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Yoga in the Modern World: The Search for the “Authentic” Practice

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Introduction

Since its early twentieth century debut into Western consciousness, yoga has quickly gained widespread appeal, resonating in the minds of the health-conscious, freedom-seeking American public. Considered to be the “spiritual capital” with which India hoped to garner material and financial support from the West, yoga was originally presented by its Eastern disseminators as “an antidote to the stresses of modern, urban, industrial life” and “a way to reconnect with the spiritual world” without having to compromise the “productive capitalist base upon which Americans [stake] their futures.”¹

Though exact practitioner statistics are hard to come by, it is clear that the popularity of yoga in the U.S. has taken off ever since its introduction, and especially since the 1990s. A 1994 Roper poll commissioned by *Yoga Journal*, the world’s most popular yoga magazine, estimated that six million Americans, approximately 3.3 percent of the population, were practicing yoga, with ten percent of Americans interested in trying it.² Ten years later, another national poll estimated that the number of American practitioners had risen to 15 million, and that of interested Americans had reached nearly twelve percent. In addition, a further sixteen percent intended to try yoga within the next year, and more than half the population

¹ Sarah Strauss, *Positioning Yoga: Balancing Acts Across Cultures* (New York: Berg

² Mark Singleton and Jean Byrne, introduction to *Yoga in the Modern World: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Mark Singleton and Jean Byrne (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 1.

described themselves as having at least a “casual interest.”³ Even if these numbers are approached conservatively, it is undeniable that yoga in the U.S. has taken off.

However, as is the case with any cultural interchange, yoga’s popularity inevitably opened the door for modification and interpretation – some would say misinterpretation – supposedly fueled by the capitalist, goal-oriented culture, which embraced the tradition. What was initially presented as a predominately spiritual practice, albeit with a physical component, quickly came to be adopted by modern health clubs and fitness fanatics as an exercise technique, advertised as a way to “reduce stress, control weight and enhance focus.”⁴ Nowadays, though dozens of forms of yoga practice exist (*kundalini*, *mantra*, *laya*, *siddha*, etc.), the *asana* or posture-based style known as *hatha* yoga dominates Western consciousness.

As a result of the radical nature of this perceived break from tradition, a conflict has arisen in the minds of modern practitioners and academics alike. As South Asian anthropologist Joseph Alter explains, the “popular imagination” has become preoccupied in recent years with the thought of “modernized” physical yoga being “a product of Western ‘misunderstanding’” and existing in contrast to the transcendental, “classical” yoga of the East.⁵ Yoga has since become an essentialized metonym for Indian society, leading to the assumption that somewhere beneath all the diversity and transformation of contemporary yoga there exists (presumably in

³ Mark Singleton and Jean Byrne, introduction to *Yoga in the Modern World: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Mark Singleton and Jean Byrne (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 1.

⁴ “Yoga for Beginners,” *Corepower Yoga*, accessed: Feb. 22, 2012, <http://corepoweryoga.com/information/yoga-beginners>.

⁵ Joseph. S. Alter, *Yoga in Modern India: The Body Between Science and Philosophy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004), 9.

India) a monolithic core of yoga philosophy and practice. But is this dichotomy accurate? Did such an untainted tradition ever exist? If so, what did it look like, and what does it look like today?

As has become clearer as the world becomes increasingly interdependent, no tradition exists in a vacuum. Exchange and interaction are inevitable. In fact, according to Mark Singleton and Jeane Byrne,

The fault most commonly found with contemporary yoga, by both scholars and ‘informed’ practitioners, is that it is inauthentic with regard to the Indian traditions it claims to transmit...To consider yoga in the modern period as simply a divergence from is to oversimplify the vectors of continuity and rupture within Indian yoga traditions themselves and to project an impression that they exist somehow outside of history.⁶

The question therefore shouldn’t be to what degree a tradition like yoga has changed in relation to its “authentic” original, but rather whether or not an “authentic” practice ever existed.

With this paper, I seek to challenge the commonly held perception that yoga in modern America is a tainted tradition, sorely distilled and dissected in relation to its Eastern counterpart. Rather, I argue that the stereotypical East versus West, spiritual versus material dichotomies related to yoga practice are a figment of popular imagination, and have materialized as a result of academia’s quest to reify and intellectualize yoga practice. Yoga in America is not simply a cultural product of

⁶ Mark Singleton and Jean Byrne, introduction to *Yoga in the Modern World: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Mark Singleton and Jean Byrne (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 4.

India that underwent a linear transformation after its introduction into Western culture. Rather, it exemplifies the theory of “cultural hybridity,” undergoing perpetual and interconnected transformation in India and in the West concurrently. Additionally, though some contemporary schools of yoga have sought to promote and protect a degree of “authenticity” to tradition, such attempts are futile, as it is obviously problematic to affirm such originality. These schools’ attempts ultimately serve as a reiteration of both the impossibility of authenticity in the yoga world, as well as the unreality of the perceived East/West divide in yoga practice.

In order to make clear the parameters of the current study, I will begin with a brief description of the definitions I have accepted and a brief overview of yoga’s historic roots. I will then examine and challenge the commonly held perception of yoga’s gradual degeneration in America by investigating the circumstances under which it was presented to and adopted by American audiences. In doing so, I will reveal that the style of yoga popular in America today was in fact presented *as such* by those who are credited with having brought the practice to the West from India. Next, I will look into the way in which the idea of a *pure*, Indian yoga tradition came about by revealing the way certain yogic texts undeservedly received canonical status in the West just following its adoption of the practice. It was this mistaken elevation which subsequently contributed to the perception of a pure, monolithic tradition existing in India when in reality, such unification never occurred. I further prove the fallacy of this idealized Indian practice by revealing the marked inconstancy of yoga’s contemporary history in India, which is more reflective of the influences of modernity and Westernization than is often believed. Finally, I will

present a case study of one of the most well-established and seemingly “authentic” schools of yoga today, known as the Sri K. Pattabhi Jois Ashtanga Yoga Institute. Here, I will uncover the near impossibility of its claims of authenticity, thereby further supporting the idea that a pure, untainted tradition of yoga does not, and could not exist in India or elsewhere. I will conclude with a description of the “cultural hybridity” theory, a concept I believe to be much more applicable to understanding yoga traditions than the commonly accepted idea of perpetually diverging American and Indian practices. In doing so, I hope to not only make a statement about the effects of the global dissemination of culture on the yoga tradition, but also about authenticity as an ideal and the implications of the search for an “authentic” original.

Definitions and History

As is the case with most conversations of spiritual phenomena, terminology within the yoga tradition is notoriously tricky, having undergone multiple interpretations and redefinitions throughout history. Some would even argue that yoga’s abstractness makes it inherently impossible to define.⁷ Nevertheless, the terms on which this study rests must be defined in some capacity.

Derived from the Sanskrit root *yuj*, meaning to yoke, join or attach, ‘yoga’ can most broadly be thought of as any practice aimed at helping facilitate a union between the limited self and the Divine, or Ultimate Being. Ian Whicher comprehensively defines yoga as any number of “Indian paths of spiritual

⁷ Joseph. S. Alter, *Yoga in Modern India: The Body Between Science and Philosophy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004), 10.

emancipation, or self-transcendence that bring about a transmutation of consciousness culminating in liberation from the confines of egoic identity or worldly existence.”⁸

Due to its metaphysical nature, yoga adepts have suggested that yoga cannot be explained or understood by our intellectual faculties, and that it can only be *experienced* as such. As Joseph Alter explains, “comprehension, by virtue of being rooted in the senses and located in the intellect, is precisely that which yoga seeks to transcend,” and therefore what yoga *is* can only become clear once “true understanding is achieved.”⁹ But comprehensible or not, yoga’s elusiveness and ambiguity remain quite real, and have resulted in countless disputes of classification, definition and perceived fidelity to tradition throughout its history. I. K. Taimni, a chemistry professor at Allahabad University who produced one of the first popular commentaries on the *Yogasturas*, bemoaned such ambiguity when he recognized that “there is no such subject which is so much wrapped up in mystery and on which one can write whatever one likes without any risk of being proved wrong.”¹⁰ Consequently, yoga practice today has diffused into various schools and methods, each with its own claim of authenticity (e.g. *siddha, kundalini, bhakti, karma, tantra, mantra, laya* etc.).

