



RE-ORIENTING

BY SARAH STRAUSS

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THE TRAIN PULLED out of the station. I was riding in the famed Rajdhani Express, on the way back from Bombay to Delhi. Across from me in the compartment, two middle-aged, middle-class Indian businessmen looked hot and uncomfortable in their standard Western style business attire—jackets, ties, the works. They wondered what a young, unaccompanied, non-Indian woman was doing dressed in *salwar-kameez* and studying a Hindi grammar book. When I explained that I was an anthropologist, and had come to India to study yoga in Rishikesh, they became quite attentive, and began to discuss the subject. Their primary sentiments were regret and amazement: regret that they knew so little of their heritage themselves, and what they knew derived solely from hearsay; amazement that I should travel so far from home, learn Hindi, and wear Indian clothing out of preference, all to study a subject they considered important to their own past, but not likely to loom large in anyone's future. Nevertheless, they agreed that Rishikesh was an ideal place to carry out such a study, since it was well known as a site of great spiritual power. As was often the case when I mentioned yoga, the businessmen inquired whether I had met any "real" yogis in my travels and speculated that there were very few left in the country. In the time of the *Mahabharat* and the *Ramayan*, the great epics of India, they mused, there had been many yogis across the land. Perhaps, one said, if I went south to Tamil Nad, where people were still in touch with the traditions, I could find some. The other commented that he had once encountered a man lying on a bed of nails, unscathed: "Was that yoga?"

LOCATING YOGA

Yoga. The word evokes a range of images and ideas, from white-bearded Indian mystics on mountaintops to cross-legged hippies burning incense to urban business people at a lunchtime fitness class. Although there is no single “correct” version of yoga, a close examination of the variety of ideas and practices identified with yoga yields a common core. This article, and the book from which it is drawn, asks how yoga has moved from its birthplace on the Indian subcontinent to become a global phenomenon, and how this transnationally produced yoga has come home to change the practice of yoga in India itself. Following a specific form of yoga developed by Swami Sivananda and his disciples in Rishikesh, India, I explore how ideas and practices are transformed as they traverse cultural boundaries. By asking what are the values, in India or elsewhere, that have supported the popularity of yoga over the past century, I explore how the values of “health” and “freedom” have shifted in meaning over time, allowing them to popularize yoga.

Yoga can be defined in many ways—as an attitude, a philosophy, a set of practices, a way of being in the world—but its definition is always located within a particular historical context. Although yoga has been studied extensively as a philosophical and religious system, it has less often been researched ethnographically, as a system of bodily practices within a sociocultural context. Yoga offers an excellent example of the inseparability of mind and body.

The Sanskrit root of the word “yoga,” *yuj*, means “to yoke or join together.” The most common English translation is “union,” usually referring to the union of the individual self with the Absolute or Universal Self. I use the general term “yoga” to refer to the broad philosophical perspective (*yoga-darsana*) normally considered to constitute one of the six *darsanas* (philosophies) of Hinduism. One way to begin a discussion of yoga would be to review the ancient Indian texts. Of these, the most famous are the *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali (dated tentatively to between 200 BC and AD 200) which are considered to be the master text for “classical” yoga. The yoga sutras are somewhat cryptic verse forms, easy for the disciples of the yoga masters to learn, but difficult to analyze. The critical and interpretive tradition which developed around the original texts



TOP: Swamiji, seated.
MIDDLE: Pilgrim in Rishikesh.
BOTTOM: Stone yogi shrine.

continues to the present day. The verses outline what are considered the eight basic stages of the yoga system, including guidelines for moral living, physical postures, breathing techniques, and meditative practice.

The eight stages of Patanjali's classical yoga begin with the practice of morality in social life (*yama, niyama*: universal and personal rules for living), proceeding to physical practices (*asana, pranayama*: physical poses and breathing techniques), and then to different states of mental attention or consciousness (*pratyahara, dharana, dhyana, samadhi*: gradual removal of external sensory input, focusing attention on a single point, uninterrupted meditative state, and, depending on the school of thought, perfect isolation or union with the Absolute). Barbara Miller's analysis of Patanjali (*Yoga: Discipline of Freedom*), in conjunction with Mircea Eliade's classic work (*Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*), together provide an excellent overview of classical yoga.

