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Modern Transnational Yoga: A History of Spiritual Commodification

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**Modern Transnational Yoga:
A History of Spiritual Commodification**

Jon A. Brammer

2010

Modern Transnational Yoga: A History of Spiritual Commodification

Master's Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of Religious Studies at

Sacred Heart University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Religious Studies

Jon A. Brammer

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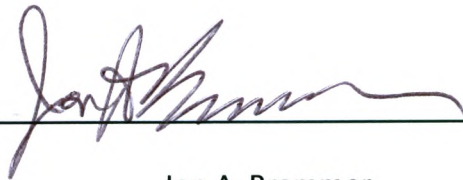
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Christel J. Manning, PhD., Professor of Religious Studies

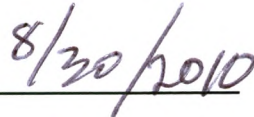
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Abstract

Yoga as both a physical activity and a spiritual practice has become an established part of Western culture. In recent years, the interest in postural forms of yoga and the philosophy from which they spring has developed into a multi-billion dollar industry; it has spawned volumes of popular histories and “how-to” books on the subject. However, scholars are only beginning to understand the true roots of modern transnational yoga (MTY) as it has developed in recent times. This thesis reviews the last two decades of scholarship in order to provide a credible explanation for MTY origins and argues that viewing yoga as a cultural commodity is the best way to explain its influence as a player in the current spiritual marketplace.

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Introduction

In the past two decades, the practice of modern, largely postural, yoga forms has become a staple of the cultural landscape of the United States. According to some sources, roughly 6.9% of the population of the U.S. practices yoga; that translates to roughly 15.8 million individuals¹. If that were not enough to attest to the ubiquity of modern yoga practice, an application for the iPhone just became available in November of 2009 that allows users to practice fifteen different posture sequences that target different areas of the body². Most WalMart and Target stores in any region of the country have special sections devoted to yoga with mats, videos, books, postural props, and even clothing on sale; health clubs advertise yoga classes amongst crowded schedules of Pilates, spinning, and aerobic boot camps. The saturation of the fitness market with yoga as a mechanism for increased vitality and health is self-evident. However, there has also been an undercurrent of interest in a nuanced and experiential spirituality that has provided a context from which the physical practices have been extracted. Even if practitioners have not explored that domain, there is an assumption that it is “out there” for the serious students who want to connect with the ancient yogic wisdom of Indian philosophical systems.

What remains unknown to many practitioners and observers is the history and development of modern yoga practice as it has manifested in the 20th and 21st centuries. Many histories of modern practice simply gloss the last fifty years of developments by lumping the period into the era of “popularization” and leave it at that. This practice leaves questions of religious import completely unexplored: is modern yoga best viewed as a

stretching regime for toning flabby thighs, or is it better perceived as the evolutionary end-product of an ancient Vedantic spirituality that is being rediscovered by the West or a new conflation of New Age spiritual agendas? Why has it drawn such a large, active, and relatively homogenous following in the past two decades? All of these questions connected to the authenticity of a particular practice or collection of practices are issues that require more researched discussion.

Good scholarship on the subject has been slow in coming and only recently have efforts been made to move past hagiographic biographies and loosely academic histories of modern yoga, especially as it has appeared in the industrialized West. In the past five or six years, a core group of researchers has made exceptionally insightful forays into the developing field of modern yoga studies; De Michelis, Singleton, Alter, Strauss and Liberman have all made impressive scholarly contributions to modern yoga studies, each with a different focus reflecting their respective academic expertise (i.e. sociology, anthropology, religious studies, etc). One term that has been helpful in exploring the modern practice is the identification and usage of modern transnational yoga (MTY)³. This ideal captures the global phenomenon of yoga practice as it is most widely known: with a strong focus on postures and breathing as opposed to moral and metaphysical aspects. The other hermeneutical construct useful to a discussion of modern practice is the multi-category typology that has been proposed by DiMichelis⁴.

One goal of this thesis is to build on this scholarship to put forward an academic and critical history of MTY practice in contrast to the assumptions that exist about its antiquity in

the body of Indian philosophy. Those assumptions include the misguided belief that MTY represents the most recent manifestation of an unbroken lineage of Yoga philosophy dating back to ancient India or that the consumption of MTY products translates automatically into spiritual growth or development (i.e. a practitioner who attends four yoga classes a week in special yoga pants is more spiritually refined than someone who only attends two and wears old sweats). Another goal of this document is to subject yoga's history to the kind of criticism and cross-examination that other newer practices have faced in the past few decades; this will also contrast with some of the more hagiographic accounts of the past. It is appropriate that MTY, now that it is safely ensconced in the collective culture, be explored with this kind of critical eye; it is also appropriate to broach questions of authenticity concerning many of the popular strands of teaching that have inundated the MTY landscape.

This research strives for more explanatory crossovers between *what* has happened to get modern yoga practice to where it is in the 21st century and *why* those practices and the people who become involved with them seem to make a match of unprecedented compatibility. In the world of "post-Christian" spirituality, the religious marketplace is crowded with competing ideologies and promises of ever-increasing potentiality⁵. The erroneous assumptions of the general public, and even uncritical consumers, that come hand in hand with the term "yoga" make a critical analysis of this nature a worthwhile endeavor.

Chapter one outlines of the philosophical underpinnings of yoga as it is categorized as one of the six traditional schools of Indian philosophy⁶. Even though Yoga (capitals

intended) as a paradigm of thinking, shares many assumptions with the Samkhya and Vedanta traditions, it can be argued that the uniquely theological bend of Yoga turns it into a different kind of practice⁷. Remarkably, those kinds of distinctions emerge relatively late in the development of Indian religious texts. Sections of the later Upanishads mention concepts that are easily connected with yoga as Patanjali explains it, but in the mass of the earlier Vedas, mention of Yoga, as an independent philosophical system, is curiously absent⁸.

Following this philosophical background, the modern developments of the 19th and 20th centuries are discussed in the second chapter. Colonial domination of India, continuing into the 20th century, played a key role in shaping the oldest English translations of seminal works like Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* and the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*⁹. Both texts were produced in their earliest English versions with a bias towards "Orientalist" thinking that colored the perception of Indian philosophical traditions well into the 20th century¹⁰. The theme of text development turns out to be an incredibly useful mechanism by which axial periods of development for modern yoga practice can be charted. The first text to make a marked impact on Western interpretations of yoga is undoubtedly Raja Yoga by Swami Vivekananda, published in 1896¹¹. However, other often overlooked volumes come up in the intervening years: Krishnamacharya's *Yoga Makaranda* and Swami Sivananda's *Practice of Yoga* are two important examples. Those volumes, among many others, informed the publication of B.K.S. Iyengar's *Light on Yoga* in 1966, which is credited with laying the foundation for the modern movement in the latter half of the 20th century¹². Postural yoga in the form that is practiced today is strangely absent and/or scrupulously avoided by Swami Vivekananda, but it forms the core of Iyengar's most notable work. In establishing the pedigree for modern forms, the

parallel developments of physical culture study and modern Hindu patriotism that are plainly evident in the period between those two publication dates did as much to help create postural forms as did any references to *asanas* in ancient Indian philosophies¹³.

The history of medical and therapeutic marketing of modern yoga will be the focus of the third chapter, with particular emphasis placed on empirical attitudes that have developed around the bold claims made by yoga practitioners. As yoga developed in the 20th century, practitioners made claims of miraculous cures, physical transformations, and disease course reversals nearly unheard of in Western medicine. The increased awareness of holistic medicinal practices and alternative therapies has made yoga a treatment option for maladies ranging from chronic back pain to heart disease to depression and anxiety disorders¹⁴. Western medical empiricism has been relatively slow to embrace clinical findings, even as they have accumulated in the last twenty to thirty years. However, consumers have been quicker on the uptake and report improvements in mental and physical health through regular MTY practice¹⁵.

The fourth chapter provides analysis of why yoga has exploded in popularity in the post-Christian spiritual marketplace. Again, a textual marker, the establishment of the periodical *Yoga Journal* in 1975, can serve as a signpost at one end of an upward arcing trend in the United States. Further publications by Iyengar, along with the stabilization of many of the yoga “schools” that sprang up after the counter-culture period of the late 1960s and early 1970s, helped legitimize yoga as a spiritual commodity with something to offer all levels of practitioners. This development, coupled with an increasing trend in “experiential”

spirituality, positioned yoga, as a postural exercise, in a unique way as the re-invention of seemingly ancient tradition that seemed to hold up to the empirical skepticism of the West. However, for those who hungered for a deeper experience, the physical practices have been incorporated into the fold of the larger body of yoga as a spiritual practice; even the historical lineage of that very idea is questionable.

In chapter five, a handful of instructor case studies will be presented that are illustrative of the differing paths taken by individual practitioners in regards to MTY. While there are often similarities in terms of physical or spiritual interest that draws students to the practice of yoga, often, the specific reasons for continuing practice are unique. The spiritual flexibility evident in the late 20th century and explored in depth by prominent religiously focused sociologists is illustrated clearly in these narratives of modern instructors.

The concluding chapter explores the idea of modern yoga practice as a consumer version of spirituality. Practitioners who have been conditioned by the materialism of industrial consumption can choose MTY practice as another commodity to be sampled and be comfortable that they are getting an “authentic” experience as a result. The marketing of MTY as a therapeutic panacea and the inherent flexibility of 21st century worldviews have only reinforced this aspect. That, in essence, is what makes MTY a truly original phenomenon: it is the result of repackaging and commodifying a philosophical product and has been since its introduction to Western culture¹⁶. In spite of that, it remains a viable spiritual commodity as evidenced by the millions of practitioners who find value in the physical practice and the underlying metaphysical assumptions that are “sold” along with it.

Notes

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8. Dasgupta, 42-69.
9. Singleton, 170-178.
10. Singleton, 1-23.
11. De Michelis, 2.
12. De Michelis, 198.
13. This is the central thesis presented throughout the work of Mark Singleton.
14. B.K.S. Iyengar, *B.K.S. Iyengar Yoga: The Path to Holistic Health* [London: DK Adult, 2008], 258-397.
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Chapter One- The Philosophical Contexts of Modern Transnational Yoga

The first item that needs to be epistemologically unpacked in the discussion of MTY is how to define the word “yoga” itself. The root of the word “religion” is thought to come from the Latin *religio* or *relegere* (infinitive form), often translated as “to gather together” or “tie again.” Similarly, the word “yoga” comes from the Sanskrit root *yuj* meaning “to bind together”, “to hold fast” or “to yoke”¹. The same root also leads to the Latin term *jungere*, meaning “to bring together”, “yoke” or “harness”². The literal meaning of that term is usually comprised of four elements: an animal that is yoked, the yoke itself, the person doing the yoking, and the ground that is being worked or plowed as a result. When used metaphorically, the ground can be interpreted as the spiritual end-point or path that a practitioner desires. What varies considerably is where a tradition self-identifies in terms of the other animate participants. In a sacred context, the yoking metaphor is particularly appropriate for capturing the description of the spiritual endeavor. On the one hand, a yoke can be a burdensome imposition designed to forcefully mold the chaotic dynamism of humanity into a moral, straight-backed whole. On the other, a yoke can be perceived as an indispensable tool for harnessing unseen power and experientially validating the potential of religious practice. The construal of the yoke symbol can take on one of those diametrically opposed meanings or anything along the continuum limited by those extremes; a tradition can identify with the “animal” doing the pulling or the “farmer” doing the plowing, but the metaphor itself remains a focal point.

The “yoga” of the Yoga school of Indian philosophy embraces all of these nuanced meanings at various times and in various contexts. One of the most daunting tasks that faces any author in discussion the philosophical schools of India to select the best way to differentiate many similar strands of thought. Of the six philosophical traditions that emerge in ancient India, the three major systems of thinking to come out of Vedic study are Sankhya, Advaita Vedanta, and Yoga³. Yoga is also an idea that represents only one thin strand in a vast web of philosophical and religious traditions known collectively as *Sanatana Dharma*⁴. In the West, this amassed wisdom is known simply as “Hinduism”, but glossing all the varieties of Hinduism under one label is somewhat misleading. All of the “yogas” combined are themselves only one of the six widely recognized philosophical systems (Sanskrit: *darsana*) that are commonly found within Hindu tradition⁵. However, outside of academics who actually study the unique systems, Yoga philosophy is arguably the best known to the West. All of this ambiguity makes it more difficult to establish a clear lineage of foundational philosophical texts for Yoga through exegetical means. There is certainly no definitive treatise that illuminates all of the beliefs and practices that are elaborated upon at a later date by Patanjali and other commentators. Most authors agree on at least a few points: the ideas of morality and the metaphysical that are eventually adopted by the Yoga philosophical tradition have their origins in a few of the later Upanishads.

The Upanishads themselves represent a large body of commentaries by different authors from different times who are dedicated to interpreting the esoteric rituals of the earlier Vedas in more spiritual terms⁶. One of the remarkable features of this collection is that the etymology of the term is directly related to the traditional means of transmission.

The Sanskrit root *upa* can be translated as “near to” while *nisad* glosses as “to sit down”⁷. Quite clearly, the wisdom contained in the collection of texts was intended to be passed orally from teacher to student through recitation and memorization. This practice would require an outstanding amount of dedication given that there are 108 Upanishads that are generally regarded as canonical⁸. The teacher-student dynamic is often considered to be a vital component of Yoga philosophy and practice; without a direct lineage of communication between a learned master and a devoted disciple, some critics have claimed that MTY is completely divorced from what yoga should be and has been. That subject will be discussed more directly in later chapters.

The earliest work to specifically deal with Yoga is most likely the *Katha-Upanishad*⁹. The story presented is a metaphorical one in which a son, to preserve his ailing father’s prosperity, volunteers to be sacrificed in place of his father’s cattle¹⁰. His father, horrified by his decision, sends him to see Yama, the god of the afterworld. The son is forced to wait many days without food before the god appears, and is granted three wishes for his patience. One of his wishes is to know the secrets of life and death. Yama tries to dissuade him, but the son, Naciketas, persists and is finally taught about the “path to emancipation”¹¹. Commentators like Feuerstein see spiritually important proto-ideas in this story: fasting, commitment to knowledge, and a confrontation with the reality of mortality¹². What is undeniably clear is that the yoking metaphor is prominently discussed in the third chapter of this Upanishad:

Know the self as a rider in a chariot, and the body as simply the chariot.