⁸ Ian Whicher, “Yoga and Freedom: A Reconsideration of Patanjali’s Classical Yoga,” *Philosophy East & West*, 48.2, (1998): 272.

⁹ Joseph. S. Alter, *Yoga in Modern India: The Body Between Science and Philosophy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004), 10.

¹⁰ I. K. Taimni, *The Science of Yoga: The Yogasūtras of Patañjali in Sanskrit with transliteration in Roman, translation in English and commentary*. Wheaton, Ill: Theosophical Pub. House, 1961) v, quoted in Joseph. S. Alter, *Yoga in Modern India: The Body Between Science and Philosophy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004), 9.

Though every school shares more or less a common goal, they each seek to reach it through different means. The present analysis will deal only with a form known as *hatha* yoga, which is associated with the manipulation of the physical body to spiritually transcendent ends. However, it should be noted that the association of the term *hatha* with a predominately physical, posture-based practice is a relatively modern one.

According to the best known hatha yoga texts, the *Siva Samhita* (15th c. CE), *Hathayogapradipika* (15th-16th c. CE) and *Gheranda Samhita* (17th-18th c. CE), *hatha* yoga is concerned with “the transmutation of the human body into a vessel” better suited for spiritual union with the Divine.¹¹ Through the systematic performance of various postures, the mind is thought to be made suppler and better attuned to Divine reality. According to the *hatha* texts, the entire process, made up of *asana* (bodily posture), *pranayama* (manipulation of the vital breath) and *mudra* (hand gestures), is aimed at the purification and balancing of the body’s network of subtle energy channels (*nadis*). The ultimate result is the practitioner’s attainment of *samadhi* (higher-level meditation), ultimately leading to *moksha* (liberation).¹²

However, contemporary *hatha* yoga accords historically uncharacteristic and unfounded primacy to *asana* within the practice, and is more often thought of as a system of health, fitness and well-being rather than one of spiritual discovery. While some schools of modern yoga do conserve some of the subtler elements from the textual tradition, on the whole they have become subordinate to the practice of

¹¹ Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 28.

¹² Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 29.

asana, which itself is rationalized in ways markedly alien to the kind of *hatha* yoga outlined in the *Siva Samhita*, *Hathayogapradipika* and *Gheranda Samhita*.¹³ In any case, for contemporary practitioners, *hatha* yoga denotes a heavily posture-based system, the practice of which is often motivated more by its physicality than its spirituality. It is the trajectory of this modern, physical practice that will be analyzed here.

The roots of yoga philosophy, *hatha* and otherwise, can be found in texts as ancient as the *Upanishads*, dating to the third century BCE, the earliest of which describe a means to leave behind sorrow and overcome death itself through maintained posture and controlled breathing. A section of the famous Indian epic the *Mahabharata*, known as the *Bhagavad Gita*, outlines three paths of yoga – action (*karmayoga*), devotion (*bhaktiyoga*), and knowledge (*jnanayoga*) – through which the aspirant can come to know the Lord, or supreme person. Not long after the *Gita* is thought to have been transcribed came arguably the most influential text on yoga practice called the *Yogasutras* (YS), ascribed to Patanjali. The YS is the first text to outline a definitive set of techniques to define the yoga tradition. It divides the practice into eight stages, beginning with rules of morality in social life (*yama*, *niyama*), followed by physical poses and breathing techniques (*asana*, *pranayama*), and concluding with gradual removal of external sensory input, single-pointed

¹³ Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 29.

focus, uninterrupted meditation and finally, perfect union with the Absolute (*pratyahara, dharana, dhyana, and samadhi*).¹⁴

Though the YS has garnered a significant amount of scholarly interest and recognition, considered by many to be *the* source of authority for modern yoga practice, current scholarship suggests that this primacy is quite recent and perhaps unwarranted. This discrepancy will be discussed at length in a later section, but nonetheless what is important here is that while yoga certainly has a lengthy textual history, contemporary allusion to such texts doesn't necessarily indicate authenticity.

Sarah Strauss aptly sums up the difficulty of pinning down a comprehensive historicity of yoga practice when she explains that “yoga can be defined in many ways – as an attitude, a philosophy, a set of practices, a way of being in the world – but its definition is always located within a particular historical context.”¹⁵ It is within the context of the twenty-first century that I seek to examine yoga practice and the attempts that have been made to define its historical lineage.

Vivekananda's Influence on Yoga in America

Not long after its introduction to the West, a dissonance surfaced in the minds of those familiar with yoga practice. While it was taking off in American gyms and health clubs as a form of alternative medicine and new age physical fitness training, the term ‘yoga’ simultaneously became associated with images of mystical

¹⁴ Sarah Strauss, *Positioning Yoga: Balancing Acts Across Cultures*, (New York: Berg Publishers, 2005), 2.

¹⁵ Sarah Strauss, *Positioning Yoga: Balancing Acts Across Cultures*, (New York: Berg Publishers, 2005), 2.

Indian ascetics and spiritual masters wandering the Himalayas. The history of yoga quickly became characterized by the “seductively modern and simplistic allure” of the distinction between “so-called physical and so-called contemplative Yoga.”¹⁶ Renowned Orientalist scholar of Indian religions Max Muller demonstrated this perceived division when he declared in his 1899 work *The Six Systems of Indian Philosophy* that yoga of his day had descended into its “purely practical and most degenerate form.”¹⁷ Like a number of other scholars at this time, he lamented yoga’s transition from what he believed to be “intellectual to practical yoga.”¹⁸ But where did the idea of such a distinction originate? And how did it become so entrenched in the Western psyche?

Contrary to popular belief, it seems that such a distinction was in fact *presented* to American audiences in the rhetoric through which yoga was introduced, as opposed to having been a product of Western exaggeration. Yoga made its debut in America at the 1893 Parliament of World Religions in Chicago in Swami Vivekananda’s presentation about Hindu philosophy. According to Sarah Strauss, this presentation marks a turning point in the way this ancient system of ideas and practices would come to be understood.¹⁹

Influenced by his privileged upbringing and sturdy education, and fueled by his commitment to Sri Ramakrishna – exemplar-saint for the disadvantaged Indian

¹⁶ Joseph. S. Alter, *Yoga in Modern India: The Body Between Science and Philosophy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004), 10.

¹⁷ Max F. Muller, *The Six Systems of Indian Philosophy*, (New York [etc.]: Longmans, Green, 1899), xx.

¹⁸ Max F. Muller, *The Six Systems of Indian Philosophy*, (New York [etc.]: Longmans, Green, 1899), 458.

¹⁹ Sarah Strauss, *Positioning Yoga: Balancing Acts Across Cultures*, (New York: Berg Publishers, 2005), 35.

middle-class – Vivekananda arrived in America on a mission: advertise and barter the “spiritual wealth” of India in exchange for the “material wealth” of the West, which he saw as the potential answer to India’s state of impoverishment.²⁰ As Raychaudhuri explains, “Swami Vivekananda very deliberately represented yoga and the Vedantic tradition as India’s gift to the West, for which monetary assistance to aid the poverty stricken Indian masses would be a most appropriate exchange.”²¹ Thus, in an attempt to claim moral high ground and convince Western audiences of his product’s value, Vivekananda used yoga in such a way as to emphasize the spiritual in direct opposition to the materiality of Western values. The East versus West mentality has thus been associated with the yoga tradition in America from the moment it was introduced and has, as a result, become an inexorable characteristic of the practice.

