metaphysical rewards, it is Patañjali’s *Yoga Sūtras*, which became the definitive text on yogic theory and praxis. The primary commentator on the text, Vyāsa, hailed the *Yoga Sūtras* as the single most authoritative text on yoga, and many scholars consider Patañjali to be one of the greatest Hindu expounders of yoga (Bryant, 2009). While the *Yoga Sūtras* draw heavily upon the philosophy of earlier Hindu texts (most notably the *Sāṃkhya* philosophy of the *Upaniṣads*), this text was also influenced by coeval Buddhist and Jain sources (White, 2012). Patañjali’s first limb of yoga, the *yamas*, lists five abstinences that are identical to the five vows of Jainism, while Vyāsa points out that many of the *samādhi* (meditation) techniques used by Patañjali in the *Yoga Sūtras* are borrowed directly from Buddhist schools who were developing yogic theories at the time, such as the *Yogācāra* (“yoga practice” school) (White, 2012). Therefore, even one of the most definitive sources on Hindu yogic theory and praxis was the result of religious and philosophical exchange between a multitude of diverse groups.

While the *Yoga Sūtras* is the most commonly cited ancient yogic source by modern aspirants, most confine their understanding solely to the *aṣṭāṅga*, or “practice” section of the *Sūtras*, while eschewing the rest of Patañjali’s philosophical and metaphysical claims (Singleton, 2010). The *aṣṭāṅga* section runs from verses 2.29 to 3.8, and outlines the “Eight Limbs of Yoga,” which present a systematic method for yogic praxis. The third limb, *āsana*, is the one most heavily emphasized in Modern Postural Yoga. Patañjali himself only dedicates three verses (eight Sanskrit words), or less than 1% of the entire *Yoga Sūtras* to the *āsanas*, and while contemporary practitioners understand *āsana* to mean “posture,” it is more literally translated as “to sit down” (Bryant, 2009). Verses 2.46 – 2.48 claim

“*āsanas* should be steady and comfortable” to enable an individual to be relaxed enough to become absorbed “in the infinite.” Vyāsa explains that by mastering *āsanas*, one “loses all awareness of the sensations of the body,” (Bryant, 2009, p. 286) and he lists twelve postures that one can use to engage in yogic practice; eleven of which are ways of sitting comfortably for long periods of time (Bryant, 2009). From this, we can deduce that the purpose of *āsana* as lined out in the *Yoga Sūtras* is simply to allow the meditating individual to sit comfortably and firmly during seated meditation, and to train the body so that it does not disturb the meditating mind. This presents us with a very different perception of the purpose of *āsanas* than the physical fitness regimen that they are presented as in MPY. Thus, one thing that becomes obvious when looking at yoga’s foundational texts is how drastically different classical yoga seems from contemporary manifestations. If one truly sought to follow an authentic yoga practice, would it entail yoking oneself to a chariot, or living a life of intense ascetic renunciation? References to the *āsanas* that make up the bulk of any MPY class are scarce, and when it is mentioned, *āsana* practice seems to be regarded only as an enabler for long sessions of seated meditation. So, one may wonder, where did the assortment of postures that are characteristic of today’s contemporary yoga classes come from?

Some modern practitioners avow to follow a type of *Haṭha* yoga (“yoga of forceful exertion”), which has its roots in the 10th and 11th centuries. *Haṭha* yoga was initially practiced by religious mystics in Northern India, and was influenced by contemporaneous tantric traditions. Tantric understandings of “yoga” interpreted the word as “union,” and their practice became focused upon an individual’s union with the divine (Singleton, 2010). *Haṭha* practices were often tantric in nature; most involved ritualized somatic practices, and emphasized the role of *āsana* and *prāṇāyāma* (breath control), as a way to heat the body and cultivate the desired flow of the *Kuṇḍalinī* sexual energy (Singleton, 2010). The goal of these practices was to eventually transform the *Kuṇḍalinī* into a nectar of supernatural powers and immortality, which one drank internally from the inside of one’s own head (White, 2012). In order to gain control of bodily systems, *Haṭha* practice revolved around an investigation into the mystical physiological body of the person. *Haṭha* presumed that humans had a “subtle body,” with *nadis* and *chakras*, through which human energies were supposed to flow. This tradition had much in common with contemporaneous Buddhist practices in the region: both sought to map the spiritual body of the person in an attempt to transcend the normal mortal

boundaries of the physical human body (Lieberman, 2008). Again, this indicates a certain amount of informational exchange between religious traditions in the formation of yogic practice (Lieberman, 2008; White, 2012).