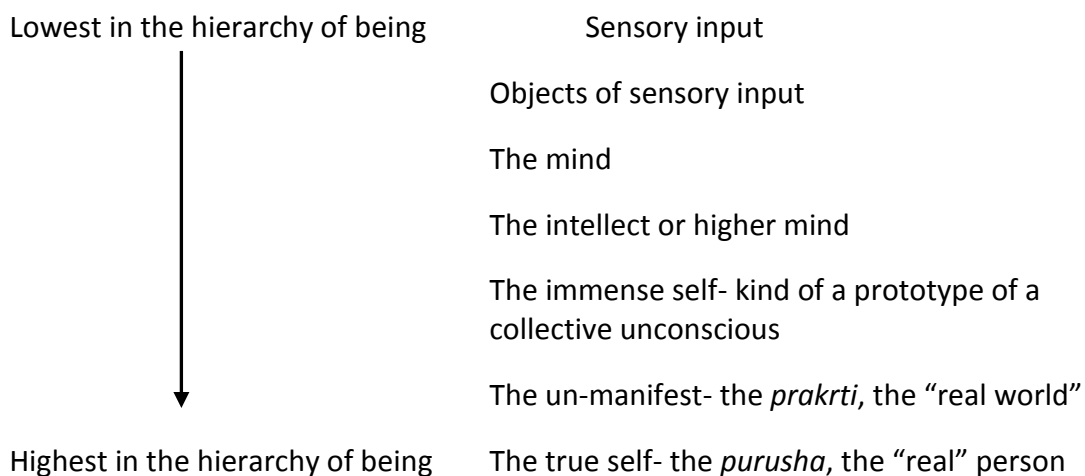
Know the intellect as the charioteer, and the mind simply as the reins¹³.

Later in the same chapter, the actual root element of *yuj* makes an appearance and is translated literally in some versions:

He whose mind is constantly unyoked, lacking in understanding- his senses are controllable like the unruly horses of a driver.

But he whose mind is always yoked- his senses are controllable like the obedient horses of a driver¹⁴.

The other vitally important philosophical ideal that is established in this text is the duality of the transcendent self and the worldly self that constitutes a core component of the Yoga system as it was expressed philosophically. Yama teaches Naciketas the hierarchy of spirituality, with sensory input being the lowest element and the transcendent self, the *purusha*, being the highest element¹⁵.



The *purusha/prakrti* duality is embraced by both the Samkhya and Yoga philosophical traditions, but it developed further in Yoga.

The component that makes the Yogic version unique comes first in the *Shvetashvatara- Upanishad*, which is usually dated to the third or fourth century BCE¹⁶. The anonymous author of this text adds the idea of a divine or theological element to the dualistic construct mentioned above¹⁷. The basic idea is that the realized self (*purusha*) must spring from some kind of eternal constant that makes the rest of the world possible; the concept that is referenced is given the name *isha* or *ishvara*, which can both be translated to “Lord.” Writers of seminal works on Indian philosophy, such as S.K. Dasgupta, focus on this as the key element which distinguishes Yoga philosophy from the plain dualism of Smakhya¹⁸. God, or *ishvara*, functions as the mechanism by which the *purusha* is differentiated and eventually realized as being separate and distinct from the *prakrti*, the world self or the worldly elements of self¹⁹. The *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* uses this concept as a focus of meditation and recommends specifically the chanting of the sacred syllable *om* to assist in controlling the senses and reaching meditative state²⁰. According to Feuerstein, the first signs of successful Yoga practice along these lines are “lightness, health, steadiness” and a variety of positive physically observable improvements²¹. There is no mention of specific postures to assist in this kind of meditational practice, but the emphasis on controlling sensory input and focusing on a divinely-inspired mantra is clear. There is even an implication that *pranayama* techniques are at least implied in this Upanishad when a reference is made to kindling the inner fire” to expose the power of the truly realized self, the *purusha*²².

The overarching philosophical themes of Yoga are prominent once again the epic narratives that are associated with Indian spirituality: the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. In each of these stories, aspects of what is later coalesced into a more complete Yogic system are in evidence. *The Bhagavad Gita*, which is perhaps the best known and most widely read and translated text associated with Indian spirituality, also communicates an important version of ideas that are later explicated by writers such as Patanjali. The first of these epics, the *Ramayana*, describes a deceptively simple story centering round Prince Rama and his effort to rescue his wife, Sita, from the clutches of the evil King Ravana²³. The prince eventually succeeds, but the virtue of his bride is called into question since she spent so much time with the evil king²⁴. Eventually, she bears Rama sons after being exiled for her apparent lack of virtue²⁵. Feuerstein argues that the principle value of the work in relation to Yoga philosophy is in the way it shows character exemplifying correct behaviors:

The significance of the *Ramayana* for students of Yoga lies in the moral values it promulgates so vividly. We can regard it as a consummate treatise, in narrative form, on what are known in Yoga as the moral disciplines (*yama*) and restraints (*niyama*). It extols virtues like righteousness (*dharma*), non-harming, truthfulness, and penance²⁶.

Likewise, the *Mahabharata*, and specifically the *Bhagavad Gita*, give similar accounts in their respective narratives of the importance of duty, self-discipline, and propitious behavior²⁷. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, the yoking metaphor once again becomes quite prominent.

The story in the *Bhagavad Gita* centers on a reluctant warrior, Arjuna, and his charioteer, who is an avatar of the Hindu god Vishnu. The context for this conversation is well known. Arjuna is a member of the Pandavas clan, and his enemies, the Kauravas, are arrayed on the field across from him²⁸. As he stands in his chariot preparing to kill enemies

in a fierce confrontation, he loses his desire to fight. His charioteer, Krishna, tries to persuade him to reconsider. In the ensuing dialogue, the avatar of Krishna uses a variety of arguments to persuade Arjuna to rejoin the fray. Because Arjuna is initially unconvinced, Krishna shifts to an appeal to a sense of duty (dharma) that is designed to persuade Arjuna to join in battle and finally resorts to a discussion of discriminating action based in the metaphysics of the disciplined mind that seeks a divine connection:

Whose self is yoked in Yoga and who beholds everywhere the same, he sees the Self abiding in all beings and all beings the same²⁹.

Of all yogins, he who loves Me with faith and whose inner self is absorbed in Me- him I deem most yoked³⁰.

The significance of this to Yoga philosophy becomes apparent when these ideas are treated as vital components of a developing and dynamic dialogue amongst the epic poetry, later Upanishads, and finally some of the redacted texts that first sought to piece together a systematized form of Yoga practice.

Other than the two Upanishads previously mentioned, the last selection that presents an easily recognizable yoga system is the *Maitrayaniya Upanishad*³¹. Eliade dates this text to the second century B.C. E., but other scholars have made claims that it is two to three centuries older³². Regardless of the exact date, the text is especially significant in that it gives, in the sixth chapter, a sketch of several elements of Yoga that begin to recur in later writings: breath control (*pranayama*), withdrawal of the senses (*pratyahara*), meditation (*dhyana*), concentration (*dharana*), reflection (*tarka*), and liberation or ecstasy (*Samadhi*)³³. Basically, it is the eight-limbed yoga put forth some time later by Patanjali, minus the ethical practices (*yama*) and restraints (*niyama*) and the postures (*asana*) articulation. It gives

perhaps the clearest precursor to the seminal work of the *Yoga Sutras* that is most often cited as the basis for “authentic” MTY practice. However, what should be immediately apparent from this very brief overview is that the philosophical system of Yoga is very much concerned with spiritual development, and not, at least in antiquity, with any kind of physical practice designed for health benefits, stress reduction, or anything else that is often at the center of MTY activity.

With these preliminary elements outlined, it is appropriate to delve more deeply into the *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali and discuss their import to the philosophical tradition of Yoga and as a benchmark of modern practice. There are two remarkable features about this text that are worth mentioning as preliminaries. First, the date of the text is not certain: most scholars place the origination of the *Yoga Sutras* in the fourth to second centuries B.C.E.³⁴. Given that rough time period, it is easy to conclude that Patanjali would have been exposed not just to the orthodox philosophical traditions of India, but also to the “heretical” teachings of the Buddhists and the Jains³⁵. This is an important distinction to point out, as it makes the *Yoga Sutras*, by definition, a work that most likely drew upon all the meditative traditions in existence at the time; it could be characterized as an edited system of practices and philosophies woven together in one place. Eliade states this most eloquently:

Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras* are the result of an enormous effort to bring together and classify a series of ascetic practices and contemplative formulas that India had known from time immemorial, but also to validate them from a theoretical point of view by establishing their bases, justifying them, and incorporating them into a philosophy³⁶.

Another feature that must be emphasized is that the actual text of the work is mostly devoted to relatively esoteric pieces of advice about spiritual pursuits. The second line of

the *Yoga Sutras* indicates this very clearly: “Yoga is the control of thought-waves in the mind”³⁷.

The volume itself is usually divided into four discrete parts and consists of only 196 aphorisms of varying lengths. The four sections cover the aims of Yoga, the specifics of practice, comments on accomplishments that come from practice, and the last section on liberation³⁸. Depending on the translator, these same sections can be labeled as contemplation, practice, accomplishments, and absoluteness³⁹. It is significant that only one of these chapter titles deals with what could be called “practice.” In fact, only one part of one section even elaborates on the ideas of yoga that are commonly thought to be universal by modern practitioners: sutra 29 in the practice section is the first and only time the eight limbs (*ashtanga*) of yoga practice are explicitly stated⁴⁰. Sutras 30-45 describe only the moral observances and restraints, while only three aphorisms, 46-49, focus on postures (*asana*)⁴¹. The only posture specifically mentioned is a seated position that helps to relax the practitioner for meditative pursuits⁴². The relatively small emphasis on practice stands in stark contrast to what MTY becomes in the 20th century. Patanjali most often concerns himself with mental disciplines that are designed to enable a practitioner to harness self-discipline and control the mind. Once again, the yoking metaphor appears with the cultivation of divine essence or true realization of the ecstatic self (*purusha*) and mastery over the physical, ego-bound self (*prakrti*) being the stated goal:

By the practice of the limbs of Yoga, the impurities dwindle away and there dawns the light of wisdom, leading to discriminative discernment⁴³.
As a result, the veil over the inner Light is destroyed⁴⁴.

Yoga practice, with its eight elements, is literally the means with which to harness transcendent energies.

Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* represent a clear starting point for what could be called "classical" yoga philosophy and practice, but they are only tangentially related to the MTY that exists in present time. Feuerstein argues that the lineage responsible for the postures we see in MTY are from *hatha yoga*, which is a related, but separate set of practices from what is described by Patanjali⁴⁵. Unfortunately, Feuerstein's work often conflates mythology with history, so some of his declarations regarding the relative importance of the seminal, pre-modern texts connected to MTY seem to be sounder than others. Two deserve specific mention here: the *Gheranda Samhita*, and the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*⁴⁶. Goraksha, a semi-mythological figure from the tenth century C.E. is credited with describing the incredible variety of postures available for a yogin: "There are as many postures as there are species of beings. Only Shiva knows all their varieties"⁴⁷. Lotus posture is described in detail, as are a number of the cleansing and breathing techniques that enthusiastic MTY practitioners seek to emulate in modern times. These include nasal cleansing, "bellows breath" practices, and alternate nostril breathing⁴⁸. Again, no vivid description of specific postures occurs in this treatise. The *Gheranda Samhita* is the first to specifically identify 32, mostly be analogies to animal forms with names like "cow-face posture," or "liberated posture"⁴⁹. Even so, ancient texts did not come with illustrations and were certainly not how-to manuals; English – speaking translators often try to piece together what a specific posture entails through the written word alone. The last, and arguably the most famous *hatha yoga* work, the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, was composed in the fourteenth century C. E. and is simply quite good at

describing poses prior to the advent of modern illustration and photography techniques: a practitioner can accomplish a reasonable facsimile of a posture through the text alone⁵⁰.

The author, Swami Svātmaṛama, only describes “essential” *asanas*; the first is *siddhasana*, the most comfortable meditation posture:

Press firmly the heel of the left foot against the perineum, and the right heel above the lingha. With the chin pressing on the chest, one should sit calmly, having restrained the senses, and gaze steadily at the space between the eyebrows. This is called the Siddha asana, the opener of the door of salvation⁵¹.

As evidenced by this, the most basic physical posture for *hatha yoga*, the physicality is viewed only as a means to a spiritual end.

Even with all of these threads of philosophy, physical practice, and textual history in place, it is still difficult to connect the forms of MTY with what is described in texts from two millennia ago. Later developments in *hatha yoga* literature seem to point to some specific evolution in terms of postures and descriptions of practice, but they don’t account for the way in which MTY presently manifests. For that, the focus needs to shift to the genesis of modern interpretations, beginning in the middle of the 19th century, when initial forays into cross-cultural religious exploration began in colonial India.

Notes

1. Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* [Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990], 4.
2. Eliade, 4-5.
3. Mary Pat Fisher, *Living Religions, 6th ed.* [Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson-Prentice Hall, 2008], 71-73
4. Fisher, 41.
5. T.K.V. Desikachar, *The Heart Of Yoga: Developing a Personal Practice* [Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions International, 1999], 5.
6. Deepak Sarma, ed. *Hinduism: A Reader* [Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2008], 24.
7. Sarma, 24.
8. Georg Feuerstein, *The Yoga Tradition: Its history, Literature, Philosophy, and Practice* [Prescott, Arizona: Hohm Press, 2008], 127.
9. Feuerstein, 134.
10. Feuerstein, 134.
11. Feuerstein, 134.
12. Feuerstein, 134.
13. Sarma, 57.
14. Feuerstein, 135.
15. Sarma, 58.
16. Feuerstein, 136.
17. Feuerstein, 136.
18. Dasgupta, 37.
19. Dasgupta, 37.
20. Feuerstein, 137.
21. Feuerstein, 137.
22. Feuerstein, 137.
23. Sarma, 142-143.
24. Sarma, 142.
25. Sarma, 142.
26. Feuerstein, 185.
27. Sarma, 88-89.
28. Robert E. Van Voorst, ed. *Anthology of World Scriptures, 5th ed.* [Belmont, California: Thompson-Wadsworth, 2006], 25-104.
29. Feuerstein, 189.
30. Feuerstein, 192.