Vivekananda’s underlying monetary motivation had consequences not only on the way in which his yoga was presented, but also on the very method of yoga he was marketing. He was likely not interested in showing Westerners the most purely Indian yoga practice but rather with advertising yoga in a way that would appeal to Western sensibilities. According to Sarah Strauss, “for the Western audience, the appeal lay in the presentation of a spiritual framework that was non-exclusive,

²⁰ Sarah Strauss. *Positioning Yoga: Balancing Acts Across Cultures*. (New York: Berg Publishers, 2005), 35.

²¹ T. Raychaudhuri, *Europe Reconsidered: Perceptions of the West in Nineteenth Century Bengal* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), 242, quoted in Sarah Strauss, *Positioning Yoga: Balancing Acts Across Cultures*, (New York: Berg Publishers, 2005), 11.

‘scientific’ (testable through personal practice), and seemingly universal.”²² The practice that emerged as a result was inescapably inclusive, and proposed to allow practitioners to maintain lives as middle-class householders while participating in, and theoretically mastering, a spiritual practice.

To this end, his first order of business was to make yoga’s complex and metaphysical aspects palatable to new audiences, which Vivekananda did by neatly categorizing yoga practice into four divisions: *raja* (the path of moral, physical and mental discipline), *bhakti* (the path of love or devotion), *jnana* (the path of knowledge or intellectual learning), and *karma* (the path of work or selfless service to others).²³ In doing so, he effectively crystallized dozens of different philosophical paths from hundreds of years of textual traditions into four key categories (the names of which were previously existing) that could be offered to an unfamiliar public eager for spiritual instruction. These four concepts were later streamlined and Anglicized further for incorporation in the motto of Vivekananda’s disciple’s social service organization: “Serve, love, meditate, realize.” While this simplification indeed made yoga more accessible and attractive to the heavily Protestant value system of America, it also served to essentialize Indian culture in the minds of Americans into a tidy, spiritual monolith, thereby emphasizing the perceived disconnect between East and West.

Further Anglicizing and commercializing his version of yoga was Vivekananda’s endorsement of the concept of *jivanmukhti*, or the attainment of

²² Sarah Strauss, *Positioning Yoga: Balancing Acts Across Cultures*, (New York: Berg Publishers, 2005), 13-14.

²³ Sarah Strauss, *Positioning Yoga: Balancing Acts Across Cultures*, (New York: Berg Publishers, 2005), 9.

absolute freedom without abandoning life in the phenomenal world, which he presented as the ultimate goal of yoga practice. This concept suggests that the traditional Hindu quest for spiritual liberation could be achieved while continuing to participate in worldly life, using yoga as the vehicle. In other words, it introduced the possibility of “being *in* the world but not *of* it.”²⁴ According to Vivekananda’s proposal, yoga practitioners needn’t give up the structures and activities of everyday life, but only reformulate their attitudes and idea of the self through the addition of yogic practices. Though *jivanmukhti* existed in Hindu philosophy before Vivekananda’s appropriation, his endorsement and unprecedented emphasis on the concept served only to distance American yoga from its Indian roots.

Ironically, Vivekananda’s method has become so entrenched that many people today assume it represents the “original” or true backbone of yoga, out of which all of the other paths of yoga emerged. Little did his targeted white, Protestant practitioners of the 1920s know, this yoga had been tailored to play into their values and desires in such a way that they were essentially being fed “a version of their very own esoteric convictions.”²⁵ Vivekananda’s work here demonstrates that perhaps yoga’s “degeneration” in America is less a product of cultural imposition from the West, and more an intended outcome of its Indian exportation. We can thus accept the idea that though yoga has indeed undergone changes since its adoption in America, these changes were made to a practice that was what we

²⁴ Sarah Strauss. *Positioning Yoga: Balancing Acts Across Cultures*. (New York: Berg Publishers, 2005), 36.

²⁵ Mark Singleton, “The Classical Reveries of Modern Yoga: Patanjali and Constructive Orientalism,” *Yoga in the Modern World: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Mark Singleton and Jean Byrne, (New York: Routledge, 2009), 89.

might call “Americanized” before it was even introduced. What’s more, one could argue that the characteristics of Vivekananda’s yoga not only permitted, but invited innovation and modernization, emphasizing freedom, commercial appeal and universality. The perceived difference between American and India practices is therefore revealed to be much smaller than is often thought.

Mistaken Purity of the Indian Tradition

Vivekananda’s influence aside, the question remains as to how the idea of such a pure Indian tradition from which the American style supposedly slipped away came about. Many scholars today are beginning to give weight to the idea that in the years just following yoga’s American introduction, academia played a role in creating the idea of an “authentic” Indian practice. Fueled by what Singleton identifies as the era’s fixation with “constructionist and deconstructionist scholarship,” early-twentieth-century Orientalist yoga scholars became interested in critically analyzing yoga’s textual tradition in order to identify the roots from which both the Indian and Western practices originated. However, many believe this quest ultimately did not leave Western scholars with an accurate understanding of Eastern history, but rather an “essentialized, primordialist view” of the yoga tradition within India.²⁶

Examples of inaccurate textual analysis and commentary can be found throughout yoga’s secondary literary history and perhaps most especially in Western scholars’ interpretation and subsequent renovation of Patanjali’s

²⁶ Joseph. S. Alter, *Yoga in Modern India: The Body Between Science and Philosophy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004), 5.

Yogasutras (YS), which has come to be viewed as the textual authority for most modern practices. However, there are a handful of examples to suggest that the YS was expressly *installed* as yoga's "textbook" through the efforts of British Orientalists and thereby unintentionally salvaged from a state of practical destitute within India. In other words, Patanjali's yoga was not a prominent tradition within India in the early twentieth century but was presented as such by researchers who perhaps, through their scholarship, served to fulfill their own prophecies about the YS's primacy, and thus about a monolithic yoga tradition within India.

Rajendralal Mitra's 1883 translation of the YS on behalf of the Asiatic Society demonstrates this misconception. In accordance with the society's intention of enhancing and furthering Oriental scholarship in India, Mitra's publication entitled *Yoga Aphorisms of Patanjali* was intended to be a collaborative effort between Mitra and a professional Yogi with whom Mitra could confer in the translation process. However, in the introduction to his text he records that upon his initial undertaking of the project, he was disappointed in his failure to find a "*Pandit* who had made the yoga the special subject of his study."²⁷ This is not to say that there were no living traditions of yoga existing in India at the time, but that those that were in existence were effectively decoupled from the authority of Patanjali. Moreover, Singleton suggests that Mitra's search for an exponent of an autonomous yoga tradition associated with Patanjali was perhaps misguided insofar as the YS may have in fact

²⁷ Rajendralal Mitra, *The Yoga Aphorisms of Patanjali* (Calcutta: J.W. Thomas, Baptist Mission Press, 1883), xc.

functioned not as a monolithic entity at this time, but as a “floating *darsana*²⁸” that merely complemented other philosophical systems.²⁹

A comparable project undertaken by James Ballantyne thirty years earlier yielded similar results. In the introduction to his translation, Ballantyne also laments that though there were many scholars in India willing to learn English and help with the project, he had great difficulty finding anyone to carry out the yoga translation because “in [those] days no *Pandit* [claimed] to be teaching the system.”³⁰ This suggests, much like in Mitra’s case, that among the nineteenth century Pandits, at least those in the regions in which Ballantyne based his research, Patanjali’s yoga was simply not a living philosophical system, let alone the scriptural basis of an existing tradition of practice.