Haṭha texts were the first to outline lengthy descriptions of *āsanas* that one could perform to cultivate these supernatural powers. The *Gheranda Samhita* describes thirty-two *āsanas* designed to control the *nadis*, but which are only to be performed after six ritual purifications (which include cleaning the stomach by swallowing a large cloth, an enema, and staring at a candle until ones eyes water) (Singleton, 2010). The *Siva Samhita* mentions the existence of eighty-four *āsanas*, but only describes four seated ones in detail, and the *Haṭhayogapradīpikā* (approx. 15th century), outlines fifteen *āsanas*, which are accredited with specific medical and curative properties such as the elimination of poisons (Singleton, 2010).

Though we begin to see references to the *āsana* practice that has become so emblematic of MPY in the *Haṭha* yoga tradition, its form and function is still very different from contemporary practice. *Haṭha āsana* is much more supernatural than any mainstream MPY class, and involves a multitude of elaborate rituals and practices that didn't carry over into MPY. While the *Haṭha* yoga tradition did introduce systematic *āsanas* into Hinduism, the teachings were vehemently esoteric in nature, and there was a belief that *āsanas* would be of no use, or were potentially even dangerous, if they were not used in co-ordination with the other teachings.

This quick glance at the ancient origins of yoga presents an image of a philosophical and religious system that has undergone a gradual process of refinement and development as it aims to bring the practitioner closer to enlightenment. These sources highlight the long history of reinterpreting the idea of yoga to meet the needs of a specific group or practitioner. Yogic praxis and theory have never existed in a vacuum; even Pātañjali's canonical *Yoga Sūtras* was developed through the active exchange of ideas between religious groups. The *Haṭha* tradition is marked by a drastic break from the yoga of its predecessors, again showing us how yoga is a dynamic tradition that defies any singular definition. While the *Haṭha* tradition presents us with the origins of systematic *āsanas*, the yoga of the 11th century is still drastically different then contemporary MPY. Therefore, what follows will bridge this gap, showing how yogic practice was transformed in the modern era into a spiritual and somatic practice with broad appeal for a Western audience.

The Philosophical Origins of Neo-Vedāntic Yoga

The inclination to equate the value of yogic practice with its connection to ancient Hinduism seen in discourse around MPY is not a new trope. In actuality, it represents a residual colonial legacy from the 17th century, when British colonialists romanticized an Indian past in which the philosophical and rational aspects of yoga were thought to have reigned supreme (De Michelis, 2004). This “Golden Age” was contrasted with a supposed modern Indian degeneracy, and colonial rule was often justified as an attempt to return to this idyllic state (Diem & Lewis, 1992). However, in the late 18th century, Indian nationalists began to reverse this narrative. By adopting the myth of an intellectual Hindu Golden Age, they too praised the same rational and philosophical qualities of Hinduism that the colonialists did, but they blamed colonial occupation for the supposed state of modern Indian degeneracy (Diem & Lewis, 1992). Yet, these Indian nationalists still sought to counter colonial accusations of Hindu backwardness by showing Indian philosophy’s affinity with Christian thought, modern science and modern psychology (De Michelis, 2004).

A group of Bengali Indians called the *Brahmo Samaj* were especially influential during this period. They developed the philosophical and ideological Neo-Vedānta movement by re-interpreting traditional Hindu concepts in light of the Western ideas that the Bengali elite were educated in (De Michelis, 2004). The *Brahmo Samaj* promoted its interpretation as the “pure form” of Hinduism, and their re-interpretations sought to reject Orthodox Hinduism by abolishing the caste system, overthrowing the religious authority of the *Brahmins* and revealed scripture, raising the status of women, and redefining karma and rebirth along evolutionary lines (De Michelis, 2004). These ideas were derived from Protestantism’s emphasis on human equality and the disbanding of spiritual hierarchy, as well as modern scientific understanding. The result of this synthesis of Hinduism with scientific and Christian ideas was the development of a theory of yoga practice that was congruent with Western ideals and concepts, and was thus much more broadly appealing to individuals in the Western world.