31. Feuerstein, 206.
32. Eliade, 9.
33. Feuerstein, 206.
34. Dasgupta, 29.
35. Eliade, 6.
36. Eliade, 7.
37. Swami Prabhavananda, *How to Know God: The Yoga Aphorisms of Patanjali*, trans. Christopher Isherwood [Hollywood, California: Vedanta Press, 1981], 15.
38. Swami Prabhavananda, 5.
39. Sri Swami Satchidananda, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* [Yogaville, Virginia: Integral Yoga Publications, 2007],x
40. Swami Prabhavananda, 140.
41. Swami Prabhavananda, 141-162.
42. Swami Prabhavananda, 159-161.
43. Swami Satchidananda, 124.
44. Swami Satchidananda, 163.
45. Feuerstein, 381.
46. Feuerstein, 400.
47. Feuerstein, 401.
48. Feuerstein, 391-392.
49. Feuerstein, 393.
50. Feuerstein, 423.
51. Swami Svatmarama, *The Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, trans. Brian Dana Akers [Woodstock, New York: YogaVidya.com, 2002], 16.

Chapter Two- The Genesis of Current Practice

There are various points to begin the narrative of yoga history in the West, but the most reliable and thoroughly researched access point is through the life of Swami Vivekananda and his publication of *Raja Yoga* in 1896¹. Prior to that time, only fleeting glimpses of Indian philosophy and culture come across to the Western world in print. The first relatively modern translation of Patanjali arrives in 1883². While the first attempt at an illustrated version of the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* comes in 1830³, it is really not until the 1893 Parliament of World Religions that Indian philosophy comes to the international stage in a meaningful way through the presence of Vivekananda and his subsequent work as a lecturer and author. What is often glossed over, however, is who Vivekananda really was prior to his rise to fame in the United States. His agenda of Indian nationalism and pragmatic fundraising are often lost in more hagiographic accounts of his life and work. Remarkably, even many 20th century yoga scholars simply ignore that reality, preferring to dwell on “pure” forms of yoga as they existed in antiquity. Mircea Eliade, in his landmark text *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, never mentions Vivekananda; neither does S.N. Dasgupta, Eliade’s mentor in Indian philosophy. Georg Feuerstein, arguably the most prolific 20th century writer on the topic of yoga, mentions him only in passing as a prominent *jnana yogin* (i.e. a practitioner who approaches the yoking metaphor through contemplation and knowledge alone)⁴. This could be due to an assumption on the part of all the named authors above that Vivekananda was only a popular source for MTY tradition and not an innovator. However, the following discussion will show that belief to be misguided.

Facts about the early life of Narandranth Datta, the future Swami Vivekananda, are not generally a part of the “common” knowledge about the development of MTY in the United States. Datta was born in Calcutta in 1863⁵. As a young man, he was educated in the tradition of other prosperous, modern Hindus and became familiar with Western philosophical thinkers such as Emmanuel Kant, Hegel, Hume and Schopenhauer⁶. By 1884, Datta had joined the Calcutta branch of the Freemasons and had become involved with the entourage of a Punjabi social reformer, Keshubchandra Sen⁷. Sen’s agenda included a re-popularization of the four branches of yoga (*jnana, bhakti, karma, and raja*) as the most worthwhile method for pursuing Hindu religiosity. He spearheaded the “revivalist interpretation” of classical Hindu philosophy as part of a larger movement of Hindu modernity⁸. It was under those influences that Vivekananda travelled to the West: primarily to raise funds for the efforts of Sen’s Indian nationalist agenda. In letters of the time, Vivekananda went so far as to explicitly state his objective of “selling spirituality” to the West in exchange for hard currency the movement needed⁹. It seems then, even at this early juncture, that there was an awareness of the mercantile capacity of the West and an early attempt to market towards that type of spiritual consumerism.

De Michelis argues that Vivekananda was further encouraged by the interest in occult systems and esoteric thinking that was experiencing a vogue in the United States at the end of the 19th century¹⁰. Groups like the Theosophical Society had gained in popularity in that time period, and the interest in exotic forms of religious expression was certainly on the upswing. The Parliament of World Religions in 1893 reflected that perspective. Vivekananda was not initially an invited guest, but showed up anyway to peddle his version

of Indian philosophy. He was billed by the organizers as a simple Hindu monk, even though his true circumstances were far removed from that claim¹¹. His speeches during the Parliament sparked interest in Indian philosophy, and Vivekananda was almost immediately booked with numerous speaking engagements in the United States, primarily along the East Coast¹². His success in these venues prompted him to make bolder proclamations about his influence: in 1895 he wrote that he wanted to “manufacture some yogis” by running a retreat in the summer of 1895¹³. This effort culminated in the publication of *Raja Yoga* in 1896.

The text itself is divided into two sections; the first is a collection of talks delivered in the winter of 1895-1896 and the second part is a very loose translation of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*¹⁴. Much like more modern 21st century teachers and researchers, Vivekananda goes to great pains to emphasize the scientific nature of yoga by drawing parallels between modern physics and the ideas of Samkhya/Yoga philosophy regarding form, matter, energy, and the human place amongst those forces¹⁵. Vivekananda then reinterpreted the four yoga types previously identified by Sen in order to match them with “the four general types of men... the rational, the emotional, the mystic, and the worker”¹⁶. Combined with his interpretations of core ideas from the Upanishads regarding the realization of the divine, *Raja Yoga* became an immensely popular volume, and Vivekananda became a spokesperson for Indian philosophy in the West. However, his contributions were not just that of a conduit of information but also as a primary force in shaping the actual content of material as it was translated for English-speaking audiences¹⁷. As De Michelis writes of *Raja Yoga*:

Essentially, this book represents Vivekananda's attempt to understand and interpret the Classical Yoga of Patanjali and a selection of *hatha yoga* techniques on the basis of the beliefs that he shared with his cultic milieu followers¹⁸.

Vivekananda's influence on the development of MTY at this time should not be underestimated, especially for the worldwide English speaking audience. *Raja Yoga* became a staple of Hindu philosophical interpretation at the time and is still currently published by the Ramakrishna foundation.

Despite this intellectual influence, there is still a large gap between what was interpreted and communicated in *Raja Yoga* and what appeared on the international scene some 60+ years later as MTY. Vivekananda himself discounts the kind of *hatha yoga* exercises for which MTY is best known as being ineffectual because they "cannot be learned in a day, and after all, do not lead to much spiritual growth"¹⁹. He further develops his dislike for physical forms by making a very clear distinction between "mere physical exercises" and the spiritual contemplation he outlines in *Raja Yoga*²⁰. Modern yoga scholars such as Singleton trace this intellectual posturing back to the image of the yoga practitioner at the end of the 19th century. In the light of the cultural norms of the time, European observers viewed Indian *yogins* as naked, dirty men who performed bizarre tricks with their bodies in the public square²¹. Early ethnographers like Max Muller dismissed any of the physical, non-intellectual forms of yoga as tortuous practices executed by men who were better called jugglers or contortionists²². Folk stories also connected the esoteric practices and postures of physical, *hatha yoga* with bandits and brigands of the Indian countryside who relied on them to endure their rough lifestyle²³. This begs the question of how physical

practices of MTY can be accounted for given their categorical rejection in arguably the most influential yoga treatise of the modern period.

Again, Singleton's work here is groundbreaking. In the period starting with the early 20th century, he traces a number of vital threads that come together in a kind of axial period for MTY in Mysore, India between 1931 and 1936. Prior to that time, movements in modern Hindu nationalism coupled with imported ideas about physical fitness and European-style bodybuilding coalesced and connected. One representative group amongst these movements, and arguably the most potent, was the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which was founded in the early 1920s²⁴. The group name translates roughly to "national volunteers organization" and the philosophy embraced by the group in the early part of the 20th century was clearly concerned with social and cultural reform through the promotion of Hindu ideals²⁵. Throughout its history and up until modern times, the smallest local groups of the RSS, known as *sakha*, take part in day-to-day training that includes "singing patriotic songs, playing team games and sports, listening to lectures, performing volunteer public service, and taking part in mass paramilitary drill exercise"²⁶. The group also promoted cultural strength through physical exercise and martial arts. Moral weakness in the face of post-colonial oppression was equated with the generally unhealthy physical state of citizens; conversely, a strong, athletic body provided the foundation a morally upstanding and decidedly Hindu view of how the world should be. Hatha yoga postures were mixed into the physical regimens in the early part of the 20th century as both a way to promote physicality and re-appropriate a uniquely Indian system of movement. As Joseph Alter writes:

In an important way, however, the complex and incomplete integration of Yoga into *sakha* practice, along with the concern of the RSS with the man making, defines a

very specific contextual framework for understanding the relationship between bodies and health in the context of nationalism, broadly defined. The RSS has inspired several individuals to do more with Yoga than is it able or willing to do...²⁷.

Other Indian intellectuals, like Vivekenanda's mentor, Keshubchandra Sen, viewed as important work the cultivation of minds, bodies, and souls to turn the Indian people into something other than the "feeble people" they had become under British domination²⁸. The stereotypes of the effeminate Indian male lacking in physical vigor or cultural courage were "used as goads by Hindu nationalist leaders and physical culture revivalists alike"²⁹. It is also worth mentioning that the re-introduction of the Olympic Games for modern times corresponded to this period; the first organized events were held in Athens in 1896³¹. This global development was not lost on Indians who were looking for footholds in the community of advanced nations.

All of those influences came became an integrated confluence in the type of yoga eventually practiced and taught by Krishnamacharya and his influential 20th century students. The practices of physical development embraced by some Indian teachers were viewed as a gateway to a modern, scientific way of viewing the human body. An emphasis on the parallels between physical development and moral/spiritual development also served to combat the rationale given by the British as to why India remained a colony (i.e. Indians were physically weaker as a "race," so it made sense that they needed a strong European hand to guide them)³⁰.

This strong emphasis on physicality is exemplified in the popularity of the work of Eugene Sandow whose teachings were so influential on what later developed into MTY, that some modern yoga scholars make the argument that his influence on the practice surpasses

that of Vivekananda and others.³² Sandow popularized the physical culture of bodybuilding in the late 19th and early 20th centuries³³. Singleton claims that Sandow was “already a cultural hero in India” when he stopped there on his tour of the Far East in 1905³⁴. Sandow’s attitude towards physical training focused on an almost religious obsession with transforming the body through discipline and strict physical regimens³⁵. It had the potential to function “as a symbolic rebuttal of colonial degeneracy narratives and-at times- and an underpinning for violent, forcible resistance”³⁶. This attention to physical development resulted in a “rescaramization of the body” that blended effortlessly with a renewed interest in physical yoga forms³⁷.

The other strand of imported physical culture that played a key role in the development of Krishnamacharya’s branch of yoga was the influence of the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) in India during the early part of the 20th century. It is somewhat surprising that an organization with a relatively conservative American pedigree can be viewed as an important player in the lineage of MTY, but this is exactly the case. Interestingly, the physical activity programs initiated internationally by YMCA branches were explicitly designed to communicate primary values of hard work, discipline and healthy living, especially those versions prioritized by American Christians³⁸. The YMCA’s tripartite emphasis on the mind, body, and spirit also integrated fluidly into the context of Indian thinking and its emerging brand of unique physical culture. In 1919, H.C. Buck, an early 20th century YMCA director in India, set up the first school for Indian physical education directors and was the primary trainer for the first India Olympic team that competed in the 1924 Paris events³⁹. The creation of that institution is a clear indication that the national climate of

physical education in India was primarily influenced by Western ideas in the period intervening between the publication of *Raja Yoga* in 1896 and the emergence of the first English language yoga texts describing physical, postural practices towards the mid-20th century. If that is the case, then scholars like Singleton and Alter are correct in their general assertions that MTY is a result of a reflexive process of syncretism in regards to the physical practices associated with modern forms.

That conclusion is further bolstered by the work of one of Sandow's enthusiastic admirers: K.V. Iyer. It was Iyer who consciously merged the idea of *hatha yoga* practice with that of modern strength conditioning. He also was familiar with Hindu nationalist movements as was popular during the early part of the 20th century, Iyer advertised a "physical culture correspondence school" as early as 1927⁴⁰. His pamphlets guaranteed results of increased vigor, overall health, and a muscular, fat-free physique. He promised devotees of his plan the appearance and power of Sandow with the disease immunity of the *hatha yogin*⁴¹. Iyer even became a trainer to the rich and famous in India: his most well-known client was Krishnarajendra Wadiyar who was the Maharaja of Mysore from 1894 to 1940. The Maharaja, after suffering a stroke, was assisted in his recovery by Iyer and subsequently granted him a space in Jaganmohan Palace in Mysore to promote physical training for aristocratic young men in the area⁴². Reports from the Jaganmohan Palace specifically mention that the purpose of the yoga studio was to "promote the physical well-being" of local boys, especially those housed at a local boarding school⁴³. The serendipity of this circumstance is apparent due to the physical proximity of Iyer's studio to that of Krishnamacharya in the same palace complex. According to Singleton, the two influential

teachers conducted classes in areas literally yards apart; they also taught evening classes at the same time every day⁴⁴. In all probability, they engaged in what most teachers in close proximity to each other do: share ideas, compare philosophies, and compete for a share of the same pool of students. From this interaction, “the crucible of today’s most popular styles of modern postural yoga” was formed⁴⁵.

Krishnamacharya himself received his yoga training from a variety of sources during the early part of the 20th century. However, most biographers chronicle his seven years in Tibet from around 1916 to 1923 as being the period of his greatest development as a yoga practitioner⁴⁶. During those years, he studied with Ramamohan Brahmachari near Lake Manasarovar in the southwestern corner of Tibet⁴⁷. These studies meshed well with his earlier academic work in philosophy at schools in Benares and Mysore. Krishnamacharya returned to the Mysore area at the instruction of his Tibetan teacher in order to spread the “true” teachings of Patanjali⁴⁸. He continued as an itinerant teacher for several years, and was finally given patronage by the Maharaja of Mysore in 1933 after having been invited by the Maharaja to lecture at a local cultural center two years before⁴⁹. Relatively early in his tenure at the Mysore Palace, he attracted some of the pupils who would become internationally recognized and inextricably associated with the popularization of MTY: B.K.S. Iyengar and Indra Devi both trained with Krishnamacharya in the period from 1933 to 1940 while Pattabhi Jois started in 1927⁵⁰. Those three students shaped a number of important threads that have been vital in weaving together the narrative of MTY construction as a physical and spiritual export.