According to Singleton, the translations that resulted from these projects therefore represent “the formation of a new Patanjali in dialogue with Western philosophy...but self-consciously cut off from traditional learning.”³¹ An analysis of the rhetoric of available author commentary regarding these texts suggests that Mitra and Ballantyne sought to establish the validity of the YS not in terms of the Indian tradition, but in terms of the *Western* tradition. Underscoring this point is the fact that Mitra declares to be “no Yogi [himself], nor anyway interested in the

²⁸ *Darsana*: yogic philosophy.

²⁹ Mark Singleton, “The Classical Reveries of Modern Yoga: Patanjali and Constructive Orientalism,” *Yoga in the Modern World: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Mark Singleton and Jean Byrne (New York: Routledge, 2009), 81.

³⁰ James Robert Ballantyne, introduction to *The Aphorisms of the Yoga Philosophy of Patanjali: With Illustrative Extracts from the Commentary by Bhoja Rājā*, (Allahabad: Presbyterian Mission Press, 1852), ii.

³¹ Mark Singleton, “The Classical Reveries of Modern Yoga: Patanjali and Constructive Orientalism,” *Yoga in the Modern World: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Mark Singleton and Jean Byrne (New York: Routledge, 2009), 81.

doctrine,”³² perhaps in an attempt to accentuate his credibility as a scholar, but at the same time only diminishing his credibility as a translator and commentator on yogic philosophy.

As two of a very few number of English translations available at this time, each published in widely disseminated and reputed series, Mitra and Ballantyne’s views can safely be taken as important markers in the development of the YS’s modern intellectual context. In the years following their publication, the conception of yoga contained in these texts was “projected as the timeless, pristine, and unitary expression of India’s yoga tradition.”³³ But, Singleton argues, this conception was merely a result of the new kind of “classical” rhetoric that was evolving as a result of the interaction between Indian scholars and European Orientalists like Mitra and Ballantyne. Though the methods of yoga that were disseminated in these translations were perceived of as “original,” their primacy was only due to the tone with which they were written by their foreign translators, and the weight subsequently placed on them by their Western audiences. The result was a “restitution of the ‘classical’ in modern times through linguistic and scholastic overkill.”³⁴ In other words, it seems these scholars effectively *created* the idea of an authentic Indian practice, thereby emphasizing and popularizing the problematic distinction between Eastern and Western practices. In this way, the upsurge of

³² Rajendralal Mitra, *The Yoga Aphorisms of Patanjali* (Calcutta: J.W. Thomas, Baptist Mission Press, 1883), lxiii.

³³ Mark Singleton, “The Classical Reveries of Modern Yoga: Patanjali and Constructive Orientalism,” *Yoga in the Modern World: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Mark Singleton and Jean Byrne (New York: Routledge, 2009), 86.

³⁴ Mark Singleton, “The Classical Reveries of Modern Yoga: Patanjali and Constructive Orientalism,” *Yoga in the Modern World: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Mark Singleton and Jean Byrne (New York: Routledge, 2009), 86.

academic commentary and redaction ought to be understood as “having made yoga what it is, rather than having simply revealed yogic truth as a predefined entity.”³⁵

Thus, we can see that the virtually hegemonic status enjoyed by the YS in some modern yoga schools by no means reflects the text’s status and function in premodern Indian yoga traditions. Nevertheless, in time, the perception of a pristine, firm textual history of yoga in India, with the YS at the forefront, has trickled into the popular psyche, contributing to the current exoticization of India as a spiritual oasis, completely unlike the capitalistic, material world of the West. A recent article published by *Yoga Journal* highlights this conception:

To Westerners, India is a place of spiritual salvation, quiet ashrams, meditation practice, sometimes grueling pilgrimages to holy sites, an oasis away from the money-making materialism of the West. It is the ancient source of spirituality, simplicity, and asceticism.³⁶

Krishnamacharya and the Modern Indian Yoga Revival

However, an investigation of the trajectory of yoga practice in India reveals this perceived “oasis” to be a fallacy. Perhaps the most significant actor in the foundation of the modern yoga tradition in India is Tirumalai Krishnamacharya (1888-1989). His work, along with considerable influence from India’s consistently tumultuous political climate, gave rise to the multicolored method of yoga in India today. Though his teaching career spans nearly seventy years, his most influential

³⁵ Joseph. S. Alter, *Yoga in Modern India: The Body Between Science and Philosophy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004), 5.

³⁶ Marina Budhos, “Culture Shock,” *Yoga Journal* (March/April 2002), 88-93, 164-170, <http://www.yogajournal.com/lifestyle/680>.

period came between the years of 1930 and 1950 during his residency as yoga instructor at the Jagannathan Palace in Mysore. It was here that he is believed to have established the basis of the rigorous, highly physical and oftentimes aerobic system of *asanas* that has become synonymous with yoga today, both in India and abroad.

However, although Krishnamacharya and his guru Rama Mohan Bramachari are frequently invoked as the authorities upon which many modern methods of yoga (most notably Sri K. Pattabhi Jois's Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga, which will be discussed at length) stake their legitimacy, Krishnamacharya's method went through considerable alteration throughout his career, and the extent to which he remained faithful to his teacher's methods is questionable. This demonstrates not only the inconsistency of the yoga tradition within India, but also the impossibility of the stark East versus West distinction.

Krishnamacharya's interest in yoga was sparked at a young age after having been initiated into the practice as a part of his father's dedication to the Vaishnavite spiritual tradition. However, growing up in a poverty-stricken era effectively eliminated the feasibility of popular yoga practice except for the wealthy elite, greatly diminishing his opportunities for continued study. The tradition was on its way out, and few lineages of learned sages remained in existence within India. Determined to learn more, Krishnamacharya set out for Tibet at the age of twenty seven to find the famed but illusive yogi, Rama Mohan Bramachari, who was, according to Krishnamacharya's Indian preceptor, the only person capable of teaching him the full meaning of Patanjali's *Yogasutras*. After seven years of

instruction under Bramachari and having reached “perfection of *asana* and *pranayama*,”³⁷ the guru instructed Krishnamacharya to return to India to spread the teachings. Unfortunately, his destitute countrymen were less than willing to be persuaded to adopt an outdated spiritual system. Unable to make ends meet as a yoga teacher, he was forced to travel throughout the country giving lectures and performing demonstrations of the *siddhis* - supernormal abilities of the yogic body. These demonstrations, designed to stimulate interest in the dying tradition, included suspending his pulse, stopping cars with his bare hands, performing difficult *asanas*, and lifting heavy objects with his teeth. To teach people about yoga, Krishnamacharya first had to get them interested.

Fortunately, he was soon discovered by the Maharaja of Mysore, Krishnarajendra Wodeyar, who was so impressed with his skill and novel practice that he soon endorsed Krishnamacharya and his yogic methods as one of a handful of physical education activities at the Jaganmohan Palace. Krishnamacharya was given his own *yogasala*³⁸ in which to hold classes, attended predominantly by young male royals.

However, working under the personal direction of the Maharaja certainly had an effect on the style and motivation behind the yoga techniques developed by Krishnamacharya at this time. Throughout his reign, the Maharaja remained tirelessly committed to cultural, political and technological innovation in Mysore, and one subject of revitalization that he held close to his heart was that of physical

³⁷ Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (Cary, NC, USA: Oxford University Press, 2010), 177.