The infamous “Hindu Missionary to the West,” Swami Vivekananda, brought this Neo-Vedāntic understanding of Hinduism to Western Europe and America. A former member of the *Brahmo Samaj*, his publication of *Raja Yoga* in 1896 gave way to the “Yoga Renaissance” by again showing how Hindu ideas could be understood along Western scientific and philosophical lines. When Vivekananda came to America in the 19th century, he tailored his message of yoga and Hinduism to appeal to modern

scientific, psychological, and utilitarian ideas in a way that allowed his message to “resonat[e] with psychological and philosophical tendencies already present in [Western] culture from as early as 1800” (Dazey, 2005, p. 423). Primarily, Vivekananda aligned his message with the testable values of the scientific method. Not only did he conflate the Hindu belief in *moksa* with Darwinian evolutionary theories by teaching that life is a process towards reaching our potential, and that the “full evolution of the self results in the liberation of the soul,” (De Michelis, 2004, p. 167), but he also disregarded Sāṃkhya’s doctrinal teachings about the essentially un-testable truths of revelation, asserting that yogic method was an empirical and “scientific” way to experience the truths of existence (De Michelis, 2004; Vivekananda 1896/1972).

Religious Studies scholar Harold Coward (2005) describes the culture of 19th and 20th century America as “an age of swift technological growth, secularization and utilitarianism, [where] people wanted techniques to achieve immediate practical and rational/scientific goals” (p. 55). People sought to apply these same standards to their religious lives and Vivekananda provided a set of codified techniques, which he described as yoga, to do precisely that (Coward, 2005). Vivekananda wrote four different yoga manuals that would appeal to what he considered the four personality types of practitioners. *Raja Yoga*, *Bhakti Yoga*, *Jñāna Yoga*, and *Karma Yoga* each outline a set of yogic practices and theories designed to fit the spiritual needs of the individual, and all purport to lead to the universal truth of “yoga.” Vivekananda (1896/1972) asserted that

The teachers of the science of Yoga, therefore, declare that religion is not only based upon the experience of ancient times, but that no man can be religious until he has had the same perceptions himself. Yoga is the Science that teaches us how to get to these perceptions. (p. 127)

Vivekananda’s yoga appealed to many modern Western religious seekers, as it offered systematic methods of salvation and spiritual growth that their own traditions seemed to lack (Dazey, 2005). Vivekananda was the first to treat the *aśṭāṅga* section as the cornerstone of the *Yoga Sūtras*, and thus, his method appealed to a long-standing “self-help” ethic that was present in Protestant culture (Dazey, 2005). Vivekananda also re-interpreted the concept of “*Brahma- Jñāna*” (God-Knowledge, or God Realization) from the canonical Hindu texts the *Vedas*, to parallel the Self-realization made possible by practicing yoga, concluding that through yoga practice, one

could come to know oneself, and simultaneously, come to know God as well (Dazey, 2005).

These Neo-*Vedāntic* conceptions of yoga are still present in much contemporary practice. Like Vivekananda, most modern yoga classes promote the superiority of empirical knowledge over intellectual understanding, and use this theory to explain why their philosophical and doctrinal teachings are so meagre (De Michelis, 2004). So too does MPY treat yoga as a practice that straddles between religion and science, as often instructors will tout the scientific benefits of stress reduction, relaxation, and physical activity in between references to yoga's ancient religious roots (De Michelis, 2004). As De Michelis (2004) notes in *A History of Modern Yoga*, this notion of Self-realization, which focuses on the individual's ability to experience a previously hidden form of his/her own spiritual truth, also resonated with the emerging New-Age movement, which has a strong affinity with MPY.

With Vivekananda, we again see a process of picking, choosing, and re-interpreting the yogic tradition to suit the needs of his message. For example, he staunchly discredited the physical practices of *Haṭha* yoga, asserting that they were mere superstitions aimed at longevity and physical perfection, which “do not lead to much spiritual growth,” (Vivekananda, 1896/1972, p. 138), but he still integrated *Haṭha* yoga methodology and theory into *Raja Yoga's prāṇāyāma* practices (Vivekananda, 1896/1972). This parallels the 17th and 18th century discourses around the value of Hinduism's yogic practices, which were marked by a process of idealizing certain aspects of the tradition while condemning others. This process began to fashion the discourse around what is considered “real” yoga, a tenacious legacy that persists into the 21st century.