Krishnamacharya's yoga style incorporated a number of techniques borrowed or adapted from the physical culture reform movements that were still popular at the time. Some of the poses that were taught to pupils were specifically designed to be attention-grabbers in public performances⁵¹. The Maharaja of Mysore instructed Krishnamacharya to organize public displays of yoga with some frequency in order to promote yoga as a reputable practice of physical fitness with Indian roots⁵²; in order to grab the attention of otherwise disinterested audiences, routines were developed for Krishnamacharya's young student that were very much in the "tradition of acrobatics and contortionism" that had been borrowed from the West and re-incorporated into a uniquely Indian system⁵³. In addition, the postures described in his first published text, *Yoga Makaranda*, were the results of ongoing experimentation and adaptation in the yoga studio, not the result of new interpretations of ancient asana texts. As an instructor, his credibility was only enhanced by his esoteric experiences studying at the shores of a lake in Tibet that has spiritual significance for both Buddhists and Hindus: the creation of Lake Manasarovar is attributed directly to Brahma⁵⁴. In some ways, this authentic pedigree coupled with the academic background of Krishnamacharya was instrumental in developing the seeds of MTY in this period, and the work and testimony of his most prominent students only added to his mystique.

Krishnamacharya's yoga legacy is undoubtedly the most prominent in the 20th century, largely due to the popularity of his most notable pupils. The first of his students to market exclusively to Western practitioners was Indra Devi, one of the first Western women to train in MTY techniques. After leaving Mysore, she eventually landed in Los Angeles and

began teaching asana techniques to Hollywood celebrities such as Jennifer Jones, Greta Garbo, and Gloria Swanson⁵⁵. The association of MTY and celebrity is not a recent phenomenon, but is, in fact, an early adaptation to expand the visibility of yoga practice and theory for larger audiences. Devi is famously noted for being the first Westerner to charge her clients fees for her teachings: she believed that Americans were “incapable of developing respect for anything that was free”⁵⁶. During the same period, she was also befriended by Elizabeth Arden, the cosmetics magnate, who sponsored her work in Los Angeles and abroad. However, most notably, Devi produced two publications directed specifically towards English-speaking audiences in the United States: *Forever Young, Forever Healthy* in 1954 and *Yoga for Americans: A Complete 6-Week Course for Home Practice* in 1959. It is clear just from the titles of these early texts on yoga that instruction for the American audience appealed to a results-oriented, consumer-driven culture.

B.K.S. Iyengar, another of Krishnamacharya’s students can arguably be identified as the most influential yoga instructor of the 20th century. His first major written work, *Light on Yoga*, was published in 1966, and represents the real beginning of what most MTY scholars term the modern age⁵⁷. The text quickly became a best-seller and brought postural yoga practice to the public in the United States for the first time en masse. Iyengar’s writing provided an accessible and relatively comprehensive guide with numerous photographs of postures⁵⁸. The author himself portrayed his own health improvements as being due to regular yoga practice⁵⁹. Through the last part of the 20th century, Iyengar continued with two more landmark publications that completed his “yoga trilogy”: *Light on Pranayama* in 1981 and *Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* in 1993⁶⁰. The true measure of Iyengar’s

influence can only be partially measured through his comprehensive written works; the work of his students has been instrumental in the worldwide spread of MTY. Rodney Yee, for example, was a student of B.K.S. Iyengar, and he is one of the best known yoga teachers in the United States⁶¹.

A host of other Indian teachers helped to export ideas to the West, but most of them brought philosophies and doctrines, not necessarily physical practices⁶². Teachers such as Paramahansa Yogananda (founder of the Self-Realization fellowship), Jiddu Krishnamurti (chosen as a boy to be a religious leader) and even Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (founder of the Transcendental Meditation movement) brought their own versions of Indian wisdom to a largely receptive Western audience⁶³. However, the focus on physical aspects of yoga specifically did not gain considerable traction in the United States until prominent teachers like Krishnamacharya became more accessible to a wider audience through their students⁶⁴. Other yoga teachers, like Swami Rama and Swami Sri Kripalvanandji also touched down on North American soil and left their own marks on the yoga landscape⁶⁵. Other teachers worked more exclusively in India to promote the scientific validation of yoga health practices: Swami Kuvalayananda conducted in-depth experiments from 1924 to 1966 at the Kaivalyadhama Yoga Ashram in a small town between Pune and Bombay⁶⁶. Kuvalayananda wanted to use science to uncover universal truths about humanity that he believed were accessible through yoga. Swami Sivananda, who used Vivekenanda's writings as the basis of his own teachings, was another incredibly influential 20th century teacher⁶⁷. One of his most notable pupils was Mircea Eliade, the famous cross-cultural religious scholar⁶⁸.

It is from these various progenitors that MTY developed. Most Indian teachers have produced as least one “crop” of Western students who themselves have gone on to gain some prominence in teaching. Sri Krishnamacharya’s son, T.K. V. Desikachar, who also became a skilled teacher of his father’s style, and one of Desikachar’s students, Gary Kraftsow, has gone on to some prominence as well⁶⁹. Pattabhi Jois, one of the earliest of Krishnamacharya’s students, has also produced a collection of prominent, modern teachers. However, in many ways, the names and lineages of teachers in the modern era are less important than the teachings themselves. MTY styles vary in the emphasis they place on different areas of practice; some consider alignment in postures as vitally important while others emphasize breathing and bodily self-acceptance⁷⁰. What seems to be of the greatest import with all the styles is that the practitioner actually *practices*. It is only through the experience of going through the postures and the breathing exercises that the claims of MTY for physical and mental health can be realized. In the words of Swami Rama, only “patience, perseverance and regularity ensure success”⁷¹. Whether the benefits of that practice are medicinal, spiritual, mental, social, or some combination seems to be a choice of the individual MTY practitioner. Most modern Western teachers are aware of this breadth of appeal and tailor to their audiences accordingly.

Notes

1. De Michelis, 20-21
2. Mark Singleton, "The Classic Reveries of Modern Yoga: Patanjali and Constructive Orientalism," *Yoga in the Modern World: Contemporary Perspectives* ed. Mark Singleton [New York: Routledge, 2008], 83.
3. Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010], 171
4. Feuerstein, 32
5. De Michelis, 91.
6. De Michelis, 96.
7. De Michelis, 83.
8. De Michelis, 87.
9. De Michelis, 108.
10. Elizabeth De Michelis, "Modern Yoga: History and Forms," *Yoga in the Modern World: Contemporary Perspectives* ed. Mark Singleton [New York: Routledge, 2008]
11. De Michelis, 112.
12. De Michelis, 113.
13. De Michelis, 121.
14. De Michelis, 149.
15. De Michelis, 156-157.
16. De Michelis, 124
17. De Michelis, 127.
18. De Michelis, 150.
19. Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 71.
20. Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 71.
21. Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 70-80
22. Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 75
23. Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 70-80
24. Joseph Alter, *Yoga in Modern India: The Body between Science and Philosophy* [Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004], 143.
25. Alter, 144.
26. Alter, 145.
27. Alter, 148.
28. Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 98.
29. Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 97.
30. Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 95.
31. Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 96.

32. Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 88.
33. Alter, 28.
34. Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 89. Even though Singleton's claims about the status of Sandow in India are arguable, his influence on the development of MTY can be traced quite clearly.
35. Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 89-90.
36. Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 89.
37. Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 89.
38. Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 91.
39. Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 92.
40. Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 125.
41. Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 123.
42. Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 124.
43. Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 181.
44. Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 125.
45. Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 125.
46. Desikachar, xvi.
47. Desikachar, xv.
48. Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 177.
49. Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 177.
50. Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 175.
51. Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 194.
52. Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 192.
53. Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 194.
54. Sacred Destinations, "Lake Manasarovar," <http://www.sacred-destinations.com/tibet/lake-manasarovar> [accessed January 12, 2010].
55. Adriana Aboy, "Indra Devi's Legacy," *Hinduism Today*, <http://www.hinduismtoday.com/modules/smartsection/item.php?itemid=3846> [accessed February 13, 2010].
56. Kenneth Liberman, "The Reflexivity of the Authenticity of Hatah Yoga," *Yoga in the Modern World: Contemporary Perspectives* ed. Mark Singleton [New York: Routledge, 2008], 107.
57. De Michelis, 198-199.
58. Iyengar's most recent manuals contain more color photos and more elaborate descriptions than ever before.
59. De Michelis, 200.
60. De Michelis, 208.

61. Donna Belk, "How Yoga Came to the United States." *Dbelk.com*.
http://www.dbelk.com/Library/MB_Belk_yoga-in-US-resources.pdf [accessed July 12, 2010].
62. Authors like Feuerstein have published extensively on these topics.
63. Feuerstein.
64. Desikachar, xvi.
65. Swami Rama, *The Royal Path: Practical Lessons on Yoga* [Honesdale, Pennsylvania: Himalayan Institute Press, 1998], 141.
66. Alter, 82-84.
67. Sarah Strauss, *Positioning Yoga: Balancing Acts Across Cultures* [Oxford: Berg, 2005].
68. Strauss, xvii.
69. Weintraub, 107.
70. Weintraub, 100-109.
71. Swami Rama, 28.

Chapter Three- Yoga as Medicinal Therapy

MTY's roots in the physical culture movements in India during the early part of the 20th century was closely connected to the use of yoga practice for therapeutic or medicinal reasons. Both K.V. Ayer and Krishnamachaya extolled the virtue of postural yoga practice for physical vitality and the prevention of disease. Teachers of MTY such as B.K.S. Iyengar have developed this idea to such a specific degree that posture books actually contain recipes for preventing and curing common afflictions ranging from digestive problems to anxiety. As a result of these marketing efforts, health conscious consumers have been quick to embrace promising alternative therapeutic and preventative practices, and MTY has gained a substantial following. Professional organizations such as the Yoga Alliance echo the claims of many teachers who pioneered the Indian tradition in the West: yoga can prevent disease, cure chronic conditions, reduce stress, and maintain health in a way unlike any other single discipline or therapy¹.

In the last thirty years, the availability of MTY instruction of various styles has expanded enormously. This expansion has reached such proportions that teacher training programs in America number in the hundreds². Most local gyms and community recreation programs offer some kind of MTY instruction in addition to other modes of fitness training and relaxation techniques. Increasingly, hospitals and stress reduction courses are including MTY techniques as part of their programming³. However, most Western practitioners, especially those in America, initially see MTY as something less than it was originally conceived: it's an exercise and a stress reliever, but not a religious discipline or even a

method of holistically changing everything about a person, from ethics to physiology. All of the challenging meditational and spiritual components have been removed to a large extent.

Remarkably, it is the message of positive therapeutic value that is exactly what has been put forward with great consistency by the waves of Indian MTY teachers who have immigrated to the United States in the 20th century. Their claims have ranged from the basic (i.e. improved circulation, relaxation, strength and flexibility) to the seemingly preposterous (i.e. telepathy and clairvoyance)⁴. Western science has been testing the impact of MTY practice since the early part of the 20th century⁵. In fact, according to one source, over 2,000 empirical studies have been performed involving MTY practice in the last 85+ years⁶. Because many of these pieces of research had Indian authors, their results were often suspect, and many Westerners assumed the methodology was less rigorous than the standard in the West⁷.

Part of the expansion in the popularity of MTY, specifically the aspects of *asana* (posture) and *pranayama* (breathing), has been the increasing interest on the part of “mainstream” doctors and scientists to test the effects of the ancient practice by the standards of modern empirical science. The main assumption to be challenged always stems from the same skepticism: how can such a simple, accessible system of mind-body integration do so much so mysteriously? MTY is claimed to be a “preventive as well as curative system of the body, mind, and spirit”⁸. However, does this reputation stand up to the scrutiny of modern scientific challenges? The answer, it seems, is resoundingly positive, and that marketing niche is one that has been utilized almost ubiquitously by modern instructors.

These specific claims are broad and far-reaching, but the list can be consolidated into a few general categories⁹:

- Physical- Increased flexibility, increased physical strength, improved cardiovascular efficiency, lowered blood pressure, improved spinal alignment, alleviation of chronic pain, joint rehabilitation, etc...
- Mental- decreased stress levels, decreased levels of depressive symptoms, decreased levels of anxiety, improved concentration, improved positive attitude, less mood fluctuation, increased emotional stability, etc...
- Spiritual- increased sense of belonging, connection to a deeper sense of “self”, greater compassion for other human beings, etc...

Since it is very difficult to quantitatively measure spiritual benefits of MTY practice, only the physical and mental health claims of MTY will be included in this section. For each category, a host of experimental protocols have been attempted to help verify the claims of practitioners. Some measures, such as blood pressure, respiratory rate, and blood oxygen saturation are relatively incontrovertible. Other measures, like anxiety symptom inventories, are more open to interpretation, but if they are accepted as being valid diagnostic tools by the mental health community, it would seem to be reasonable to accept them as good measures of MTY efficacy in those areas.

Increasingly, using these kinds of tools, Western science has been able to validate the claims of MTY practitioners through the empirical methodology of the scientific process. This trend has been on the uptick for the past 25-30 years as yoga practice has started to enter the mainstream of exercise and alternative medical therapies¹⁰. Examples of this kind

of scientific rigor can be seen in countless studies, but a landmark piece of research was conducted by Dr. Dean Ornish in 1983¹¹. He placed a group of cardiac patients on a yoga training program that included dietary changes; in three weeks, the regimen produced a tremendous drop in cholesterol levels and increased cardiac efficiency¹².

Outcomes such as these are far from unique and have been accumulating for some time. A 1993 study at the Vivekananda Kendra Yoga Research Foundation in Bangalore, India produced similar, if less dramatic results¹³. The experiment recruited 40 physical education teachers between the ages of 25 and 48 to attend a three month residential yoga camp¹⁴. All of the subjects, being physical education teachers, were in generally good health, and baseline readings were recorded as a control: body weight, diastolic and systolic blood pressure, heart and respiratory rates, breath retention times, and even measures of balance¹⁵. After the three months of training in *asana*, *pranayama*, and some meditation, the subject group showed marked decreases in blood pressure, heart rate, and overall body weight as well as an increase in breath retention time and enhanced balance/body stability¹⁶.

Significant pieces of research from the 1990s and into the 21st century have echoed the positive physiological results of earlier studies. MTY reliably lowers blood pressure and heart rate, relaxes muscles, and drastically improves cardiovascular efficiency¹⁷. It has also been proven to increase metabolic rates and improve the quality of sleep in patients with insomnia¹⁸. Again, these results, now supported by the empiricism of Western scientific methodology would not be all that surprising to any of the MTY pioneers mentioned earlier in this discussion. In fact, such outcomes would probably be expected.