³⁸ *Yogasala*: classroom/studio space intended for the practice of yoga.

education. He promoted physical culturalism in various ways, one of which was his endorsement of what came to be known as the “Indian physical culture movement” of the 1920s and 30s. This movement promoted physical training as a means of generating “the bodily strength necessary to reclaim India after centuries of colonial rule,” along with “the mental fortitude needed by anyone who wanted to effect change in his or her world.”³⁹ An excerpt from the 1950 edition of the *Encyclopedia of Indian Physical Culture* highlights the popular interest in fitness at the time:

You were meant to have a fine looking strong and super healthy body. God cannot be pleased with the ugly, unhealthy, weak and flabby bodies. It is a sacrilege not to possess a fine, shapely, healthy body. It is a crime against oneself and against our country to be weak and ailing. Our own future and that of your Nation depend upon good health and enough strength.⁴⁰

The methods taught by Krishnamacharya at this time are a clear reflection of this fitness-obsessed atmosphere within which his *yogasala* was conceived. According to Mark Singleton, the administrative reports of the Jaganmohan Palace strongly suggest that the *yogasala* was principally intended as a forum for developing the physical capacities of the young royals. Throughout the reports the yoga classes are categorized as “exercise,” and are mentioned alongside other non-yogic physical activities such as gymnastics, military exercises and various Western sports and games also being taught at the Palace.

³⁹ Sarah Strauss, *Positioning Yoga: Balancing Acts Across Cultures*, (New York: Berg Publishers, 2005), 7.

⁴⁰ Mujumdar, *Encyclopedia of Indian Physical Culture*, (1950), ii, quoted in Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body: Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (Cary, NC, USA: Oxford University Press, 2010), 180.

Along with physical culturalism, the Maharaja demonstrated an equally fervent commitment to keeping India abreast of the innovations of modernity, an interest that also seems to have influenced the development of Krishnamacharya's yoga. As former World Committee President John R. Mott touted in his opening address to a conference hosted by His Highness, the Maharaja was a man with reverential regard for India's great traditions, but who was also able to "successfully blend the priceless heritage of the East with much that is best in the Western world."⁴¹

He thus fostered a climate of diverse, creative physical culture in Mysore, establishing the material and ideological conditions ideal for reinventing the then defunct Indian yoga tradition. It was within this milieu that Krishnamacharya developed his own system of *hatha* yoga, rooted in brahminical tradition but molded by the "eclectic physical culture zeitgeist"⁴² of the Maharaja. The system that resulted, which was to become the basis of so many forms of contemporary athletic yoga, was a "synthesis of several extant methods of physical training that prior to this period would have fallen well outside any definition of yoga."⁴³

Former Mysore *yogashala* student T. R. S. Sharma supports the idea that Kirshnamacharya's style was a product of his surroundings during this period in an interview with Mark Singleton in which he explains that Krishnamacharya would often meet with and take advice from nationally-admired physical culture celebrity

⁴¹ Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (Cary, NC, USA: Oxford University Press, 2010), 178.

⁴² Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (Cary, NC, USA: Oxford University Press, 2010), 179.

⁴³ Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (Cary, NC, USA: Oxford University Press, 2010), 177.

and Mysore Palace bodybuilding instructor, K. V. Iyer. Yoga scholar Elliott Goldberg has even suggested that it was under Iyer's influence that Krishnamacharya introduced *suryanamaskar*, or prostrations to the sun – a form of gymnastics attached to sun worship in India – into his *yogasana* sequences, a conflation never before undertaken in recorded yoga history.⁴⁴ Before this time “it was far from obvious that *suryanamaskar* and yoga were, or should be, part of the same body of knowledge or practice.”⁴⁵ Underscoring this point is Shri Yogendra, prominent figure of the modern yoga renaissance, who admonished the “ill-informed” who indiscriminately mixed the “*suryanamaskaras* with [the] yoga physical training practices” of the time.⁴⁶

While Iyer's impact ultimately cannot be confirmed, it nevertheless seems likely that Krishnamacharya's teaching was influenced by, if not based on, predominant popular styles of children's physical education in 1930s India, and therefore did *not* represent a pristine *asana* sequence conferred by his guru, Bramachari. Additionally, though these sun salutations have become an inextricable part of most *asana*-based practices today, the dispute surrounding their relatively recent inclusion into the sequence disproves the perceived immaculate status of Krishnamacharya's legacy.

⁴⁴ Elliott Goldberg, “Worshipping the Sun Indoors: The Beginnings of Modern Surya Namaskar in Muscle Cult,” (Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 2006), quoted in Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (Cary, NC, USA: Oxford University Press, 2010), 179.

⁴⁵ Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (Cary, NC, USA: Oxford University Press, 2010), 189.

⁴⁶ Shri Yogendra, *Yoga Asanas Simplified* (Santa Cruz: Yoga Institute, 1988 [1928]), 33.

In conclusion, it seems that given Krishnamacharya's need to make yoga appealing to an nonexistent practitioner base and conform to the fitness-obsessed atmosphere of the time, it is unlikely that the yoga practices being undertaken at the Mysore Palace had much to do with Bramachari's ancient methods. Moreover, their marked transformation over Krishnamacharya's career certainly disproves the notion of a unilinear tradition of Indian yoga.

Ashtanga's Fallacy of Authenticity

Despite these historical inconsistencies, countless modern schools of yoga attempt to distinguish themselves by asserting their fidelity to the seemingly well-established yoga tradition of Krishnamacharya. One such school, known as the Sri K. Pattabhi Jois Ashtanga Yoga Institute (KPJAYI), enjoys perhaps the most perceived authenticity of any contemporary school, often referred to as "the modern-day form of Classical Indian yoga."⁴⁷ Though the Institute has shown exponential growth in recent years, now fielding a student waiting list at least a three months long, R. Sharath Jois, grandson of the late Pattabhi Jois, who inherited the *yogashala* after his grandfather's death in 2009, has ignored the potential for expansion. There remains only one official KPJAYI *yogashala*, located in Mysore, which enjoys the distinctiveness of being the place to go to "study the tradition from its source."⁴⁸

Advocates of the Pattabhi Jois method, which has made its way around the world, staunchly assert its "authenticity," which they believe distinguishes the

⁴⁷ Betty Lai, "Ashtanga Yoga Background," *Ashtanga Yoga*, last modified: 13 February 2012, <http://www.ashtanga.com/html/background.html>.

⁴⁸ "Teachers Information," Shri K. Pattabhi Jois Ashtanga Yoga Institute, 2009, <http://kpyai.org/the-institute/teachers>.

technique from other *asana*-based practices. Through the accounts of dedicated Ashtanga students and an analysis of the school's online image, three methods of legitimization seem to arise as the most prominently invoked and therefore the most relied upon by the Ashtanga Institute: 1) claims of allegiance to an ancient textual tradition; 2) adherence to a traceable lineage of yoga gurus; and 3) upholding of strict requirements for all Ashtanga teachers. References to these values have been made time and again by Pattabhi Jois and other Ashtanga spokespersons in an attempt to differentiate the Ashtanga method and maintain the "authenticity" of its techniques. However, given the contemporary environment of globalization and cultural interchange, along with the issues surrounding the notion of a "classical" Indian tradition mentioned above, these efforts are ultimately ineffectual.

In regards to KPJAYI's claim of textual fidelity, the source of textual authority most often cited by Ashtanga practitioners is an ancient manuscript known as the *Yoga Korunta*, said to have been recorded by the sage Vamana Rishi, date unknown. The text allegedly contains lists of many different *asanas*, as well as highly original teachings on *vinyasa* (union of breath and movement), *drishti* (gaze points), *bandhas* (maintaining yogic breath), *mudras*, and philosophy.⁴⁹ According to KPJAYI, the *Yoga Korunta* was imparted to Krishnamacharya in the early 1900s by Brahmachari. Krishnamacharya supposedly transcribed and recorded the text in the 1920s during visit to Calcutta, at which time it "was written on palm leaves and was

⁴⁹ Sri K. Pattabhi Jois, *Yoga Mala*, (New York: North Point Press, 2002), xv.

in a bad state of decay, having been partially eaten by ants.”⁵⁰ It is said to have been passed down to Pattabhi Jois according to the sacred tradition of *guru parampara* (disciplic succession)⁵¹ during Jois’s studies with Krishnamacharya, which began in 1927. Since 1948, Pattabhi Jois has been teaching the Ashtanga yoga method, supposedly as outlined in the *Yoga Korunta*, from his *yogashala* in Mysore.