India's Encounter with the International Physical Culture Movement and the Creation of the Modern Yoga Class

The 19th century saw the rise of an unprecedented enthusiasm for athletic and gymnastic disciplines across Western Europe and America (Singleton, 2010). The “International Physical Culture Movement” (p. 82) was marked by the conflation of physical fitness with internal strength of character and morality, and eventually one's physical body became elevated to a position of social and spiritual responsibility (Singleton, 2010; Griffith 2004). This era also saw the rise of “Muscular Christianity” and the YMCA, both of which presented the cultivation of a triadic “body-mind-spirit” model of the human being as a method of moral reform (Singleton, 2010).

Within this global context the state of bodies became not just a personal, but also a national obsession, as the bodies of citizens were seen as potent symbols of cultural politics, and the strength of a nation (Singleton 2010). In Britain, physical education, callisthenics, and gymnastic exercises became a regular component of most public and government institutions (Singleton, 2010). This left a legacy that would also be carried over to colonial India in a way that drastically altered modern yoga practices.

A specific form of “medical gymnastics” from Sweden became particularly influential during this era. Yoga Scholar Mark Singleton (2010) has analyzed this set of holistic exercises created by Pehr Henrik Ling in the 19th century, and has noted the stark similarities between Ling’s routine and Modern Postural Yoga. Ling’s regime was touted for its therapeutic and curative properties, as well as its ability to prevent disease, increase flexibility, tone muscles and develop the mind, body, and spirit simultaneously (Singleton, 2010). Singleton (2010) notes the stark similarity between the flowing sequences of postures lined out in Ling’s 19th century gymnastic manuals, and the poses and movements of a modern *āsana* class. Common poses like *Adho mukha śvānāsana* (down-ward facing dog), *Utthita Padangsthāsana* (standing extended leg stretch), *Adho Mukha Vrksāsana* (hand stand), and *Aekpādprasarnāsana*, (equestrian pose), are all among a list of MPY *āsanas* that have indistinguishable parallels in 19th century gymnastic manuals such as Ling’s (Singleton, 2010).

While the similarities between the poses of medical gymnastic regimens and modern yoga classes can be attributed to the limited postural possibilities of the human body, it is interesting to note the way in which such practices were actually imported to India. An aerobic form of medical gymnastics eventually became the official training program of British public institutions, and because of the anglicized schooling system and military service in India at the time, these exercises and the triadic version of the self that they promoted quickly became a part of British Indian culture (Singleton, 2010). Due to the ethos surrounding the moral benefits of physical culture, British authorities viewed the development of an Indian physical culture as a way to lift Indians from the purported state of degeneracy that the British saw them in (Singleton, 2010). H.C. Buck, the head of the YMCA, set up schools for Indian physical directors, with the specific goal of designing somatic programs to promote the moralistic values of Western physical culture, while simultaneously appealing to an Indian audience (Singleton, 2010). Anglophone directors found the medium

they were looking for in earlier *Haṭha* yoga traditions. By drastically simplifying *āsana* to a series of physical poses, *āsana* became a system of health and fitness that could be performed without any expensive equipment (Singleton, 2010). Thus, other aspects vital to *Haṭha* yoga practice, including the more esoteric and mystical practices of the *mudras* and purifications were either pushed to the outskirts of the practice, or eliminated entirely (Singleton, 2010). As Singleton (2010) has noted, Anglophone yoga creators “grafted elements of modern physical culture onto *Haṭha* yoga orthopraxy and excised the parts that didn’t align with emerging health and fitness discourse” (p. 7). Thus, *āsanas* were not revived to fulfil ancient spiritual needs, but rather they were stripped of their more contentious religious aspects and re-constructed as a form of gymnastics that would align with the goals and values of Western physical culture. This process saw the transfer of the health benefits associated with medical gymnastics onto *āsana* practice, and, as an Indianized form of European gymnastics, postural yoga became an integral component of both the Indian YMCA’s fitness programmes, as well as those of the British military and public education systems in India (Singleton, 2010).