Although a few scholars outside of India were interested in the classical yoga texts during the 17th and 18th centuries, it was only in the late 19th century that wider audiences in the USA and Western Europe began to learn about yoga. Much of this exposure derived from a series of public lectures given by the Indian Swami Vivekananda. Vivekananda developed his ideas about yoga while he was traveling in America and Europe and later promoted them in India from his home base in Calcutta (now Kolkata). Young Vivekananda, child of a judge and trained in European-style philosophy and law, had overcome his extreme skepticism of religious power through his interactions with Sri Ramakrishna, one of the most famous figures of the 19th century Hindu world, and still one of the most revered spiritual teachers in all of India.

Yoga, described in Vivekananda's lectures as well as printed pamphlets, became a commodity, something of value that could be acquired and circulated among the literate middle class people of both India and the West. Swami Vivekananda presented yoga as a spiritual commodity that had an explicit exchange value for people in America and Europe. He said that India had an abundance of spiritual wealth, and that yoga was a method that could help people to achieve spiritual well-being. In return, the West—well-known for its material resources—



Vivekananda postage stamp.



Portrait of Sivananda, with disciple.

could pay cash for the privilege of learning yoga. Vivekananda reasoned that the West lacked spirituality, and so a fair trade could be made. Vivekananda influenced many other middle-class people like himself (not only in India but around the globe) to pursue an ascetic lifestyle, or at least to incorporate aspects of classical Hindu religious philosophy and practice in their daily lives.

One of those strongly influenced by Vivekananda's teachings was Swami Sivananda of Rishikesh, India. Sivananda, trained as a secular medical doctor in south India, left his successful career to become one of India's best-known 20th century religious figures. During my research, I traced a path out from Sivananda's Divine Life Society in Rishikesh, through Germany and America, and back to Rishikesh, to explore how the practice of yoga—though clearly of Indian origin—has come to embody the values of health and freedom in a transnational context.

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It's 4:30 A.M. and my alarm has just sounded. In the small dark room, I begin to hear others moving about the ashram courtyard. I reach for my clothes and begin to dress. Time enough for a cup of tea and a quick wash before walking down the road to the Yoga Center on the banks of the Ganga (Ganges River). Sixteen of us converge on the large cement structure at 5:15 a.m.—a dozen non-Indian students, mostly women; a couple of Indian students, both men; the instructor and his assistant, also Indian men. Some sit in silent meditation, while others begin to stretch and twist, warming up their bodies in the cool of dawn, while staring into the mist rising up off the Ganga, the glint of the river barely visible beyond the wire mesh windows. At 5:30 a.m., Sumit, the instructor, begins to chant; he invokes the aid of the god Siva, exemplar of yogic practice, as we prepare to spend 2 1/2 hours in vigorous pursuit of the perfect pose. As he barks out the names of *asanas* (poses), followed by detailed explanations, I am called upon to translate for the numerous German students in the class. Although most of them speak English fairly well, Sumit's heavily accented, staccato Indian English is too difficult for some to comprehend, and so I try to help.



Ganga at dawn, Rishikesh.

FROM HISTORY TO PRACTICE

Styles of contemporary yoga practice vary from the gymnastic to the sublime. Most people who see the photograph below of a yoga class with its members twisted and stretched on various types of equipment view it as a variant of a medieval torture chamber. Another typical example (right), this one of a man standing on his head on an oriental carpet, seems to agree with more people's idea of what one ought to be doing



Yoga with props.



Headstand.

when practicing yoga. Yet both photos were taken within minutes and meters of each other. They reflect the diverse range of yoga practices available to students worldwide. There are, however, many Hindu textual and popular traditions other than yoga whose fame has never reached beyond the borders of the subcontinent. While the term “yoga” has widespread name-recognition, the words *Vedanta* or *Mimamsa* will probably draw only a blank stare from any non-Hindu (other than a Sanskrit scholar). But these three together make up half of the six classical schools of Indian philosophy. Why has yoga alone made it to the status of a major “cultural export”? What makes yoga different?

The title of this article, “Re-Orienting Yoga,” points to three major reasons for yoga’s surge in popularity. First, we can think about the shift in the orientation of yoga that began with Vivekananda in 1893, at the Parliament of the World’s Religions at the Chicago World’s Fair. Originally, yoga was a philosophically grounded set of practices designed to facilitate spiritual enlightenment, and it was mostly considered the domain of Hindu men. The practice of yoga in ancient India was geared primarily toward the male gender and had as its purpose the control of the body in service of the release of the spirit. Vivekananda’s later re-interpretation shifted the focus of yoga toward the promotion of two specific values of the modernity: health and freedom. Health is a primary goal of the self-development process, which is itself a key feature of modernity. While all people have always enjoyed being healthy and suffered when health is compromised, not all populations see health as a specific end in itself; that is, while illness is always a marked category, “health” is not.