The traceability of this claim would appear undisputable, except for the fact that the *Yoga Korunta* has been lost for decades, the likelihood of its existence having become a topic of much controversy within the yoga community. Nevertheless, according to Mark Singleton, “[Pattabhi Jois] insists that the [*Yoga Korunta*] describes in full all the *asanas* and *vinyasas* of the sequences and treats of nothing other than the Ashtanga system.”⁵² It is however surprising that the text has not been transcribed by Pattabhi Jois or any other close disciple of Krishnamacharya, nor was it ever passed on to a disciple of Pattabhi Jois during his lifetime, as would have been customary in the traditional brahminical oral tradition. It is also surprising, as Singleton points out, that the text is not even partially recorded in either of Krishnamacharya’s books – *Yoga Makaranda* (1935) and *Yogasanagalu* (c. 1941). It does not even appear among the twenty-seven cited sources for *Yoga Makaranda*.

Additionally, as has been explained by Krishnamacharya’s grandson and student T. K. V. Desikachar in his book, writings by his grandfather often

⁵⁰ “The Practice,” Shri K. Pattabhi Jois Ashtanga Yoga Institute, 2009, <http://kpjayi.org/the-practice>.

⁵¹ Sri K. Pattabhi Jois, “An Informal Public Talk on Traditional Yoga,” *Namarupa Magazine*, (Spring 2003), 9-12.

⁵² Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (Cary, NC, USA: Oxford University Press, 2010), 184.

“contradicted the popularly held notion that the *Yoga Korunta* was the basis for Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga.”⁵³ The content of the work Krishnamacharya so often verbally cited was subject to change as his teaching style changed, suggesting that he may have invoked the text to legitimize the sequences that became Ashtanaga yoga. Srivatsa Ramaswami, a thirty-three year student of Krishnamacharya, is of a similar opinion, coming to the conclusion after recognizing that the text so often alluded to was subject to constant variation. He believes that the work was perhaps “the masterpiece of [his] own guru (i.e. Krishnamacharya), inspired by and attributed to a legendary ancient sage to lend it the authority of tradition.”⁵⁴

Yoga Korunta aside, Pattabhi Jois and others have been known to cite other Indian philosophical texts as the basis for the Ashtanga methods. As was previously mentioned, it was Krishnamacharya who was to introduce and systematize the gymnastic movements of *suryanamaskar* into *asana*-based yoga practice; it is these movements which were to become the basis of his Ashtanga Vinyasa method. Although Krishnamacharya's later writings are the first and only to outline the *vinyasa* forms taught by Pattabhi Jois today, Jois still claims that the exact stages of the sequences, as taught by his guru, are enumerated in the *Vedas*.⁵⁵ Similarly, Annie Pace, long time student of Jois and one of only a handful of certified Ashtanga teachers, insists that “[Ashtanga yoga] is an ancient system that hasn’t changed for

⁵³ T. K. V. Desikachar, *Yoga - Gesundheit für Körper und Geist Leben und Lehren Krishnamacharyas* (Berlin: Theseus-Verl, 2005), 60, quoted in Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (Cary, NC, USA: Oxford University Press, 2010), 185.

⁵⁴ Srivatsa Ramaswami, *Yoga for the Three Stages of Life* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions Publishing, 2000), 18.

⁵⁵ Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (Cary, NC, USA: Oxford University Press, 2010), 180.

thousands and thousands of years.”⁵⁶ Given the fact that no other recorded descriptions of *asanas* existed before Krishnamacharya’s time, it seems more logical to assume that the form we find in Jois’s series of *asanas* was not an inherited format, but was developed during Krishnamacharya’s period of teaching.⁵⁷

The next most significant claim with which the Ashtanga Institute attempts to assert its authenticity is that of its strict adherence to a well-established lineage of yoga gurus and their methods. The Institute strongly believes in using the consistency of *parampara* – knowledge “in its most valuable form,”⁵⁸ passed in succession from teacher to student for thousands of years – to guide and authenticate their practice. According to a section of their website, *parampara* “is the basis of any lineage,” and “in order for yoga instruction to be effective, true and complete, it should come from within *parampara*.”⁵⁹ What’s more, it is the teacher’s *dharma* or duty in the *parampara* tradition “to teach yoga exactly as he learned it from his guru...The teacher should not mislead the student in any way or veer from what he has been taught.”⁶⁰

Though this is an attractive sentiment, it seems at odds with the aforementioned innovations and creative liberties taken by Krishnamacharya during his time at the Mysore Palace. The system he developed was undoubtedly a

⁵⁶ Annie Pace (KPJAYI student and certified Ashtanga instructor) in a personal communication, Feb. 1, 2012.

⁵⁷ Norman Sjoman and Kṛṣṇarāja Vaḍeyara, *The Yoga Tradition of the Mysore Palace* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1999).

⁵⁸ “Parampara,” Shri K. Pattabhi Jois Ashtanga Yoga Institute, 2009, <http://kpjayi.org/the-practice/parampara>.

⁵⁹ “Parampara,” Shri K. Pattabhi Jois Ashtanga Yoga Institute, 2009, <http://kpjayi.org/the-practice/parampara>.

⁶⁰ “Parampara,” Shri K. Pattabhi Jois Ashtanga Yoga Institute, 2009, <http://kpjayi.org/the-practice/parampara>.

product of the pressure to popularize yoga practice and legitimize it as an effective fitness training technique, which is demonstrated by his tendency to tailor his instructions to the constitution of each student so as to maximize physical benefit.

Yogasala student T. R. S. Sharma affirms that during the yoga classes, Krishnamacharya

was innovating all the time in response to his students. He would make up variations of the postures when he saw that some of his students could do them easily...[He] never emphasized a particular order of poses, there was nothing sacrosanct about observing order with him. He would tell me “practice as many as you can.”⁶¹

Additionally, after having left the Mysore Palace and struggling to find work, Krishnamacharya began to focus more on adapting his postures to each student's capacity, as his practitioner base began to encompass people in varying states of health. For example, he might vary the length, frequency, and sequencing of asanas to help students achieve specific short-term goals, like recovering from a disease.⁶² As students' practices advanced, he would help them refine *asanas* toward the ideal form. This approach, which is now usually referred to as Viniyoga, became the “hallmark of Krishnamacharya's teaching during his final decades,”⁶³ and is fundamentally at odds with the strict, demanding Ashtanga style.

⁶¹ Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (Cary, NC, USA: Oxford University Press, 2010), 187.

⁶² Fernando Pages Ruiz, “Krishnamacharya's Legacy,” *Yoga Journal*, accessed March 29, 2012, 8. <http://www.yogajournal.com/wisdom/465>.

⁶³ Fernando Pages Ruiz, “Krishnamacharya's Legacy,” *Yoga Journal*, accessed March 29, 2012, 8. <http://www.yogajournal.com/wisdom/465>.

Though these personalized techniques admittedly came about after Jois's discipleship with Krishnamacharya, the fact that Krishnamacharya's own methods transformed throughout his career stands in stark contrast to statements made by Annie Pace and others who emphasize Ashtanga's infallibility: "the program is measured, sequential and universal."⁶⁴ But how can the Ashtanga school so fervently insist upon the importance of unfailing loyalty to the guru's teaching if Krishnamacharya himself, the ultimate guru, failed to demonstrate consistency in his own career? The fact that the style of *yogasana* popularized through Jois's Ashtanga Institute is representative of "a unique and unrepeated phase"⁶⁵ in Krishnamacharya's teaching would appear to greatly discredit KPJAYI's claims about the immutability of their disciplic tradition. Thus, although Pattabhi Jois and many of his committed students promote and believe in the reputability of their school, an infallible teacher-to-student transmission seems unlikely given the potential innovation in recent history.