It was not long until an Indian nationalist movement inspired by Neo-*Vedānta* ideologies arose to reclaim *āsana* practice, and began to promote the postural yoga system constructed by the British as “an inferior imitation of the wholly perfected system of the ancient Hindu yogins” (p.126). It was within this context that Swami Kuvalyananda and Shri Yogendra (and Sri Aurobindo and his Pondicherry, Ashram, to a lesser extent) are believed to have “invented” Modern Postural Yoga at their ashrams in Bombay in 1918 (Alter, 2006). Once again, they re-defined what yoga “really is” while carving out the MPY that dominates today. Just like the Indian nationalists in the 18th century who tried to redeem the philosophical aspects of the Hindu yogic tradition by showing its affinity with Western thought, these men tried to reclaim *Haṭha* yoga’s spiritual physiology, while simultaneously asserting its usefulness as a way to sculpt “beautiful bodies” (Singleton, 2010, p. 127). Here again we see an active exchange between Hindu and colonial culture that helped transform yoga into a Western-friendly spiritual and somatic regimen.

Kuvalyananda, Yogendra, and Aurobindo all framed *āsana* practice in the triadic “mind-body-spirit” understanding of the person, asserting the unity of the body and soul, and thus that total perfection of a person’s inner state also requires perfection of the body (Alter, 2006). Alter (2006) has called this understanding of the individual “indicative of the logic of

modernity” (p. 767), as modern society was becoming increasingly obsessed with the perfectibility of the spiritual and physical self. Such notions are crucially important to the widespread appeal of MPY. Vivekananda was the first to promote yoga as a systematic path towards spiritual perfection in the modern context. Appealing to the rational utilitarianism of modern Western societies Vivekananda outlined his yogic regimen as an empirical and scientific method for gaining this desired state. Indian gurus like Kuvalyananda, Yogendra, and Aurobindo, who sought to reclaim āsana practice from its Anglophone gymnastic manifestation, continued this trend of reinterpreting the practice along modern lines. Once the physical body began to be conflated with one's spiritual state, *āsana* became re-incorporated into contemporary yoga practice in a way that stripped it of its more contentious religious aspects, transforming it into a form of holistic gymnastic exercises that aligned with contemporary trends in physical culture.

An Equivalent Practice

When one considers the popularity of MPY in America, it is important to note that in the early 20th century, there already existed a phenomenon that looked remarkably similar to MPY before systematic *āsana* practice was imported to the country. “Harmonial Gymnastics” was a regimen that dominated women’s physical culture during the 1920’s and 30’s. Comprised of roughly the same demographic as a contemporary yoga class (a 2012 *Yoga Journal* survey reported that 82.2% of American practitioners are women), these classes performed what Mark Singleton (2010) has labelled a kind of “proto-flow” yoga (p.143). They consisted of a combination of calisthenics, relaxation and respiration exercises, with flowing, “dance-like” (Singleton, 2010, p.143) movements between various postures, all imbued with a heavy aura of spirituality (Singleton, 2010). Genevieve Stebbins and Annie Payson Call were the founding figures of this “spiritual stretching” (p.143) regimen, and promoted it as a kind of religious practice that could be performed outside of the church (Singleton, 2010). Through prayer, deep breathing practices, and an acute emphasis on both relaxation and physical awareness, this movement consciously cultivated a somatic spiritual experience. Thus, before the development of Western MPY, and without any overt association to *āsana* or any other Hindu practice (in fact, the spirituality cultivated was of a specifically Protestant type), there was already a successfully established female physical culture that focused on postures, breath control, relaxation and

stretching, as a form of alternative religiosity in the West. Singleton (2010) has even suggested that this women's "stretch and relax" regimen created a niche market in Europe and America that MPY was eventually able to satiate (p. 147). Singleton's research into this cultural phenomenon is significant because it helps solidify the argument that MPY is not exclusively a practice stolen from Hinduism and perverted by Western society (see Shukla 2012) because holistic spiritual stretching regimens are as much a part of modern Protestant culture as they are of ancient Hinduism. In fact, MPY represents both a transformation, and a synthesis of these two cultures. Not only does this help explain MPY's widespread popularity, but it also helps us understand the way that contemporary spiritual trends often resist binary descriptions such as East vs. West, or ancient vs. modern. MPY represents an amalgamation of cross-cultural spiritual trends, and its complex origins defy such a simple mode of classification.