Health is not only a central value of modernity, but also a marker for modernity, in the sense that the development of

nations is measured in part by a series of “health indicators” such as morbidity and mortality rates. A second indicator for national development, as established by the United Nations, the Commonwealth of former British colonies, and such private groups as Amnesty International, is the degree of individual freedom available to private citizens. In order to participate in one of these alliances of theoretically equal and free nation-states, a government must ensure a minimal level of human rights, with personal freedom the most fundamental of these. The presentation of yoga in the Western context was seen as a way to reconnect with the spiritual world, reduce stress, and regain health and freedom—all without having to lose the productive capitalist base upon which Americans and Europeans had staked their futures. As the transformed versions of yoga from Vivekananda and others became popular in India, they brought back with them similarly transformed notions of the values of health and freedom within the context of global modernity.

Second, the title “Re-Orienting Yoga” refers to the continuing debate on “Orientalism” begun by the Palestinian critic Edward Said. Said focused attention on the problem of a Western colonial power, such as Great Britain or France, reducing members of a colonized Asian society to a stereotypical or “essentialized” character. The tendency to reduce an Oriental or Asian “Other” to a singular essence (e.g. “Spiritual India”) is not new. However, I suggest that the study of yoga ideology and practice provides an excellent example of how essentialized images have been used by the colonized people themselves, as a way of literally re-forming the physical body and ideological makeup of both colonizer and colonized. Yoga offered an indigenous strategy for both the physical training to generate the bodily strength necessary to reclaim India after

MODERNITY: SEEKING HEALTH AND FREEDOM

With Michel Foucault, I see modernity as an attitude, a society’s way of relating to the world in a way that assumes that unlimited progress is both possible and desirable. As a way of approaching the world, modernity directs our attention to certain key values, among them freedom and health. While these are concepts that are debated in the highest levels of philosophical discourse (What is a good life?), for an ordinary person-in-the-world, health and freedom must always be understood in the contexts of local cultures and communities.

centuries of colonial rule, and also a model of the mental fortitude needed by anyone who wanted to effect change in his or her world. The power and flexibility of the yoga philosophy itself allowed Vivekananda to turn one simplified set of ideas and practices to two very different ends: the spiritual awaking of the western public, and the spiritual rejuvenation of the Indian people.

The third way that this article demonstrates the “re-orientation” of yoga can be seen in the literal fact of re-circulation of ideas and practices from one place on our planet to another, and back. The world is increasingly characterized by the rapid dissemination of people, goods, ideas, images, and practices around the globe. However, the majority of studies which address these transnational phenomena focus on flows from a center or “core” of political and economic power, usually somewhere in the West, to a “peripheral” locale, as outlined by Emmanuel Wallerstein in his description of *The Modern World System*. But yoga, originating in India, is now widely recognized and practiced in relatively mainstream and globally available settings, such as YMCAs or public adult education programs in the USA or Canada. In India, yoga’s popularity has followed on the heels of its Western dissemination; in some sense, though it had not actually “left” India, yoga was nevertheless “re-Oriented.”

Yoga has become entrenched in the global lexicon and its image lodged in the visual imaginary of the world. The re-orientation of yoga by innovators like Vivekananda and Sivananda suggests to Westerners emancipation from a material/spiritual dualism, and a way to get themselves and their environment “back on track.” To Indians, re-oriented yoga suggests empowerment, using an imagined shared history to

create a progressive, self-possessed, and unifying identity. In this light, yoga can be understood as part of a methodology for living a good life. It offers a critical practice which encompasses both ends of modernity’s personal/global spectrum, the current preoccupation of the middle-class world with personal health and fitness as well as with the ecological health of the planet. Yoga re-oriented is new theory with old practice. Experientially based, it offers the individual hope that through the practice of yoga, they might be freed from the constraints of “taking sides,” because yoga suggests the possibility of transcending such essentializing dichotomies as East/West, religion/science, mind/body, culture/nature, and spirituality/materiality. By going between the horns of the dilemma, being free to choose which elements from each side make the most sense to them as individuals, these middle-class yoga practitioners seek a globally relevant model for living a good life. 🏠

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Yogasana postage stamps.

For Further Reading

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