

Inadequacies of Modern Yoga Practice
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The basics of any practice, physical or mental, revolve around perception. The world is desired to be viewed in black and white, in right and wrong. The goal of yoga is to self-induce decided perception resulting in ways of relief. Millions of people around the world practice this “yoga” everyday. But does it truly matter how one practices yoga? That answer is relative to the practitioner. Looking directly at the desire to achieve perfection of practice, having a deep understanding of the actual history and factual instruction is of utmost importance in being able to achieve the highest level of mastery possible. The problem in being able to do this stems from the availability of information. The libraries and bookstores are littered with yoga books, inevitably most, if not all, being and representing “modern yoga.” This “new” modern form of yoga is almost guaranteed to claim to be the genuine practice and original technique of the ancient tantric yogis. The problem is, more often than not, this is simply incorrect. Modern Yoga of the Western World has become a realm in shadow of original tantric yoga. While maintaining a resemblance to ancient practice, modern traditional yoga’s teachings lack a deep understanding and miss profound connections to the body, which are essential in making the practice of yoga most beneficial for ones body and soul.

Having a basic understanding of the history of yoga helps deciding how to practice. Misinformation surrounds us as we attempt to soak up the plethora of knowledge available, yet, as usual, to get the accurate historical details analyzing ancient Sanskrit text is most necessary. This is because there have been interpretations of interpretations branching from the ancient texts which have not only lost important meaning and instruction through language translation, but have been selectively filtered by the interpreters. Fortunately, recent research has taken an interest in finding the factual details behind ancient practice.

There are no definite dates when “yoga” (as we know it) began but there are artifacts that let us estimate when more definitive organized versions of ancient yoga came to existence. “The development of monolithic yoga tradition can be traced back to the *Yoga Sutras*, the ancient doctrines of the earliest Vedas (circa 1700-1500 B.C.E.), or to even more ancient origins over 5,000 years ago in the Indus Valley Civilizations.” (Jain.) This seems to be the time that there was a distinguishable split between Classical and Tantric Yoga. “Tantra’s origins are still debated. Some scholars believe that it began in the Indus Valley (Pakistan and northwestern India) between 3,000 and 5,000 years ago, when the earliest yoga texts, the Vedas, were written” (Isaacs.) However, no real evidence proves the actual practice of a relative sort of “yoga” till after the turn of the century. “...*yoga* was first used as a term for a systematic set of ascetic techniques in Brahmanical sources but in reference to Buddhist practices...the most widely cited Brahmanical sources on soteriological systems of yoga emphasized meditative or devotional techniques.” (Jain.) Patinjali’s *Yoga Sutras* condensed standardized and organized meditative yoga practice.

Although meditation is usually interpreted to be the preeminent component of yoga in the *Yoga Sutras*, numerous techniques, including techniques...namely Asana and Pranayama, are prerequisites for successful meditation....Asana, however, here includes a steady and comfortable body position. (Jain)

Because of this modern postural yoga techniques are not drawn from the *Yoga Sutras*. Tantric yoga practices took even longer to develop "...Tantra did not come into common practice until the fourth century, after Patanjali's classical yoga flourished" (Isaacs.) For the next several hundred years Tantric yoga grew in popularity. Tantric Yoga revolves around chakras, the spiritual centers within the body. "Tantra came in both exoteric and esoteric forms. Exoteric practices include visualization, ritual sacrifice, devotion, and mantra as means to gradually achieving identification with the divine. Esoteric traditions combined the above practices with the idea that the practitioner could instantly and directly experience the divine..." (Jain.) These practices separated tantric yoga further from classical yoga.

The chakra system implemented in Tantric yoga has no definitive set of chakras as it ranges between different practitioners. Its importance however remains along with several repeating chakras.

The main purpose of any chakra system was to function as a template for *nyāsa*. In *nyāsa*, you visualize a specific mantric syllable in a specific location in a specific chakra in your energy body while silently intoning its sound. Clearly, this practice is embedded in a culturally-specific context in which the sounds of the Sanskrit language are seen as uniquely powerful vibrations that can form an effective part of a mystical practice that brings about spiritual liberation or worldly benefits through magical means. (Wallis)

The tantric and classical yoga practices continued to grow and evolve over the next thousand years.

In the past couple hundred years unique changes occurred to the now solidified yoga practices. These changes were caused by globalization and the demographic spread of practice from Asia to the western world. Modern yoga is, "made up of heterogeneous systems that developed as a consequence of encounters between Indian yoga reformers engaged with modern thought...yoga became subject to processes of translation and accommodation as its proponents actively modernized it. Ida C. Craddock was responsible for one of the biggest reasons yoga was majorly shut out of the western world. While her research and teaching of mystic-erotic techniques of yoga were revolutionary of the time and helpful for her students, the late 19th Century American audience was not ready for them. Not only did the general consensus have a distaste for Craddock's teachings, but they were fearful of them. She served excessive prison time and ending up taking her life. Pierre Bernar and Sir John Woodroffe were two other major American yoga pioneers who attempted to bring "modern" tantric yoga to the masses. They were subject do deep criticism.