The Western Body and Postural Yoga as a Spiritual Practice

In the Western world the physical body has long been perceived as a reflection of the spiritual state of an individual. According to Max Weber's (1905/2003) sociological theory, it was the Protestant Reformation that transformed the image of a healthy, sober, and hard-working individual into an ideal of spiritual purity. Weber (1905/2003) argued that this led to the physical condition of one's body becoming viewed as an external reflection of the state of their soul. Indeed, this conflation of the physical and spiritual self carried over into the modern age in the above discussion of the International Physical Culture Movement of the 19th century. Scholar of American religion Marie Griffith (2004) has argued that Western body image obsessions relate to the historical way that Europeans and Americans "have conceptualized, enacted and practised the relationship between body and soul" (p. 4). Griffith (2004) has further argued that our contemporary "rigorous and near-compulsory standards" (p.7) of fitness and beauty are secularized manifestations of this Protestant idea about our physical bodies being suggestive of our inner spirit.

Over the past few hundred years, it has become a normative perception within Western culture that the body is the primary medium for "pushing the soul along the path to redemption" (Griffith, 2004, n.p.). It is through this logic that the image of a slim, flexible, and contorted "Yoga-Body," (Singleton, 2010) has come to represent the spiritual possibility of a person. The advancement of print images was vital to postural yoga's popular

appropriation in the West, because, as Singleton (2010) has noted, “Postural yoga was constructed, popularized and made possible within the visual context” (p. 165). The image of this perfected Yoga-Body presents the “irresistible commodity” (Singleton, 2010, p. 129) of a holistic, calm, self-assured, and perfectible self. Thus, just as Vivekananda professed that his yoga regimen was the scientific and empirical way to access the universal truths of human consciousness, contemporary practitioners are led to believe that this perfect form of self can be attained through the spiritual and physical capacity that MPY purports to cultivate.

However, the current Western obsession with yoga as a spiritual pursuit goes beyond the intricate entanglement of conceptions of spirituality and physicality in the West. Despite the fact that MPY’s roots are as much within Protestant physical culture trends as ancient Hindu practices, the somatic practice of MPY still produces a genuine spiritual experience that fits within a contemporary secular context. A plethora of psychologists, sociologists, and evolutionary biologists (such as C. G. Jung, R. Bellah, W. C. Smith, S.C. Morris, S. Sanderson, J. Bering and E.O. Wilson, among many others) have long argued that most people have a basic propensity towards spiritual inclination, of which organized religion is a manifestation. Yet one overt mark of modernization in the Western world is the popular transition from traditional religious institutions toward newer, more liberal forms of spirituality. A greater level of individual spiritual freedom and the decline of official religious authorities mark this secularization process. When considered in conjunction with increased exposure to foreign ideas and beliefs, we see a trend emerging in the modern world where individuals pick and choose their own various spiritual particulars in order to create a system of “ultimate” significance for themselves (De Michelis, 2008).

Therefore, part of understanding yoga’s massive success in the West is understanding the ethos of spirituality that distinguishes it from a simple physical regimen. There can be no denying that MPY yoga downplays the transcendent goals of older traditions. As iterated earlier, in an attempt to make yoga more palatable for modern Westerners, many of the most overt mystical or religious aspects of the practice have been discarded. However, in almost every contemporary class, whether through décor, music, chanting of a certain mantra, the philosophical teachings of the instructor, or even just the resting the hands in prayer pose, there is almost always the suggestion that *something* spiritual is going on.

Scholar Benjamin Richard Smith (2007) studied the somatic practice of MPY in an attempt to de-mystify the spiritual experience of a yoga class.

He asserted that while popular culture most often emphasizes the material benefits of *āsanas*, such as weight loss, or increased flexibility and strength, the reason that so many Western practitioners throw themselves into a yoga regimen is because the somatic experience induces a spiritual moment of self-realization (Smith, 2007). This experience is characterised by an individual's confrontation with their embodied self in which he or she is suddenly exposed to an aspect of their being that has been previously hidden from plain view (Smith, 2007). It is no surprise that MPY acts as a sort of "meditation in action" where the practicing individual must remain acutely aware of a multitude of minute details: tempo, breath control, extensions, directions, orders of sequences, where to fix one's gaze, and the precise physical alignment of the body within a pose (down to the placement of each individual toe) (Nevrin, 2008). However, as Smith notes, such an acute awareness of one's own physical body is something immensely foreign to many Westerners. Smith (2007) asserts that Western society lacks any bodily self-awareness, unless the body is not doing what one wants it to. While we obsess over the appearance of the body, we rarely notice how it feels or functions. In a Modern Postural Yoga class, this bodily approach is vehemently countered; instead, one is encouraged to cultivate *full* bodily awareness by acknowledging every sensation within the body, no matter how minute, insignificant, or uncomfortable (Smith, 2007). This focus on the body usually generates an intense and unknown encounter with the embodied self, which often results in a spiritual moment of self-realization (Smith, 2007):