Hand in hand with the guru lineage comes the equally strict requirements necessary for one to be chosen to spread the Ashtanga method as an Ashtanga yoga instructor. According to the KPJAYI website, becoming a teacher of Ashtanga yoga requires that the aspirant demonstrates "an appropriate attitude, devotion towards the practice, and a respect for the tradition of *parampara*," qualities which can "only be determined on an individual basis by the directors of the Institute." In other words, the "blessing" of being selected as fit to spread the Ashtanga teaching is an

⁶⁴ Annie Pace (KPJAYI student and certified Ashtanga instructor) in a personal communication, Feb. 1, 2012.

⁶⁵ Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (Cary, NC, USA: Oxford University Press, 2010), 176.

honor, once conferred only by Pattabhi Jois himself, and now only by Sharath Jois. Furthermore, practitioners are advised against coming to the Institute with the expectation of obtaining authorized or certified status as “teaching authorizations and certifications are only *offered* by the directors of the Institute and cannot be requested (emphasis added).”⁶⁶ Though Sharath has succumbed (allegedly begrudgingly)⁶⁷ to recent pressures to outline a distinct set of criteria for obtaining authorized and/or certified status, the criteria remain somewhat vague and leave much room for input on Sharath’s part. Nevertheless, the requirements that do exist are arduous, insisting upon over ten years of daily Ashtanga yoga practice and more than eight annual trips to the KPJAYI in Mysore for certification. Additionally, it has recently been mandated that those who want to be authorized must take a teacher-training class in Mysore led by Sharath, and sign a paper promising that they will teach only as they were taught. It goes without saying that there are no other teacher training programs approved by KPJAYI under any name, and that KPJAYI is the only authority able to authorize or certify individuals to teach the Ashtanga yoga method.⁶⁸

In an interview from the fall 2004 issue of *Namarupa Magazine*, Pattabhi Jois personally attests to these strict standards and admonishes the many “Westerners [who] are thinking more about making money than about teaching the correct method.” He references the modern trend of turning yoga into a business, and

⁶⁶ “Teachers Information,” Shri K. Pattabhi Jois Ashtanga Yoga Institute, 2009, <http://kpjayi.org/the-institute/teachers>.

⁶⁷ Annie Pace (KPJAYI student and certified Ashtanga instructor) in a personal communication, Feb. 1, 2012.

⁶⁸ “Teachers Information,” Shri K. Pattabhi Jois Ashtanga Yoga Institute, 2009, <http://kpjayi.org/the-institute/teachers>.

disdainfully speaks of those who believe they can sufficiently train yoga teachers in as little as a few days: “People offer fifteen-day courses, even one-week courses, to become a yoga teacher. [Laughs] How good for yoga that is, I don’t know.”⁶⁹

Unfortunately for Jois, it seems that some of his own students do not share this respect for the sanctity and responsibility of an Ashtanga guruship.

Tim Miller, credited as the first American to be certified by Pattabhi Jois and one of the first to bring Ashtanga yoga to the United States, is the director of the Ashtanga Yoga Center in Carlsbad, California where he has been teaching for more than thirty years. Though he maintains a respected presence in the American Ashtanga community having published various Ashtanga articles and DVDs, Miller is also perhaps the only Ashtanga certified instructor in the world to offer and lead his own teacher-training courses. His 2012 courses, taught both from his Center in California and a beach resort in Yucatan, Mexico, range from one to two weeks in length and are “designed to give participants an in-depth experience of the Primary [and/or Secondary] series of Ashtanga Yoga as taught by K. Pattabhi Jois.”⁷⁰

While it is interesting that any Ashtanga practitioner would make such a blatantly unorthodox move, it is especially alarming that it was made by a man with such a seemingly enthusiastic and devoted history. Miller met Jois in Encinitas, California in 1978 as a practitioner of only eight months, and not long after, went to

⁶⁹ R. Alexander Medin and Deirdre Summerbell, “3 Gurus, 48 Questions: Matching Interviews with Sri T.K.V. Desikachar, Sri B.K.S. Iyengar & Sri K. Pattabhi Jois,” *Namarupa Magazine* (Fall 2004), 6-18.

⁷⁰ “Teacher Training with Tim Miller,” Ashtanga Yoga Center, visited: March 6, 2012, <http://www.ashtangayogacenter.com/training.html#>.

Mysore to study under Jois where he achieved certification in 1982.⁷¹ Nevertheless, Miller exudes an attitude of rebellion that would seem heretical against the backdrop of Ashtanga's respect for tradition. In a recent *Vanity Fair* article, Miller insists that he is "interested in what works, what is effective," as opposed to being "stuck in some model that says, 'You can't do that, that's against the rules.'"⁷²

Beryl Bender Birch, another of Jois's early American students, has demonstrated a similar disregard for the *parampara* tradition, resulting in her being "kicked out of the Ashtanga club." After learning the Ashtanga method from her teacher Norman Allen in New York, Birch and her husband began teaching the method themselves – without certification or authorization, and without having visited the Institute in Mysore – to the unfamiliar East coast crowd. In the late 80's, Beryl modified the series of poses she had learned, added a few of her own, and called it "power yoga" in an effort to relate the then obscure ancient practice of Ashtanga to the Western mind. According to the bio on her website, Birch saw "power yoga" as "the perfect way to let people know that the Ashtanga practice was a workout for the body, unlike much of the yoga being taught at that time in the United States."⁷³ Though Birch says she was simply trying to translate something she found beneficial to a broader group of students, many devoted Ashtangis were detested by such modifications. Birch was virtually disowned by the Ashtanga community, though she maintains a successful institute of her own in East Hampton

⁷¹ "About Tim Miller," Ashtanga Yoga Center, visited: March 6, 2012, <http://www.ashtangayogacenter.com/training.html#>.

⁷² Bethany McLean, "Whose Yoga is it Anyway?" *Vanity Fair* (April 2012), <http://www.vanityfair.com/business/2012/04/krishna-pattanbhi-trophy-wife-ashtanga-yoga>, 4.

⁷³ Beryl Bender Birch bio on website

where she teaches “the Middle Path of Jina Yoga.” Birch’s story again highlights the difficulty that arises in the intersection of ancient tradition and modern practice.

While Miller and Birch’s decisions admittedly do not reflect the Ashtanga community as a whole, the fact that such blatant contradictions to the fundamental aspects of the tradition are being made by seasoned adherents suggests that modern practitioners, Western and otherwise, are serving to promote a diluted, simplified form of Ashtanga practice. Some of Ashtanga’s most advanced practitioners are reacting negatively to its recent popularity. “As the Western mind began populating the room, it changed the room,” says Chuck Miller, one of Jois’s early students and one of the most advanced practitioners in the world.⁷⁴ Miller stopped seeking to advance his practice when he reached the fifth series and, in 1996, ceased going to Mysore. “It was too much of a party for me,” he said in a recent article titled “Whose Yoga is it Anyway?” from the April 2012 issue of *Vanity Fair*.⁷⁵ Statements like these ought to be seen as an indication of the difficulty, and perhaps impossibility, of the maintenance of Ashtanga’s strict regulations on the modern global stage.

Though the claims of authenticity exemplified here are only discussed in relation to the Ashtanga school, countless other modern schools can be seen demonstrating similar methods, though perhaps to a lesser degree. Therefore, not only is Ashtanga quite similar to these other schools of yoga, but if a school like Ashtanga, with the highest degree of perceived “authenticity” in the modern world,

⁷⁴ Bethany McLean, “Whose Yoga is it Anyway?” *Vanity Fair* (April 2012), <http://www.vanityfair.com/business/2012/04/krishna-pattabhi-trophy-wife-ashtanga-yoga>, 4.