What is even more remarkable, aside from the physiological changes that yoga practice brings about, are the accompanying mental health benefits that seem to arise as well. More and more, health and medical authorities in the West are coming to realize the importance of the mind-body connection in an overall wellness paradigm¹⁹. Part of this realization is the inclusion of holistic mental/physical regimens like MTY for a wide variety of mental as well as physical ailments. The history of research into the mental benefits of yoga is similar to that of the physical: more and more convincing results have been accumulating for some time. A 1993 study in the *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, for example, clearly demonstrated the superior efficacy of *pranayama* techniques for increasing “perceptions of mental and physical energy, alertness, and enthusiasm”²⁰. Relaxation techniques involving systematic muscle contractions and visualization strategies proved to be less effective²¹. Some studies have even gone deeper into *pranayama* techniques by comparing specific types of yogic breathing in relation to symptoms of chronic mental health conditions such as depression.

This type of research is exemplified by the work of a pair of physicians from the Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons²². The studies from this institution involved the comparison of *ujjayi* breathing (“ocean-sounding breath”) with a more active form known as *bhastrika* breathing (“bellows breath”) in the treatment of depressed patients. The *ujjayi* technique is characterized by deep abdominal breathing with 3-4 cycles occurring every minute²³. In this technique, the breath is taken in through the nostrils with a slight constriction of the throat that results in a slight “snoring” sound²⁴. During the exhalation, the abdomen is pulled in and pressed upward to expel air while the throat

remains slightly contracted²⁵. By contrast, *bhastrika* breathing is a controlled hyperventilation. On the inhalation, air is taken in through the nose while the practitioner's arms go overhead with the fingers spread wide²⁶. The exhalation comes with an energetic rush through the nostrils and the pumping of the elbows downward along the sides of the body²⁷. This kind of breathing is usually done rapidly, with 20-30 cycles done in one minute²⁸. It is thought that both of these techniques calm the thalamus while stimulating activity in the limbic system, both of which lead to a feeling of enhanced energy and relaxation²⁹. In addition, there is some evidence that intentional breathing strategies like those described above can stimulate the vagus nerve by way of its connection to the diaphragm, and heart and the brain. The vagus nerve, often called the "wandering" nerve, innervates muscles in the throat and neck³⁰. Other fibers engage the esophagus, stomach, and numerous other internal organs³¹. While the exact mechanism is unknown, the effects on mental health are undeniably positive³². One yoga teacher who was interviewed for this discussion connects these mental health benefits not just with the physiological, but also with the "non-judgmental self-awareness" that comes with conscientious practice³³. Whether the physiology comes before the mentality or vice versa is a question that remains to be answered.

Pranayama techniques have also been shown to have a positive impact on anxiety symptoms as well as other mental health disorders³⁴. Renowned teachers have even published "prescriptions" of MTY for anxiety that include a series of as few as 26 *asanas* (postures) coupled with *pranayama*³⁵. Some claim that following very specific sequences can treat everything from irritability to bulimia, drug addiction, and alcoholism³⁶. Many of

those claims have yet to be tested by reasonably controlled studies of MTY, but even so, the two mental health issues where yoga seems to have the most efficacy, anxiety and depression, have been tested with increasing rigor.

All of this positive evidence in support of MTY practice for overall health would seem to indicate that it should be placed in a category with other “common sense” health ideas that have become part of the canon of wellness knowledge in this country. Anyone who has come of age in the last 20-30 years can answer questions about the dangers of too much saturated fat, the hazards of smoking, the benefits of regular exercise, and the value of fluoride toothpaste. All of those realities were mostly unknown at the beginning of the 20th century, yet their veracity has not been questioned since they became part of the knowledge that every American has about health. What has not joined that canon of knowledge is the notion that MTY practice is good for almost anyone, regardless of age, infirmity, or pre-existing conditions³⁷. This begs a simple question that will be the focus of the remainder of this discussion: why have yoga enthusiasts faced such skepticism and incredulity when a mounting body of evidence overwhelmingly supports the benefits of the practice? The answer is not straightforward, but many pieces of evidence point to combination of arrogance and ignorance that seems nonsensical given the fact that yoga teachers have always insisted that nothing about their teachings should be taken on blind faith³⁸. Since yoga practice is intrinsically experiential, any practitioner is forced to evaluate the practice based on what they encounter; there is no doctrine or dogma that needs to be accepted without a healthy degree of skepticism³⁹. The emphasis placed on these measurable results reinforces the belief that MTY is best understood as a health-club pursuit instead of a

spiritual practice. Even so, many individuals are drawn to yoga because it represents a different kind of medical paradigm that is opposed to the drug model of therapy.

Drugs of all kinds, usually deriving from plant compounds, have been used in medical treatments since ancient times, but no systematic body of experimental evidence was amassed until the early 1800s⁴⁰. What that means is that the dominant medical paradigm of today has only been around 200+ years; by comparison, MTY techniques are at least ten times as old⁴¹. In addition, many of the chronic ailments that actually end up causing serious problems or death (i.e. cancer, diabetes, viral infections, etc...) are things that modern, allopathic (another label for current medical science, as opposed to homeopathy or chiropractic treatments) medicine have not been able to defeat⁴². The current practice of treating specific symptoms or clusters of symptoms in line with the specific diagnosis of an ailment results in patients taking any number of compounds to remove those symptoms and promote health. However, what is that paradigm of wellness actually illustrating? It seems to be based on the assumption that human beings are in a state of wellness at all times, *except* when they experience some physical discomfort or mental distress. Only then do they need to be “cured” of that discomfort or distress, often through pain-killers, cholesterol reducers, blood thinners, libido enhancers, tranquilizers, hormone additives, or any number of other categories of drugs. Yogic science makes very different assumptions about the wellness of human beings. For the MTY practitioner, especially one who embraces the philosophy of the system, being alive means accumulating physical and mental stress every day⁴³. It is simply not possible to live in the world and be free from aches and pains that come with the ownership of a human body and the mental stress of family and work

demands. What some varieties of MTY teach is to exorcise these influences daily *before* they turn into symptoms that need curing; in short, the approach is preventive instead of curative. Again, this method appears to be eminently practical and blatantly empirical.

However, there appears to be a major disconnect in what is considered acceptable empirical evidence and what is not. For example, if a researcher only views large-sample, multi-site, double-blind trials as acceptable proof of a mode of therapy, then yoga would not even be in the running. However, by the more realistic standard of verification through repeated experience, MTY research can be considered as empirical as any other. How many pieces of anecdotal, qualitative evidence need to be accumulated before the need for large-scale quantitative studies is simply too great to ignore?

It is in this last contrast that the competing interpretations of what constitutes necessary and sufficient evidence for the claims of MTY come to light. On the one hand, the grass roots empiricism of thousands of successful practitioners supports what the authority of Western science has only begun exploring in the last few decades. On the other hand, the authority of the Western scientific approach wants to dismiss competing ideas about wellness and paradigms of health in order to maintain a stranglehold on mechanisms of healing: an effective way to do that is by re-framing what constitutes “empirical” evidence.

That is certainly not a new pattern given the history of health traditions in the Western culture. The American Medical Association (AMA), for example, has actively suppressed competing modalities like chiropractic, homeopathic, and herbal medicine⁴⁴. The organization has been “militant and exclusive” from the start⁴⁵. In the late 19th century, the AMA worked to have homeopathic practitioners barred from state medical societies,

and, by 1923, the group had succeeded in virtually shutting down homeopathic medical training in the United States⁴⁶. Considering the AMA did not even recognize female physicians until 1915, it is not surprising that they have enthusiastically pursued legislation to limit the application of alternative approaches to health in order to further a hegemonic agenda. In 1987, the AMA lost a landmark case in which a federal judge ruled that they had engaged in an illegal boycott of chiropractic treatments by censoring references to the technique⁴⁷. This practice violated, of all things, the Sherman Anti-Trust Act; the AMA was trying to keep their monopoly on what was considered by the general public to be “legitimate” health practices⁴⁸. All of these examples seem to be prime evidence of a bias against alternative mechanisms for promoting physical and emotional well being, such as MTY.

This clash of competing empiricisms seems to be won more and more by the side of MTY. A recent large survey of wellness practices in America indicated that more than 40% of the citizens of the United States are using some kind of alternative health therapy or practice⁴⁹. In 2002, the American Medical Student Association came out with a position paper encouraging changes to medical school curricula so that it covers alternative practices like MTY⁵⁰. In addition, universities around the country are more commonly offering education in traditional yogic science and are putting forward responsible research in the same⁵¹. Yoga as a holistic “self-care” strategy is even turning up in modern professional journals as a worthwhile activity⁵².

Today, anyone interested in pursuing the teachings of MTY can go to a local bookstore or a nearby gym to sample what the ancient practices have to offer. That in itself

seems to be evidence that the obstacles put in the path of alternative health paradigms fall relatively quickly when weighed against the pragmatism of the knowledgeable, health-conscious individual. One Kripalu-style yoga instructor previously referenced in this discussion is very optimistic about the future of MTY:

I see great things in the future of yoga. Doctors are prescribing yoga to patients with all kinds of ailments including cancer, MS, and depression... In ten or fifteen years, I see bed top yoga being offered to hospital patients, breathing techniques to help reduce pain, and meditation for those receiving chemotherapy⁵³.

If that kind of vision came to pass, it would probably indicate a very real shift in how wellness and health are viewed in the West. It would also mark a victory of sorts for a more egalitarian form of empiricism.

Notably, the kind of medicinal claims made by MTY practitioners and teachers are reminiscent of the kind of experiential demands made by modern spiritual seekers as well. In almost any aspect of human life, citizens of Western countries especially define themselves by what they consume, be it medical therapy, spiritual experience, or some combination of the two. Those who doubt the medical model of health choose alternative therapies; those who are dissatisfied with their spiritual experiences chose another item from the buffet of spirituality that is the modern religious marketplace. This emphasis on the choice and consumption of MTY as a multi-faceted commodity will be the focus of the next chapter.

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Chapter Four- Modern Transnational Yoga in the Spiritual Marketplace

Previous chapters have shown that the evolution of MTY can be traced through a number of innovations and interpretations from the late 19th until the middle of the 20th. What is often not addressed by current yoga scholars is the most recent period of development: the boom in popularity that has taken place in the last years of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st. Authors like De Michelis provide the most involved attempts at identifying distinct periods in the development of MTY, but even her classification avoids specifics when it comes to the past twenty years of yoga evolution. She labels her categories as popularization, consolidation, and finally acculturation¹. The popularization age is identified as roughly 1950 to the early to mid 1970s which means it incorporates some of the key publications in English about yoga. Notably, the first works of Devi and Iyengar come out during this period. From the 1970s to the late 1980s, De Michelis argues that various kinds of yoga schools established as counter-culture movements in the late 1960s and early 1970s either adapted and consolidated or simply vanished as viable entities. There seems to be some historical support for this claim, as the proliferation of available teachers of various types of yoga seemed to occur in this time frame with certain gurus gaining larger followings than others. For example, Swami Prabhupada, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Swami Rama, and Amrit Desai all established centers, schools, or societies in the period between 1966 and 1974 (see timeline in appendix). The last period De Michelis identifies is the acculturation age from the early 1990s onward. She asserts that yoga, mostly in its postural form, became a common fixture both within the context of physical culture and lifestyle adherents. Again, this claim seems reasonable given the spike in the

perceived ubiquity of yoga instruction and publication during that period. Unsurprisingly, it also roughly coincides with Iyengar's additional texts: *Light on Pranayama- The Yogic Art of Breathing* in 1985 and *Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* in 1993 (see appendix timeline). *Yoga Journal*, the most popular English language periodical on the subject, also experienced an upswing in circulation during the decade of the 1990s.

Running parallel to this history, De Michelis also provides a useful typology of the different types of yoga that emerge in the West, only one of which really evolves into what could be called MTY. She describes four major categories:

- *Modern Psychosomatic Yoga (MPsY)*- focus is placed on body-mind-spirit training; the teachings of Vivekananda could fall into this category
- *Modern Postural Yoga (MPY)*- focus is on postures and breathing; Iyengar and Jois are both examples of this type
- *Modern Meditational Yoga (MMY)*- focus is on meditative aspects; TM founder Maharishi Mahesh Yogi would be a good example of this kind
- *Modern Denominational Yoga (MDY)*- focus is on the personality cult of particular teacher; it can incorporate elements of many other types as well; Swami Rama might fall into this category².

As with any socio-cultural typology, these categories are not simply black and white but are more representative of clear guideposts for the largely uncharted map that is yoga practice in the 20th and 21st centuries. Undoubtedly, the most popular form that has morphed into MTY is the postural variety. The reasons for the development of that particular form will be discussed in greater length later in this chapter, but they are clearly related to the

experiential and results-oriented attitude of Western practitioners, especially those in the United States. However insightful De Michelis is in identifying the stages of development for modern yoga and the typology above, it seems that two more layers in the evolution can be added very easily: commodification and reflection.

The need for discussing commodification in relation to MTY should be somewhat self-evident. Practitioners of yoga self-identify through their consumption of goods and services that are produced for that demographic. Many even create their lifestyle image and an important part of their social place through that kind of consumption. It is important to differentiate this behavior from acculturation for two reasons. First, acculturation connotes a passive context of a theme that has integrated itself into the cultural landscape, but doesn't always identify how that has occurred. Second, commodification is an important key, both historically and more recently, in the ongoing vitality of MTY; it is not enough for the knowledge and teachings to exist without being a viable commercial enterprise. Commodification keeps the idea of yoga alive in the minds of media-savvy consumers and spiritual seekers alike. As mentioned in previous chapters, from the beginning, yogic teachings were marketed to Westerners as a commodity, from Vivekananda to Devi and Iyengar. What has happened recently is that the commodity has been embraced as a means of structuring individual identity in spite of, or perhaps because of, the marketing. This is a feature of MTY that helps it cross over from a physical practice for health into the realm of the spiritual or religious.

Helene Christiansen and Joost de Groot, two graduate students at Lund University in Sweden, explored this issue in a unique way in 2006. They attempted to examine the

interplay between spiritualism and consumerism in the context of yoga practice. In order to gather information, they set up participant observation opportunities in a handful of California yoga studios. Their basic research idea was to critically identify how yoga practitioners were examples of consumerism geared towards idealizing a certain experience, namely the sensation of being spiritual. They found that their participant observations revealed a complex dynamic for modern practitioners:

Thus, spiritualism constitutes an applicable path of escape or alternative to the material driven Western consumer in their search for quality of life. There is an ongoing debate among scholars in regards to the interplay between spiritualism and consumerism and the conceptualization of spirituality in the Western world today³.