Western practitioners... do not appear to be simply mimicking practices drawn from another 'culture.' Rather, they seem to be successfully engaging in a set of supposedly exogenous bodily techniques and modes of somatic attention that exceed 'mere' gymnastics, and instead become a mode of self-inquiry and self-encounter. (p. 40)

One should also note that there are other spiritual aspects of a yoga class that can benefit the practitioner. The environment often cultivates a sense of shared experience, belonging, and communal relation. As Nevrin (2008) points out, these communal feelings, plus the way that a change in body performance can alleviate symptoms of depression and boost health, often empowering the practitioner in ways that are similar to institutionalized forms of religion.

Conclusion

Both supporters and critics of MPY persistently imply that somehow the practice lacks virtue or meaning if it is not connected back to ancient sources. Nearly every contemporary yoga class is punctuated by this theme: the Sanskrit names for the poses, the chanting of *Aum*, or other mantras, the closing of class with a prayer or a “*Namaste*,” and the various references to Hindu philosophical thought and ancient texts, are all indicative of this desire to prove the legitimacy of the practice by linking it back to ancient Hinduism. Yet, as has been explored, these teachings are rarely ever wholly consistent or truthful to their origins. Any given class is likely to preach a combination of a *Haṭha* physiology that ignores vital religious conceptions about the cultivation of supernatural powers or immortality, a *Vedantic* philosophical framework that discredits physicality while simultaneously promoting the cultivation of a slim and strong physical body, and a Patañjalian yoga that ignores nearly the entirety of the teachings of the *Yoga Sūtras*, except for those contained within the *aṣṭāṅga* section. While many critics of Modern Postural Yoga argue that this is precisely the reason that MPY represents a perversion of a sacred and ancient tradition, this argument is not entirely accurate either. Rather, yoga praxis and theory have undergone many rounds of re-interpretation to meet the spiritual needs and desires of various groups over the past few thousand years. Since the 18th century, yoga’s transformations have been most notably distinguished by a repeated pattern of Indian teachers reconciling the ideals of Western modernity with an idyllic view of their Hindu tradition. Yoga teachers like Swami Vivekananda purposefully constructed a theory of yoga that was designed to appeal to a Western audience, while other gurus, like Swami Kovalyananda and Shri Yogendra, promulgated a form of yoga that was designed to synthesize modern Western philosophical, spiritual, and physical ideals with ancient Hindu practices.

Furthermore, by looking at the spiritual and somatic practices that were developing in the West around the same time as the creation of MPY, we see that the secularizing and body-image obsessed Western world had already begun to form practices which looked remarkably similar to contemporary MPY. The conflation of one’s spiritual state with the physical body is an idea with distinctly Protestant origins; indeed, this idea had already been transformed into holistic regimens that cultivated the mind-body-spirit triad long before the creation of Modern Postural Yoga. Thus, we can see how contemporary postural yoga practices smoothly transitioned

into the Western mainstream because they meshed so seamlessly with modern physical and spiritual trends.

Modern Postural Yoga does not derive its spiritual integrity from its connection to ancient Hindu sources. It is a definitely modern regimen, which provides a very real avenue to pursue a basic human spiritual need within a secular context. In a world of de-institutionalized religion, where physical regimens have also become spiritual regimens, Modern Postural Yoga is a somatic practice that plays an important role in many an individual's spiritual well being. While the references to ancient Hinduism are not always accurate or consistent, the religious aura that surrounds MPY is a necessary feature in the cultivation of an environment that induces such a spiritual experience. In the end, MPY provides practitioners with a unique spiritual experience that is the result of various cultural syntheses and many rounds of historical reinterpretation. This process has formulated a practice that is both spiritual and somatic, as well as Eastern and Western. Perhaps most importantly, this process has resulted in a regimen that is acutely capable of meeting the modern spiritual needs of a secularizing society.

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