

BOOKS

General



Mark Singleton and Ellen Goldberg, eds., *Gurus of Modern Yoga*

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THIS BOOK ASSEMBLES sixteen essays on disseminators of modern yoga, emphasizing posture-based yoga and also referring to recent Indian traditions of *bhakti*- and *karma* yoga. It is a welcome contribution to what has emerged in the last decade as modern yoga studies in the social sciences and the humanities. In this context, the term “modern” refers to yoga discourses and practices from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, shaped not only by ideals of science, rationalization, and secularization, but by transnational encounters of Western esotericists interested in Hinduism with the British-educated Indian elite in search for their Hindu roots and identity (DE MICHELIS 2005). The medium of this encounter was English and, like several other Hindu concepts circulating on a global scale, the understanding of yoga was accompanied by semantic interferences as well as a new stage of re-contextualization and hybridization. Part of this process were significant changes in the kind of transmission as well as in the position and identity of yoga masters.

In this volume, the contributors consider what happened “when Indian yoga gurus ... [came] to the West,” framing yoga as a practical system, teaching group classes, and incorporating new technologies (2). Moreover, the authors intend to shed “new light on the changing role and function of the yoga guru in nontraditional contexts” (1). They wish to explore the status of these gurus and how Western yoga teachers negotiate their authority, last but not least in the case of guruship-related scandals and abuses. Following the OED, the term “guru” is taken colloquially to name “a Hindu spiritual teacher or head of a religious sect,” yet excluding its popular metaphorical meaning (like in “fitness guru”). Unfortunately, the editors do not relate their approach of understanding guru phenomena in modern society to earlier findings and the current state of research. They neither render recent debates on guru faith or new religious movements, nor do they consider the semantic dynamics involved in what Srinivas Aravamudan has coined “Guru English.” Probably this is the reason why the contributions vary in their degree of theorizing and scope of conclusion. Most chapters describe the life and work of the respective yoga guru, at times accompanied by very personal experiences. Fortunately, some authors also share further conceptual reflections and connect their findings with earlier arguments and discourses (for example, the contribution by Joseph Alter). Moreover, although compilations like this

cannot be exhaustive, the selection criteria for the yoga gurus included in this volume could have been made explicit. Whereas the lineage of T. Krishnamacharya is well represented, yoga traditions from Rishikesh or Bengal are hardly mentioned.

At any rate, looking at various contributions in their own right reveals the strengths of this book. Most of the authors are already well-known experts in the field, with varied backgrounds in Social Anthropology, Religious Studies/Comparative Religion, South Asian Studies, Sanskrit Studies, Philosophy, and Psychology. Some are long-standing yoga practitioners and also yoga teachers.

The book is divided into six parts, beginning with a focus on key figures in the early twentieth century: Dermot Killingly looks at the role of Swami Vivekananda and his well-known mission to the U.S., considering the circumstances and what had been already known and thought about yoga. Ann Gleig and Charles I. Flores revisit Integral Yoga—a system created by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother—with the idea to relink its emphasis on spiritual development with Aurobindo’s appreciation for physical culture and health. Joseph S. Alter explores Sri Yogendra’s efforts in the 1920s to secularize yoga in terms of medicine and physical fitness, promoting the medical application of postures by framing yoga in the realm of nature cure.

Part two is directed to one of the most dominant yoga lineages today. Mark Singleton and Tara Fraser examine the tremendous influence of T. Krishnamacharya and his yoga revival in the 1930s. They show how his authority as “the father of modern yoga” not only resulted from hagiographic accounts given by his various famous pupils, but also from carefully drawn discursive links suggesting the continuity with tradition, despite several innovative strategies. Jean Byrne looks at Sri K. Patthabi Jois, an early disciple of Krishnamacharya. She reveals how Jois combined his branding of Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga with a seemingly premodern way of authentication by means of an initiation as a “lineage holder,” leading to a highly personalized, if not devotional, attitude towards the guru (107). Two chapters concern another student of Krishnamacharya: B. K. S. Iyengar. Frederick M. Smith and Joan White asked Iyengar himself (since deceased) to reflect on his role as a yoga teacher and on his gradual transformation to an acclaimed yoga guru, and they contextualize his insights. Suzanne Newcombe focuses on the spread of yoga in the 1960s in British adult education and considers the role of charisma, comparing Iyengar’s teachings with that of Yogini Sunita. Newcombe argues that the “institutionalization of charisma” away from a direct guru-disciple interaction was crucial for making postural yoga a global phenomenon (147).

Part three of the volume introduces gurus who located their teaching within a spiritual (“tantric”) framework. Ellen Goldberg portrays Swami Kripalvananda and how he inspired a transnational U.S.-based community to follow Kripalu Yoga as a healing method in the widest sense, that is, to attain a divine body. Andrea J. Jain explores Swami Muktananda, a proponent of Siddha Yoga, as an “entrepreneurial godman” and his strategies to attract Western followers in the 1960s and 1970s. The chapter by Lola Williamson continues with John Friend, a later generation of U.S. yoga gurus, and his synthesis of postural yoga with the Western body cult in the form of Anusara Yoga.

The fourth part focuses on two religious communities associated with the Hindu devotional path to salvation, and to references to *bhakti* yoga within these traditions. From this angle, Hanna H. Kim considers the transnational Swaminarayan sect and their current head Pramukh Swami Maharaj; whereas Smriti Srinivas discusses Sathya Sai Baba as a healer-physician and notions of health in his line of thinking. In both cases, yoga is understood as a spiritual practice, not as system of postures.

Part five of the book looks at modern media and internet technology in the global dispersion of yoga. Joanne Punzo Waghorne analyses the “scientific” technocentric packaging of spiritual teaching in Singapore, taking the examples of courses run by Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev and Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. Maya Warriar explores how “online *darshan*” and “cyber-*satsang*” alter devotional attitudes vis-a-vis Ma Amritanandamayi and her transnational order.

The final sixth part connects yoga’s relevance for nation building and modern Hindu nationalism. Gwilym Beckerlegge focuses on Eknath Ranade, the founder of the “spiritual oriented service mission” Vivekananda Kendra, and his popularization of yoga camps. Stuart Ray Sabaker explores Swami Ramdev’s vision of spreading yoga via TV and reconstructs the institutional development and network behind this yoga celebrity in present-day India.

It is not easy to draw a general conclusion from this highly stimulating collection of essays. No doubt it provides insights into some of the latest developments and phenomena regarding the institutionalization and communication of yoga. Most importantly, it relinks the debate on modern postural yoga in the West to its Indian parallels and counterparts, showing also its continuum with notions of healing and health in recent forms of *bhakti* yoga. However, the reader is left to search for these links by themselves, and also to draw conclusions regarding the new position and role of guruship. Still, this volume is highly recommended to scholars interested in modern yoga studies and also as an adequate source book for teaching about yoga and gurus in the modern world.

REFERENCE

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