In short, how is the spiritual experience being “constructed by consumers or steered by marketers” when the case of MTY is examined?⁴ Christiansen and de Groot concluded that modern incarnations of yoga are representative of a unique crossroads between spiritualism and consumerism, the latter being completely at odds with the philosophical foundations from which the practice is supposedly drawn⁵. Yoga as it is experienced in the Western context is a social phenomenon where those involved construct “subjective meaning of it through their practice”⁶. In other words, the value of the practice is created by the practitioner. Some of their informants clearly identified their practice as their religious or spiritual identity while others simply lauded the “feel good” properties of postures and breathing as with any other form of exercise. Overall, participants identified positive qualities with MTY practice whether religious scaffolding was used for context or not. The experience of controlling the body through postures and breathing almost inevitably led those involved to conclusions about their own powers of control and focus in the midst of a fast-paced consumer-oriented society. The practice, according to Christiansen and de Groot,

makes individuals naturally reach inward to uncover “the mind as the core of human decision-making”⁷. Like people finding a beneficial physician in the yellow pages, Christiansen and de Groot’s informants knew what they were consuming and did so consciously, albeit of different specific reasons.

The theme of this kind of choice and choosing MTY as a vehicle for constructing a subjectively valuable experience, whether spiritual or secular, is also evident in the idea of the expanded spiritual marketplace of the past 40+ years in the United States. When Iyengar published *Light on Yoga* in 1966, the socio-cultural fabric of America was gearing up for monumental changes. As Wade Clark Roof claims in *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*, the time after WWII initiated a change in the way individuals viewed their identities, religious or otherwise⁸. Consumption instead of production started to re-shape social roles and social labels, and religion was no exception. Religious pluralism and exposure to different cultures and populations made the boundaries of traditional religious identities and other competing perspectives increasingly porous. Does a person identify as a devout Catholic first or as a humanistic, civically-minded American? Are individuals associated more with what they consume (i.e. “I drive a Mercedes”) or what they produce (i.e. “I build furniture”)? As the balance tilted towards a consumer identity, religions became increasing like pairs of shoes: try on a few varieties and see which one fits⁹. Much like the conclusions reached by Christiansen and de Groot, Roof asserts that humans in a modern society still crave an authentic wholeness, but have been subjected to fragmentation in the consumer context:

Modernity severs connections to place and community, alienates people from their natural environments, separates life and work, dilutes ethical values, all of which

makes the need for a unifying experience so deeply felt... as a species, we may be reaching limits on the extent to which we can, or will, tolerate compartmentalization: once wholeness-hunger sets in, it manifests itself in a process of “de-differentiation”- that is, in constructive efforts at reintegrating life experiences...¹⁰.

MTY could be seen as one of the many competitors in the spiritual marketplace vying for the role of the “de-differentiation” mechanism: it becomes a tool for a subjective experience of wholeness, whatever that entails for a practitioner. This kind of development leads to, in Roof’s words, a sort of a la carte religious mentality with “pluralism within the individual” as well as without¹¹. Again, MTY fits nicely into this new kind of definition of experiential spirituality. Practices can be borrowed and coalesced from different sources and even different cultures; ancient traditions are re-visited and their nuggets of wisdom prepared as consumables for the modern world. “‘New religious techniques’ are thus not altogether new, only a repackaging and reinterpretation of older religious practices, as culled from both Western and Eastern religions”¹².

Other authors are less congenial when describing the same trends. G. Jeffrey MacDonald, the author of *Thieves in the Temple: the Christian Church and the Selling of the American Soul* unequivocally labels modern religious practice as a entertainment, therapy, or some combination thereof. The experience of an authentic spirituality is what modern spiritual consumers crave, not rigid doctrine that seems out of date or difficult to apply. Not only are more Americans unhitching themselves from traditional ideological wagons, they are also trying to connect to new ones at an unprecedented rate. In 1955, a Gallup poll on religion asked informants if they had switched religious associations, and only 4% answered in the affirmative¹³. In 2008, when the Pew Center asked a similar question, a whopping 44% could answer positively¹⁴. MacDonald notes that this trend forces religious

organizations to market more aggressively and to pursue more specialized niche markets to keep a share of the spiritual marketplace. Traditional spiritual organizations like Christian churches are in the same race with Scientology, Sufi Order International, and even variations of MTY; they are all vying for the right to be that mechanism for pursuing authentic wholeness. Even though MacDonald uses a specific religious group to develop his commentary, his conclusions are much the same as those proposed by Roof: spiritual borders as they were have dissolved, and new ones are in the process of being formed and re-formed in a process that is dynamic and subjective.

Roof's analysis of the religious landscape of the latter part of the 20th century also identifies a clear movement towards a "quest culture" that is focused on finding appropriate narratives for culture and identity among the myriad of options that present themselves¹⁵. What Americans are questing for is not only a sense of unified wholeness, but a core collection of values and beliefs that allows for the multiplicity of roles that an individual must fulfill in life. Hardened boundaries of ethics or behavior are seen as a hindrance to modernity and convenient consumption. As a result, there are Americans who identify as being pro-choice Catholics, Jewish Buddhists, and "spiritual but not religious." Consumers of products from the spiritual marketplace are also savvy in terms of knowing what these potential conflicts represent; they have become reflexive in the way they approach both belief and their own choices regarding belief¹⁶.

The process of being able to reflect is the most recent stop on the journey of MTY development. That reflection takes on two distinctly different forms that are both worth discussing. On one hand, MTY has evolved into a completely self-reflective practice that

reinvents history to suit the needs of practitioners today. An example of this would be the “yoga vacations” that are readily available in India. These retreats, including the “authentic yoga” practiced there, are directed at the Western consumer. However, because the practitioner can then claim to have studied yoga in the country of its origin, his or her credibility as a knowledgeable, spiritual consumer is reinforced. The trend provides evidence for a dynamic and reflexive relationship in modern times that parallels the kind of conflation of ideas that combined in the development of Krishnamacharya’s yoga style in the early 20th century. However, this time, the manifestations of MTY in the West are being re-imported back to India, and Indian teachers are recognizing the benefits of catering to the spiritual expectations of Westerners. The authenticity of modern yoga interpretations is remade and reinforced at the same time. One author captures this new kind of reflexivity especially well:

As Western nations dominate the publication of books, videos, and other media, the yoga studied and contemplated by many Indians is a Western adaptation of Indian yoga; indeed, much of its present status, not to mention its financial supports- are derived from the popularity of yoga in the West, and that inevitably influences the definition of yoga itself. Indians celebrate Western trends in the field and study Western texts on yoga, so in much of India yoga exists as a reflection of a reflection: it is as if two mirrors are staring at each other¹⁷.

This seems strangely appropriate in some ways given that an almost identical phenomenon accounts for the development of main lineages in postural styles through the teachings of Krishnamacharya and his disciples. Were it not for his exposure to ideas about Western physical culture in Mysore and elsewhere, the face of MTY would likely be much different, if in existence at all. What is remarkable is that most practitioners of postural forms are unaware

of this history, or if aware, they minimize the real history in favor of a history more appropriate to the authenticity they are seeking in their own personal quest narratives¹⁸.

The other meaning of reflexivity is connected to the new wave of scholarship that has emerged in only the past ten to fifteen years that has critically engaged the numerous historical, philosophical and cultural assumptions about the entire field of yoga in general. Prior to 2005, only a handful of serious, scholarly publications were available dealing with modern yoga development. Most publications on the subject ranged from interpretations of Indian philosophy to hagiographic narratives by smitten devotees of authentic gurus. Only when a trend or development has matured to a certain degree can it become ripe for academic study, and that seems to be what has happened to MTY. It has become acculturated enough to shift in focus from aggressive propagation of information to refinement and study. The approaches used by yoga scholars range from the historical (e.g. Singleton) to the sociological (e.g. Strauss) to the anthropological (e.g. Alter), but all of them share the focus of trying to connect the dots amongst the fragmented pieces of yoga lore, mythical stories of sages like Patanjali, and the actual practices as they have developed and unfolded in the last 150 years. As this body of work grows in depth and breadth, it is likely that some kind of MTY orthodoxy will emerge for academics that may be at odds somewhat with popular conceptions. This would not be unlike the situation that exists with many other spiritual institutions that have practitioners unused to complex theology of realities about doctrine that only theologians consider with any regularity.

Besides the academic publications that have become available, popular texts on yoga have also changed focus to embrace a more complete notion of the ethical and philosophical

aspects of the practice, as presented by Patanjali and elsewhere. Authors like Michael Stone have reinvigorated yogic ethics and tied it to social activism with titles like *Yoga for a World out of Balance* and *The Inner Tradition of Yoga: a Guide to Yoga Philosophy for the Contemporary Practitioner*. The forward of the former text is written by none other than B.K.S. Iyengar. *Yamas and Niyamas- Exploring Yoga's Ethical Practice* by Deborah Adele also attempts to repackage the moral guidelines of yoga by presenting them in language that is familiar to consumers of self-help volumes and modern therapies. One of the best longitudinal examples of this trend is the evolving editorial tradition of *Yoga Journal*. The magazine serves as a fascinating benchmark of how yoga practice has moved through the epochs described by De Michelis.

Founded in 1975, *Yoga Journal* started out as a ten page handout with a run of 300 copies¹⁹. Early articles tried to convey the basic foundations of yoga as interpreted by pioneering teachers in the West. Issues from the late 1970s include a limited number of topics: letters to the editor, book reviews, "alternative" culture pieces, philosophical explanations, a focus on one or more postures, and a classified section for products and instruction²⁰. The publication had a "grass roots" feel of a struggling community trying to establish itself and regulate a growing amount of secondary and tertiary literature in English about yogic traditions. Ten years later, the text range expanded to cover five different feature articles and ten discrete reporting departments including "life-style," "well-being," and the profiles of popular teachers²¹. By the late 1990s, this range of topics included even more variation and more breadth with substantially less emphasis on philosophy and primary sources; products advertised were geared to specific solutions or cures for everyday

problems of stress, insomnia, lack of flexibility and energy, etc...²². The march to appeal to the educated consumer with enough disposable income to has such problems had clearly begun.

In its present form, *Yoga Journal*, in both print and as a web presence, is indicative of the vast distances the threads of tradition have travelled to get to modern times. It further illustrates the notions of reflection and commodification previously discussed. The publication hosts ongoing contributions about the essence of good yoga practice and what constitutes the authentic version of MTY heritage. Third and fourth generation instructors (i.e. several times removed from “original” importers of MTY like Iyengar and Devi) offer their opinions on where the practice is now and where it is going. Their attempts at reflection, continued education, and self-conscious analysis of how their own styles of yoga compare to others is well-intentioned. However, their commentaries are often grounded in (or the result of) the idea of a consumer product being the end result. Some, like Rodney Yee, a frequent contributor to the magazine, are somewhat critical of how yoga is marketed through popular media and the lack of self-conscious appraisal on the part of many modern teachers²³. Other well known yoga personalities, such as Liliias Folan and Stephen Cope, are less concerned with reflecting on MTY practice as a whole if the package of practices is “working” for the consumer/practitioner in terms of the results begin sought. Any process of reflection on practice is inextricably linked to making MTY more suitable for consumption by a specifics audience.

At the same time as these kinds of commentaries are being presented, the magazine provides a platform for a more direct type of commodification: the staggering array of

commercial endorsements, training programs, and lifestyle articles; prominent advertisements promote everything from all-natural cleaning products to encouraging readers to subscribe to the *Yoga Journal* twitter feed. From most any perspective, this seems to be a long ways from Patanjali, *The Hatha Yoga Pradapika*, or even the romanticized versions of Indian wisdom conjured by Western esoteric in the early part of the 20th century. However, this is the state of MTY as it presently exists and is utilized by millions of practitioners. Considering that American consumers spent \$5.7 billion on yoga classes and products in 2008, it seems unlikely that this marketing direction will reverse itself any time soon²⁴.

Notes

1. De Michelis, 189-192.
2. De Michelis, 187-189.
3. Helene Christiansen and Joost de Groot, "Yoga: spiritual Balance of contemporary consumers," master's thesis, Lund University: School of Economics and Management [May, 2006], 13.
4. Christiansen and de Groot, 14.
5. Christiansen and de Groot, 23-24.
6. Christiansen and de Groot, 23.
7. Christiansen and de Groot, 45.
8. Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* [Princeton, new Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001],45.
9. Roof, 42.
10. Roof, 62-63.
11. Roof, 73.
12. Roof, 92.
13. G. Jeffrey MacDonald, "Thieves in the Temple Lecture and Book Signing,' [lecture, Hartford Seminary, Hartford, CT, April 20, 2010].
14. MacDonald.
15. Roof, 59-76.
16. Roof, 74-76.
17. Liberman, 110.
18. Roof, 207.
19. Yoga Journal, "Yoga Journal Release 2008 'Yoga in America' Market Study," http://www.yogajournal.com/advertise/press_releases/10 [accessed May 24, 2010].
20. Back issues of *Yoga Journal* are available on-line in their entirety from Google Books. There is a distinct difference both in form and content that can be observed when comparing the issues from different periods of MTY development. If the eras of yoga development identified by De Michelis are used, the changes are especially prominent.
21. See note 20.
22. See note 20.
23. Yee and other instructors are profiled in more detail in chapter five.
24. Yoga Journal, "Yoga Journal Release."

Chapter Five- The Tale of Many Demographics

A key piece of information that helps to illuminate the development of MTY in the last thirty years is the identification of who best represents the tradition and practice. What kinds of people are drawn to the experience that yoga provides and do they share any characteristics that relate to issues already discussed? The majority of individuals who embrace MTY as part of their spiritual or lifestyle identity are part of a relatively homogeneous population in the West. This is not the whole story of who practices MTY or why, but it does give some insight into the nature of the interrelated reflections that drive the evolution of the yoga paradigm.