⁷⁵ Bethany McLean, “Whose Yoga is it Anyway?” *Vanity Fair* (April 2012), <http://www.vanityfair.com/business/2012/04/krishna-pattabhi-trophy-wife-ashtanga-yoga>, 3.

is failing to sustain the authenticity it seeks, perhaps sustained “authenticity,” even if it is illusory, in modern yoga is unfeasible.

Cultural Hybridity as it Relates to Modern Yoga

Within the last half century, a reexamination of the way we characterize the mixing of cultures, especially in relation to colonialism, has taken place in the sociology and anthropology fields. The phenomenon of cultural integration, which was once understood to be more or less a one-way movement of a dominant culture imposing itself upon a subordinate culture, is now accepted as an *interaction* between the two parties, each one giving and taking, resulting in the formation of a new whole, which Homi Bhaba calls a “Third Space.” Sociologist Fernando Ortiz has attested to a similar phenomenon, which he calls “transculturation.” According to Ortiz, cultural conversations are “always a process in which we give something in exchange for what we receive” and in which “the two parts of the equation end up being modified.” Interacting cultures undergo “a set of ongoing transmutations,” full of creativity, never ceasing, and irreversible.⁷⁶ From this creativity emerges a new reality, which is not a patchwork of features, but an original and independent phenomenon.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Fernando Ortiz and Harriet De Onis, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* (New York: A.A. Knopf), 1947, quoted in “Transculturation and Cultural Hybridity,” *Interdisciplinary Research Group on the Americas*, accessed March 29, 2012, <http://www.gira.info/en/about-us/research-questions-and-key-notions/transculturation-and-cultural-hybridity>.

⁷⁷ Fernando Ortiz and Harriet De Onis, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* (New York: A.A. Knopf), 1947, quoted in “Transculturation and Cultural Hybridity,” *Interdisciplinary Research Group on the Americas*, accessed March 29, 2012,

By embracing Bhaba and Oritiz's philosophies of the hybridized nature of cultures, I believe we can begin to steer ourselves away from the problematic binarisms (i.e. the divide between Indian and American practices) that have framed notions of yoga practice for decades, and perhaps notions of culture altogether. In conjunction with the ideas of transculturation and the "Third Space," Bhaba proposes that as global citizens we ought to open ourselves to the notion of an international culture "not based on exoticism or multi-culturalism of the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity."⁷⁸ In other words, rather than viewing yoga or any other cultural tradition as a monolithic cultural product of a place, diminishing in quality and "authenticity" as it makes its way around the world, modern cultural practices ought to be thought of as hybridized products of the now inevitable global culture.

I believe modern yoga practice – American, Indian, Ashtanga or otherwise – ought to be thought of as one such hybridized product. Rather than viewing yoga practice in the United States as an independently transforming cultural export of India, having been misinterpreted by Americans and imparted with foreign and therefore "inauthentic" cultural imprints, both the American *and* Indian practices can be seen as having undergone "transmutations" throughout their modern existences, always reflective of the ideological moment in history. In this way, yoga practices in India and America ought to be seen as exactly the type of novel,

<http://www.gira.info/en/about-us/research-questions-and-key-notions/transculturation-and-cultural-hybridity>.

⁷⁸ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and H. Tiffin, *The Post-Colonial Reader* (London: Routledge, 1995), 183.

independent phenomena resulting from transnational cultural hybridity, each unique and complete in its own right.

I challenge the idea that in order for a practice to be considered “yoga,” it must necessarily demonstrate a certain degree of similarity to some predetermined original. Instead, I choose to see all of yoga’s manifestations, as Mark Singleton does, as simply “the latest grafts onto the tree of yoga.”⁷⁹ Though they all have roots in the Indian tradition, this fact should not be taken as an indication that they ought to be defined by their relation to this tradition. Rather, each historical moment of yoga ought to be appreciated in its own right as an equally significant and “authentic” branch of the tree, and each an example of a novel formation arising from the process of cultural hybridity.

Conclusion

To conclude, despite the aforementioned East versus West, spiritual versus physical dichotomies presented by modern practitioners and yoga scholars, the yoga tradition is inescapably a product of cultural hybridization, having been molded and transformed over hundreds of years to conform to the ideals and desires of the time, and to the culture to which it is presented. Although contemporary schools of yoga exist that have attempted to buck the trend of this cultural infusion and promote their authenticity by stressing their fidelity to lineage and textual tradition, it seems the influences of modernity and globalization are making it impossible for such pristineness to persist. What’s more, even a spiritual

⁷⁹ Mark Singleton, “Yoga’s Greater Truth,” *Yoga Journal* (November 2010), 3, <http://www.yogajournal.com/wisdom/2610>.

tradition like yoga, of which authenticity is a defining feature and a major draw for practitioners, cannot escape the effects of transnational flows of culture. Despite practitioners' attempts to retain and protect its fidelity to its origins, it has been, and will continue to be molded by ideological, economic, and social influences.

But rather than begrudgingly sacrificing our ideas of what yoga is, it can be liberating to realize that yoga is infinitely creative, expressing itself in a multitude of forms and re-creating itself to meet the needs of different times and cultures. As a yoga practitioner myself, I believe we ought to adopt a greater appreciation for the role of individual intuition and creativity in the development of yoga. As is evident throughout yoga's colorful history, the fathers of modern yoga have been great innovators and experimenters, characteristics that often get overlooked in the tendency to romanticize the ancient lineages. That's not to say that honoring tradition is unimportant, but if we cling to the old ways as ultimate truth, we perhaps miss one of the most beneficial and fundamental points of yoga practice altogether: the potential for individual discovery. The poses being practiced today were born from yogis who looked inside themselves, experimented, and shared their discoveries with others. If we cannot do the same, we lose some of the spirit of yoga.

Beyond the context of yoga practice, I see the concept of hybridity as a useful tool with which we can better understand the idea of authenticity and begin to question the contemporary fascination with cultural fidelity to a perceived "original." The mixing of cultures exposes the fiction of our ideas of originality, which we often believe to be universal. In this context of hybridity, types of

belonging and identity that we accept and take for granted are revealed as being socially and/or historically constructed and highly complex. In the modern context, the idea of a simple phenomenon of "deculturation-acculturation" is practically inapplicable. It is therefore useless for us to attempt to define ourselves, and our practices within predetermined cultural, spatial or temporal boundaries.

Moreover, given the continental scope of ongoing global fluctuations such as demographic and migratory movements, the breaking down of national borders, the flow of media information and the dissemination of local cultural products, in today's world, and in the context of yoga, it is essential for us to constantly re-create meaning rather than trying to set it and give it a single truth. This exercise calls for a true opening to otherness and, consequently, to the resulting movements and shifting of identity landmarks that are being generated.

Joseph Alter highlights the catastrophe of what he calls our contemporary attempts at the "concretization of abstract concepts and practices, such as yoga" which he believes ought to be seen not only as misrepresentations, but as detrimental to our understanding of ourselves and other cultures. Such oversimplification leads to the "serious problem of conscious human creativity being reified in the ideating of culture."⁸⁰ Alter believes that in many ways, "culture has increasingly come to stand in as a proxy category for social facts, even though social facts are epiphenomenal to meaning as such." In other words, though we attempt in earnest to define and thereby differentiate cultures and create meaning

⁸⁰ Joseph S. Alter, *Yoga in Modern India: The Body Between Science and Philosophy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004), 93.

for ourselves, the fixed “social facts” we create and perceive as truth are not only false, but serve to limit our potential to see culture as it truly is – the creative byproduct of ongoing, dynamic exchange.

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