In the past ten years, at least three data collection efforts have been made to try to find out what groups most frequently participate in MTY. It is reassuring that all three studies make similar claims about gender, education, socio-economic level, and a few other notable factors. The first study was conducted in 2002 for *Yoga Journal*¹. The publication hired the Audit Bureau of Circulation to gather information based on subscriber responses. The sample size was small (756 responders), but the rate of response was a bit over 50%, which is usually considered quite good in the field of survey methodology. The publication launched a more ambitious survey in 2008, again through an independent firm, and collected over 5,000 responses from “a statistically representative sample of the total U.S. population”². A broader focused questionnaire was also circulated at British yoga conference in 2005³. This kind of quantified information is relatively unusual in the field of MT scholarship; a summary of findings is charted here:

	sample size	average age	college grad+	income>\$50K	female	male
2002 YJ study	756	44.5	67.50%	60.70%	89.20%	10.8%
	sample size	average age	college grad+	income>\$50K	female	male
2005 British study	175	47	64%	n/a	84%	16%
	sample size	average age	college grad+	income>\$75K	female	male
2008 YJ study	5050	n/a	71.40%	44%	72.20%	27.80%

A number of possible conclusions are suggested from this information. Most notably, all three surveys indicate that MTY is practiced most by educated, relatively affluent females more than any other group. However, the 2008 study showed a marked change in the gender make-up of MTY practitioners with a clear rise in the number of males participating. The much larger sample size of the most recent data collection also makes the information presented in that sample somewhat more convincing. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the same study indicated that Americans as a whole spent roughly \$5.7 billion on yoga classes and assorted yoga-related products in 2008⁴; the authors cite that as representing an 87% increase from a similar measure taken from 2004⁵. Clearly, something has been happening with MTY in the 21st century that moves beyond the general idea of popular acculturation.

Suzanne Hasselle-Newcombe, the author of the 2005 British study, argues that MTY in Britain is indicative of a humanistic, secular spirituality. She cites the fact that 85% or

respondents in her sample indicated that yoga brought a “sense of meaning” to their lives⁶. The notion that the majority of yoga practitioners come from affluent and educated backgrounds also supports the idea discussed in the last chapter that despite material gains, modern humans still seek the same kind of connectivity wholeness in their lives through whatever mechanism. About half of the informants in the British study used terms like “spiritual” or “spiritual element” as a reason that they continue to practice MTY, specifically the Iyengar style that is arguably the most popular in Britain⁷.

Abstract and more difficult to measure themes such as “spirituality” are often better approached through a different method of analysis. Subjective responses like those collected by Hasselle-Newcombe only scratch the surface of an immensely complicated subject like spiritual flexibility and, in the case of MTY, quasi-religious commodification. The more common means of studying the development and impact of yoga is through the collection of interviews and case studies connected to both instructors and practitioners. Singleton, De Michelis, and Strauss, for example, all rely heavily on interviews and case study analysis to construct their individual arguments regarding where yoga has come from and where it is now. In order to understand the complexity and diversity of yoga practice and who is drawn to it, qualitative information must be considered side by side with the quantitative. The case studies of different instructors that will make up the rest of this chapter represent an attempt to move in that direction through highlighting the experience of a handful of modern yoga teachers. One active, local MTY instructor was interviewed and the remaining profiles were culled from published interviews and essays. Each of the individuals profiled has a different history when it comes to MTY: why they started, why they

teach, and why they continue. However, the common thread is the quest to realize something unrealized in a culture of commodification and consumption. The names of unpublished authors have been changed to protect their privacy.

Sarah is in her late 30s. She began studying to be a yoga teacher in 2004, after many years of practice⁸. Sarah now works as a freelance teacher in the New London area and has pursued advanced teacher training to enhance her professional abilities. She was initially taken to a class in the early 1990s by her father. "I thought it was kind of strange [...] I did continue on my own, trying different classes and teachers, and found it helpful in dealing with stress." However, as she practiced, it became clear that her professional goals were in conflict with other elements in her life, leading to some negative consequences.

...I was working my way up the corporate ladder in the banking industry- feeling totally burnt out and depressed. As my depression worsened, I took a leave of absence at the end of 2004. Not sure of my life's purpose, I felt lost and hopeless. Then the catalogue for Kripalu came. As I browsed through the workshops, I noticed the dates for yoga teacher training [...] after some soul searching, I went for it⁹.

Sarah's first steps into instruction training were arduous, but she persevered and created a space of "non-judgmental self-awareness" for herself, which is something that she strives to duplicate for her students. "When students get out of their own way, they can experience a sense of peace and well-being." Her training and personal philosophy revolve around treating people as individuals to be honored for who they are at any given moment. That attitude, more than anything else, is what Sarah feels is the foundation of yoga that she tries to reiterate in all her classes.

One of the things she avoids is putting too much of her own baggage into her teaching opportunities; each student is different and the posture sequences need to be

about their issues, not hers. “I try to point out that my posture may not look exactly like yours and listen to the wisdom of your own body to know when to back off in a stretch or skip a too challenging posture.” Again, Sarah emphasizes the importance of non-judgmental awareness in every aspect of yoga practice. She uses language that could be described as humanistic as opposed to religious in order to explain how she views the posture practice that is fundamental to MTY:

Yoga, by definition, is the union of mind, body, spirit [...] it can aid in respect for one’s self. When that connection is made, there is an awareness of how to treat the whole person with respect and kindness, leading to an overall sense of well-being [...] it is a beautiful thing to witness. If that non-judgmental self-awareness cannot be obtained, it can lead to injury and/or a sense of not measuring up¹⁰.

The connected theme of a search for an alternative paradigm with which to approach the complexities of mental health is a common drive behind many who become immersed in the eclectic spirituality that surrounds MTY.

This interest forms part of the yoga foundation for Patricia Walden, one of the most well-known teachers of MTY in the Iyengar style; she is one of only two Americans who holds an advanced teaching certificate in Iyengar yoga¹¹. Walden explains her practice in terms of an antidote to ongoing emotional darkness and turmoil:

When I was in my twenties, I was in therapy for depression. I remember the therapist telling me probably two years into my therapy with him that my depression was hereditary, and that I would probably always have it. I got really angry. That comment made me feel like I had a label on my T-shirt that said DEPRESSION FOREVER¹².

Walden credits her ongoing yoga discipline with eliminating her emotional problems and also giving her a tolerance of ambiguity and impermanence¹³. Remarkably, even an advanced MTY teacher like Walden acknowledges that her practice has evolved as a “long,

powerful, painful, and wonderful journey”¹⁴. This acceptance of the sweat equity that goes into advanced practice contradicts some of the “feel good” rationale given by more casual practitioners as the reason they pursue MTY. For those who delve deeper into the philosophical foundations of yoga, regardless of the style, the reward can be profound. For Walden, that means a “deep sense of OK-ness”¹⁵.

[...] I can live with impermanence now. I don't always have to know the outcome in order to feel safe. I am much more adaptable. I can live with not knowing, and know deep in my heart that whatever happens I am going to be OK [...] right now, I am in the process of giving up my yoga center, which has been my world and my life. It is a risk, and I'm fine with it and open to the future¹⁶.

Walden is representative of a group of MTY instructors and scholars who came to yoga in the late 1960s or early 1970s and who have embraced eclectic spiritual choices wholeheartedly. Other prominent names in American MTY like Sylvia Boorstein, Larry Rosenberg, Richard Faulds, and John Friend share this type of history with more or less variation and academic preparation attached. For example, Rosenberg holds a PhD in social psychology from the University of Chicago and was a respected college professor before he devoted more time to studying various forms of meditation and yoga¹⁷.

Sarah and Patricia Walden were both drawn to yoga as a largely therapeutic practice: it served as a holistic treatment for a condition that they both experienced. Subsequently, the kind of MTY taught by each instructor comes from that background. That pattern is also indicative of the reflection and commodification cycle; what draws an individual to practice influences what that individual puts out as a public product to be consumed by the next wave of students. Each generation of teachers puts a mark on the evolution of practice and shifts the MTY paradigm slightly. If every instructor came to MTY for the same reasons, their

teachings would be predictably one-dimensional (i.e. yoga is best for mental health therapy). However, the diversity of benefits that attract people to yoga practice is also what keeps each wave of teaching equally varied. That fact lets yoga consumers choose the style that best fits with their perceived needs; the commodity is custom-tailored and the audience is self-selecting.

This is illustrated clearly by another strand of prominent MTY instructors exemplified by Liliás Folan who hosted what is arguably the best known television presentation of MTY that would be known to Americans: *Liliás, Yoga and You!*¹⁸. Her program was syndicated nationally and aired on PBS stations for fifteen years, starting in 1970¹⁹. Another multi-part yoga instruction series went from the late seventies to 1996²⁰. This level of extended national exposure has led authors like Stephen Cope to argue that she has instructed more individuals in yoga postures than any other teacher²¹. Folan did not come to yoga primarily as a mental health therapy but rather as a development from her interest in meditation and Vedic philosophy. As a result, her teaching has a different flavor, more in line with an intellectual framework or a theory of applied psychology. She describes her present practice as being a constantly evolving process, but postures, the core of MTY instruction around the world, provided her with key personal insights:

Practicing asanas began to teach me about myself. They became what Jean Klein used to call one's "closest natural environment." The body is such a great school of learning. It makes you pay attention. I started from the physical part and later began to get the mental benefits. It was a huge day when I actually began to see that I am *not* my thoughts. [...] it was a real milestone in my practice²².

Folan is also quick to point out that yoga practice represents a constantly evolving with age and experience. Because she is in her sixties, she is a member of the "boomer" generation

that is sometimes referenced as a great catalyst in the popularity of MTY²³. Folan believes that yoga is responsible for moving gracefully through maturation stages that would otherwise be more traumatic; issues that were problems when she was younger transform into the seeds to life insights as her perspective changes:

It's taken me thirty, maybe forty years to understand certain experiences I had in my early years. I had a few powerful experiences of a spiritual nature. But I didn't understand them earlier in my life. Actually, I didn't understand myself then either. I always felt that I wasn't good enough. I looked around and thought everyone else was having these fabulous lives and experiences and I wasn't. Getting to know myself has been the core of my continual journey in yoga²⁴.

Folan's sentiments reflect the conclusions that many instructors seem to come to after enough exposure to MTY: the postures are a gateway to awareness, but the real foundation of sincere practice is inner transformation. That blends seamlessly with the original foundations of Yoga philosophy, and it also shows how those ideas have been re-packaged into a recognizable consumable through the use of new, psychologically flavored language in place of Vedic terminology. Folan's success is in large part due to her ability to take esoteric teachings and make them relevant to the life experiences of Western yoga students; this puts them into an accessible and understandable package for a yoga consumer. Other teachers focus on this psychological development aspect even more by basing their instruction on directed mental improvement designed to bring out a practitioner's full potential. The audience for that commodity is somewhat different than the audience of practitioners who would seek out an instructor like Patricia Walden. MTY practice with that kind of "peak performance" focus is another variation popular in Western countries²⁵.

No survey of well-known MTY instructors would be complete without sharing the ideas of the nearly-ubiquitous Rodney Yee. Perhaps no other instructor is as well known to

Americans as Yee, who has served as the instructor/practitioner in more than 25 very popular yoga videos as well as numerous periodical covers, calendars, and other media²⁶. His video series produced in conjunction with *Yoga Journal* is sometimes the “official” introduction that beginners receive to the activity. However, Yee emphasizes teaching for “the whole human being”²⁷. This broad emphasis is arguably what makes Yee’s teachings the most generic and the most accessible to a wide range of practitioners. Of the eight limbs of yoga mentioned in Patanjali’s text, he notes explicitly that posture training, the core of much MTY practice, is only a small part:

The media labels things, and give a superficial view or definition of everything. And there are some yoga studios that just teach the physical practices and talk nothing of the philosophy or even the breathing and so forth, and to me it’s as if they’re not even teaching yoga [...] they are teaching asana, but they’re not even teaching asana very well because if you teach asana well you have to teach about the mind and you have to think about meditation. There is no way you can be a good asana teacher unless you teach the whole human being²⁸.

Yee is also very comfortable with the fact that individuals come to MTY practice for “thousands of different reasons” that are all equally valid²⁹. The emphasis that is most important to cultivate is an awareness of what the body is doing and a kind of deep intuition about the boundaries, both physical and mental, that are restricting and individual. Practitioners get the most holistic benefit when they can be self-aware enough to observe what is happening during the holding of a posture or when they are consciously altering their breathing patterns. Ultimately, claims Yee, the practice can be altered radically depending on what a practitioner wants from the experience; more strain in a posture can do good things but so can putting forth less effort and less intensity. He also sees the dynamics of MTY evolving rapidly in the 21st century, especially in the gender of participants.

It [gender of participants] is definitely changing. The problem is that most men identify yoga as being something where you have to be in a pretzel. It goes back to the media, as I said before. Most men think they are tight, and so they don't want to look like fools in yoga class. They are not used to being less capable than women. And a lot of men are scared touching that part of themselves³⁰.

However, what most interests Yee is the way that more and more practitioners are discovering the aspects of MTY that go beyond the physical:

To me, what is exciting is that there are a lot of people doing regular yoga practice that are really working at it as a spiritual practice. There is a lot of knowledge that is being passed around and shared. Yoga is a 5,000 to 6,000 year old art form, and yet at the same time it is opening up into whole new arenas of consciousness and whole new places for exploration and discovery³¹.

Clearly, Rodney Yee and with the other instructors briefly profiled in this section are acutely aware of the complexity of yoga practice in terms of its transformative possibilities.

Whether an individual is drawn to practice as the effect of a life-changing event, a form or self-directed therapy, an exercise for increased flexibility, or a holistic practice for enhanced wellness, it seems that MTY in its various flavors can serve many of these needs. The more the modern version is seen as being the new orthodoxy of practice, the more instructors will develop their own unique interpretations and trademarked approaches to packaging the tradition as a consumable item for physical culture and the spiritual marketplace. The cycle of reflection on practice and renewed commodification is a part of what has contributed to the explosive growth in numbers of MTY practitioners in the last 20+ years. Popular teachers such as Yee are representative of a generation of instructors who view their work as popularizing yoga as much as possible and making it available for the largest possible audience. By reflecting on the needs of the spiritual consumer, they can package their

approach to meet the expectations of consumers when it comes to what is wanted in a spiritual commodity.

Notes

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3. Suzanne Hasselle-Newcombe, "Spirituality and 'Mystical Religion' in Contemporary Society: A Case Study of British Practitioners of the Iyengar Method of Yoga," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 20, no. 3 [2005]:305-321.
4. Yoga Journal, "*Yoga Journal* Release"
5. Yoga Journal, "*Yoga Journal* Release"
6. Hasselle-Newcombe, 311.
7. Hasselle-Newcombe, 312.
8. "Sarah," interview by the author, Waterford, CT, December 8, 2008.
9. See note 8.
10. See note 9.
11.Patricia Walden, "Moving from Darkness Into Light," *Will Yoga and Meditation Really Change My Life?* ed. Stephen Cope [North Adams, MA: Storey Publishing, 2003], 84.
12. Walden, 85.
13. Walden, 85.
14. Walden, 92.
15. Walden, 86.
16. Walden, 86.
17. Stephen Cope, *Will Yoga and Meditation Really Change My Life?* ed. Stephen Cope [North Adams, MA: Storey Publishing, 2003], 54.
18. Cope, 194.
19. Cope, 194.
20. Cope, 194.
21. Cope, 195.
22. Liliias Folan, "Cultivating Witness Consciousness," *Will Yoga and Meditation Really Change My Life?* ed. Stephen Cope [North Adams, MA: Storey Publishing, 2003], 200.
23. Dennis Hughes, "Interview with Rodney Yee," *Share Guide: The Holistic Health Magazine and Resource Directory* <http://www.shareguide.com/Yee.html> [accessed July 1, 2010].
24. Folan, 196.
25. Cope, 242.

26. Hughes, 1.
27. Hughes, 3.
28. Hughes, 4.
29. Hughes, 3.
30. Hughes, 6.
31. Hughes, 6.

Conclusion- What Does It All Mean?

This discussion started with a piece of evidence that supports the idea that modern transnational yoga has truly become an acculturated product: an iPhone application is currently available for those who want instructions for asana sequences but can't be bothered to attend a class or open a book¹. On June 22, 2010, the largest single gathering of yoga practitioners took place in New York City's Central Park². The Great Lawn was the site of the event that was co-sponsored by jetBlue, an eleven-year-old airline company, and Flavorpill, a kind of cultural clearing house of events and attractions specific to major cities³. Over 10,000 people converged on the Great Lawn in the evening to be led as a huge class by a well-known New York City yoga teacher⁴. The event participants were chosen at random from a pool of more than 15,000 who submitted entries to the attendance lottery. Everyone in the crowd received a free yoga mat from Gaiam, one the largest retailers of products that promote "focus on personal development, health and wellness and global consciousness"⁵. The event was cut short by inclement weather, but participants did manage a few asana poses and a group chant intended to keep the rain at bay⁶.

This number of MTY practitioners gathered in one place is unremarkable in some ways; an average basketball game at Madison Square Garden can draw several thousand more. By standards of spiritual events, it is not even close to being large: the Easter Mass in Vatican City can have 100,000 attendees in good weather⁷. What makes this number noteworthy in the world of yoga is that it is a first of its kind. It also reflects a clear distinction between MTY and other traditions that are competitors in the spiritual marketplace; yoga is so multi-faceted, accessible, and acculturated that a commercial entity

can “put on a show” to popularize yoga with the help of a state board of parks and recreation. Would it be possible for another modern, spiritually connected practice to garner that kind of support? It is difficult to envision a similar gathering of Asatru kindreds, Scientologists, or even mainstream Catholics taking place on the Great Lawn. Why is this the case? Could it be that modern transnational yoga has progressed as a cultural product to the point where it is a widely acceptable form of exercise *or* spirituality?

Clearly, for those who invest more than a casual interest in the practice, MTY has the potential, as discussed above, to provide scaffolding for a transformative kind of self-conscious observation, regardless of how a practitioner packages those insights or what they choose to do with that package. It is another mechanism for attempting to regain “the contact with the divine self [...] to enable one to reconnect to a sacred realm that holistically connects ‘everything’” and alleviates the modern sense of isolation that plagues human beings in the present world⁸. Whatever skepticism modern scholarship brings to the idea of spiritual products as yet another form of consumable, it is almost impossible to argue against the growing amount of evidence that suggests MTY is effective in filling the existential holes in Western cultures, especially those in the throes of increasingly secularized and diversified ideas about spirituality. More information on the history of modern forms, while characterized by some as an attempt to discredit or reduce MTY to something less than it is, are, in actuality, just the latest chapters in a larger narrative of continued efforts to understand the dynamics of religiosity in a world where traditional spiritual paradigms are increasingly incompatible with personal reality. The belief that yoga, like other new and active spiritual paradigms, provides an ongoing vessel for putting life-

changes, ongoing physical development, and personally relevant insight into one context is a core assumption indicative of the flexibility of modern, essentially post-Christian religiosity.

This, then is the main tenet [...] the belief that in the deepest layers of the self the divine spark"- to borrow a term from ancient Gnosticism- is still smoldering, waiting to be stirred up, and succeed the socialized self. Getting in touch with this "true," "deeper," or "divine" self is not considered a "quick fix," but rather understood as a long-term process: "Personal growth"⁹.

However, with practitioners of MTY, where does the socialized, consumer self end and the "deeper" self begin? Could they be one and the same? Maybe it doesn't really matter. In the words of Peter Berger, the eminent sociologist, "the world today [...] is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever"¹⁰. What had changed is not the hole that people are trying to fill, but the manner in which they are attempting to do the filling. Individuals who seek spiritual development in modern times often "do not pursue meaning and identity from "pre-given" authoritative sources, located outside the self," but instead turn towards a self-actualized and personalized sense of spirituality¹¹.

It is this dogma of "self-spirituality" that not only accounts for the much emphasized diversity at the surface of the spiritual milieu- an inevitable outcome when people feel the need to follow their personal paths and explore what works for them personally- but that simultaneously provides it with unity at a deeper level¹².

This kind of exploration is only enhanced by the kind of unflinching critical looks at the development of MTY tradition like those put forward by Alter, Singleton, De Michelis and others.

It will be a fascinating project to track where MTY goes as it moves into the middle of the 21st century. Will it continue to be a popular semi-spiritual commodity for everyone or will it evolve into a new kind of all-inclusive religious practice, as it has for a dedicated core of practitioners today? The openness of the spiritual marketplace offers "an opportunity for

spiritual exploitation and even capitalistic imperialism,” but with some caution and knowledge on the part of practitioners, perhaps that kind of influence will be mitigated¹³.

Those that are spiritually hungry in the West will continue to be catered to by whatever philosophy or tradition best suits their needs. In the words of one religious scholar “for better or worse, the spiritual and commercial have become increasingly welded”¹⁴.

However, in the case of modern transnational yoga, it can be argued that it is not for the worse.

Notes

1. PR Newswire, "Yoga on the Go: Yoga Journal iPractice Mobile App Released for iPhone and iPod Touch," <http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/yoga-on-the-go-yoga-journal-ipractice-mobile-app-released-for-iphone-and-ipod-touch-70182687.html> [accessed February, 3 2010].
2. Jo Piazza, "A Moment of Peace as Rain Replaces Yoga on the Great Lawn," Tonic, <http://www.tonic.com/article/yoga-at-the-great-lawn-class-central-park-rain/> [accessed June 30, 2010].
3. Flavorpill has specialty sites dedicated to certain metropolitan areas such as New York, Los Angeles, London, Chicago, and Miami. The web site calls itself "your culture guide."
4. Piazza, 1.
5. Gaiam, "About Gaiam," <http://www.gaiam.com/text/home/about-gaiam.htm> [accessed July 1, 2010].
Gaiam was established in 1988 with a focus on alternative exercise and lifestyle products. The company has expanded enormously since then and has been instrumental in the continued marketing of MTY products.
6. Piazza, 1.
7. Eric Lyman, "Religious Tourists Keep Italy on the Must-See Lists," USA Today, http://www.usatoday.com/travel/destinations/2009-04-09-religioustourism_N.htm [accessed July 1, 2010].
8. Dick Houtman and Stef Aupers, "The Spiritual Turn and the Decline of Tradition: The Spread of Post-Christian Spirituality in 14 Western Countries, 1981-2000," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religions* (2007), 46 no. 3 [2007]: 75.
9. Houtman and Aupers, 307.
10. Houtman and Aupers, 305.
11. Houtman and Aupers, 307.
12. Houtman and Aupers, 307-308.
13. Michael York, "New Age Commodification and Appropriation of Spirituality," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 16, no. 3 [2001]: 361-372.
14. York, 371.

Appendix

Timeline for the Development of Modern Transnational Yoga

- 1781 *Gymnastique Medicale* by C.J. Tissot published
- 1830 First illustrated *Jogapradapika* published- physiology of yoga described, but postures not explicitly detailed
- 1852 J.R. Ballantyne publishes the first English translations of the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali
- 1880 *Exposition of the Swedish Movement Cure* by George Taylor published
- 1883 *The Yoga Aphorisms of Patanjali with Commentary by Bhoja Raja and English Translation* by R. Mitra published
- 1889 *The Yoga Aphorisms of Patanjali, An Interpretation by W.Q. Judge* by William Judge- Judge is a member of the Theosophical Society
- 1896 *Raja Yoga* by Swami Vivekananda is published after his appearance at the 1893 Parliament of World Religions in Chicago
- 1898 *Sandow's Magazine of Physical Culture* first published- a periodical based on the seminal bodybuilding work of Eugen Sandow
- 1899 *Six Systems of Indian Philosophy* by Max Muller published
- 1904 *Hatha Yoga* by Ramacharaka published- probable pen name for Western esoteric thinker William Walter Atkinson
- 1905 *Yogasopana Purvacatuska* is published- 37 asanas are illustrated
- 1914 *Arya* first published by Sri Aurobindo- a monthly periodical of nationalism and neo-Hindu philosophy
- 1919 First school for Indian physical education directors opened by H.C. Buck of the Indian YMCA Shri Yogendra established Yoga Institute in New York
- 1921 Swami Kuvalayananda established yoga research institute to study asana and the physical benefits of yoga scientifically
- 1923 *Practical Yoga, Science, and Health* by Rishi Singh Gherwal published
- 1924 *The Hindu System of Health Development* by Yogi Wassan published
Paramahansa Yogananda begins cross-country speaking tour in the United States
- 1925 *Soroda System of Yoga Philosophy* by Yogi Wassan published
Paramahansa Yogananda establishes the Self-Realization Fellowship in California
- 1926 *Yoga System of Study* by Yogi Hara Rama published
- 1927 S. K. Pattabhi Jois becomes a student of T. Krishnamacharya
- 1928 *Yoga Asanas Simplified* by Shri Yogendra published
- 1929 *Practice of Yoga, etc.* by Swami Sivananda published
- 1930 *Muscle Cult. A Pro-Em to My System* by K.V. Iyer published- influenced by Sandow, Iyer promotes hatha yoga for developing physical prowess

- Muscle Control and Barbell Exercise* by B.C. Ghosh published- Ghosh is the younger brother of Paramahansa Yogananda
- Health and Strength* first published in Britain- the periodical promotes stretching a way to enhance the female form
- 1931 T. Krishnamacharya invited to teach at the Mysore Palace by the Maharaja of Mysore
Yogi Exercises by Bhagwan S. Gyannee published
Yoga Personal Hygiene by Shri Yogendra published
- 1933 T. Krishnamacharya given a wing of the Mysore Palace to establish a yoga studio and teaching space
 B.K.S. Iyengar begins yoga training with his brother-in-law, T. Krishnamacharya
- 1935 *Health and Strength* issue shows photos of “Best Figure in the British Isles” posing in asanas/gymnastic positions
Yoga Makaranda by T. Krishnamacharya published
Yoga Asanas by Swami Sivananda published
- 1936 *Perfect Physique* by K.V. Iyer published
- 1937 Indra Devi is the first Western woman to be trained by t. Krishnamacharya
 B.K.S. Iyengar sent to Deccan Gymkhana Club in Pune to teach Mysore-style yoga
- 1941 *Yogasanagalu* by T. Krishnamacharya published
- 1946 *Autobiography of a Yogi* by Paramahansa Yogananda published
- 1947 Indra Devi arrives in Los Angeles and soon after begins teaching celebrities
- 1950 *Hatha Yoga: The Report of a Personal Experience* by Theos Bernard published
- 1952 B.K.S. Iyengar begins teaching Yehudi Menuhin
- 1954 *Forever Young, Forever Healthy* by Indra Devi published
 B.K.S. Iyengar begins demonstrations for European notables
- 1956 B.K.S. Iyengar travels to the United States
- 1958 Maharishi Mahesh Yogi begins first global tour promoting Transcendental Meditation
- 1959 *Yoga for Americans: A Complete 6-Week Course for Home Practice* by Indra Devi published
- 1966 *Light on Yoga* by B.K.S. Iyengar published
 Swami Prabhupada establishes International Society for Krishna Consciousness
- 1967 Maharishi Mahesh Yogi meets The Beatles and TM is popularized worldwide
 International Yoga Teachers Association founded
- 1969 Swami Rama establishes the Himalayan International Institute of Yoga Science and Philosophy
- 1972 First Kripalu yoga center founded by Amrit Desai
- 1973 International Yoga Teachers Association establishes recognized teacher training curriculum
- 1974 Maharishi Mahesh Yogi founds Maharishi International University in Fairfield, Iowa

- 1975 *Yoga Journal* is founded in the United States
- 1977 Swami Prabhupada dies
- 1978 *Beginning Yoga Class* by Bikram Choudhury published
- 1982 *The Yoga of T. Krishnamacharya* by T.K.V. Desikachar published
Unity of Yoga group founded in the United States- sponsors national and international conferences
- 1985 *Light on Pranayama: The Yogic Art of Breathing* by B.K.S. Iyengar published
- 1987 International Yoga Federation founded- becomes the largest yoga organization in the world
- 1990 *Yoga Journal* circulation reaches 55,000
- 1993 *Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* by B.K.S. Iyengar published
- 1996 *Yoga Journal* circulation passes 85,000
- 1997 Ad Hoc Yoga Alliance founded- volunteer group working for minimum qualifications for yoga teachers
- 1998 *Yoga Journal* circulation reaches 95,000
- 1999 Yoga Alliance formed from Unity of Yoga and Ad Hoc Yoga Alliance
Yoga Teacher Registry established nationally in United States
- 2005 *Yoga Journal* subscription rate tops 325,000; over 1 million regular readers reported
Yoga Alliance begins to recognize and certify teachers with extensive and significant instruction experience in addition to training
- 2008 *Yoga Journal* paid subscription rate is 360,000
- 2009 344 Yoga Day events in the United States; sponsored by Yoga Alliance
- 2010 Yoga at the Great Lawn, the world's largest single yoga event, happens on June 22nd;
10,000 yoga mats are given away by sponsors Flavorpill and jetBlue to guests chosen by lottery
Krishnamacharya: His Life and Teachings by A.G. Mohan published
Light on Yoga: The Bible of Modern Yoga by B.K.S. Iyengar remains the number one selling book on yoga as listed by Amazon.com

Dates for this timeline have been gathered from a great number of sources, but Singleton's *Yoga Body: The Origins of modern Practice*, Alter's *Yoga in Modern India*, and De Michelis' *A History of Modern Yoga* were all used extensively. In addition, on-line publication information was used to date many of the texts.

Any errors in this chronology are the fault of the author and do not reflect in any way on the sources used to compile it.

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