Despite what one might suspect given the prevalence of postural yoga in pop culture today, modern yoga's early history shows that involvement in physical yoga cost a person more social 'currency' than involvement in yoga focused on meditation, philosophy, or ethics...abilities to contort the body into what were considered bizarre yoga postures were associated with contortionists. Consequently, the physical techniques of hatha yoga were reduced to mere crass entertainment (Jain.)

Despite the failed attempts at introducing yoga to the "new" western audience, other advocates continued to persist different ways to bring yoga to the masses.

After a basic trial-and-error representation of what happened with tantric yoga it was apparent what people did not want. Classical (*raja*) yoga was the answer. The "ethical, philosophical, and meditational components" of classical yoga were subject to much less controversy and were taken more seriously. "Vivekananda used raja yoga to refer to what he considered authentic yoga according to his selective readings of the Yoga Sutras...Vivekananda sought to disseminate a form of yoga to 'the West' that would be perceived as the antithesis to the body-centered religion popularly associated with yoga" (Jain.) Vivekananda is one of the first examples of purposeful yoga tailoring to a certain audience, not for factual purposes, but for practical more likeable purposes. The 19th century was a time of religious questioning throughout the western world. Advances and discoveries in science dismissed many orthodox religious reasonings and opened up many doors for questioning. A sort of modern religious reform had arisen.

"For something to qualify as modern, it had to be compatible with science, so Vivekananda sought to prove that raja yoga was scientific... he appropriated the notion of the subtle body, which he argued had correspondences in the physical body as mapped out in modern anatomy and physiology... he argued, subtle energy could function as a healing agent... while acknowledging that yogic metaphysics and meditation could have implications for the physical body, he largely rejected the physical practices associated with hatha (tantric) yoga" (Jain)

Vivekananda plays a contradicting role in the development of modern yoga practice. While he is one of the biggest original, "modern," influences pushing yoga through to modern western culture, he abandoned physical posture practices, which are at the core of the majority of yoga practiced today. "Because he prescribed an ascetic, Protestant yoga, he was successful in establishing a network of American centers for what he called the Vedanta society...its members were still marginalized from American mainstream, which perceived yoga in all its forms to be a threat to social norms. A large ban on yoga was implemented short after Vivekananda's efforts. The reemergence of yoga gradually followed the physical/fitness movement of the western world. Pattabhi Jois was "among many proponents who became globally famous for prescribing yoga as a physical fitness regime.... The valorization of physical fitness traveled from Europe to British India, where Indian yogis assimilate

physical culture” (Jain) The result was a “hatha yoga renaissance” (Singleton.) Unexpectedly, through posture practice, yoga began to finally gain ground. “Yoga was modernized, medicalized, and transformed into a system of physical culture” (Alter) The practices that were once rejected were now spreading faster than ever.

In addition to knowing the history (which in itself exhibits drastic recomposition and change of original systems) it is essential to know how the history relates to modern practice. In general there is very little real relation. Modern yoga has taken many deviations as its popularity has escalated in the past couple decades. It has established itself into the well known but for the most part remained inconsistent with pure ancient practice. Ancient yoga scholars including Mark Singleton agree that “modern postural orthopraxis does not really resemble the yoga forms from which it claims to derive” (Singleton.) To fully understand this, it is essential to be able to link where modern yoga came from. While Tantric yoga was initially interesting to a select few it was rejected by the majority, aggressively. The first actually successful establishment (although short-lived) was through Vivekananda’s introduction of his version of Classical yoga. Thereafter yoga slowly began to spread but once again as a physical practice, first and foremost, and then re-evolving in with more classical aspects. Therefore the yoga practiced today, while thought of as having most relation to “hatha,” tantric yoga, actually stems from classical yoga that was already adjusted for the western world, readjusted to accommodate the goal of fitness, and then reinfused with a touch of classical and tantric ideas to develop the perception of a fully rounded “proper ancient” practice.

In addition, it must be noted that the original goal of ancient yogis (especially the tantric yogis) was to be able to connect their bodies to their spirit. “The difference between Tantra and classical yoga is Tantra’s body-positive view. Since the body exists in the material world, the classical yoga viewpoint is that it is inferior to the transcendental Self or spirit. Tantra views the body as a manifestation of spirit” (Isaacs.) While it seems that modern yogis exhibit similarities to ancient Tantric yogis their practice is not close to being accurate. “The primacy of asana performance in transnational yoga today is a new phenomenon that has no parallel in premodern times” (Singleton.) Since modern yoga stems from classical yoga there is an inherent belief that the spirit of the mind controls the body. Therefore when doing the “refined” modern yoga posture poses one attempts to control the body through the mind and place it in certain “correct” positions to be able to feel an alteration, relief, or to trigger growth. To an external observer and insufficiently educated interpreter it seems the Tantric yogi does the same, but in fact, the tantric yogi does the opposite. Tantric yoga focuses on the body and separates it into its specific chakras (spiritual powers.) A tantric yogi uses strong will, focus, and imagination to create different physical perceptions of reality which in turn affects each chakra that physical dominates a certain part of the body. Through this reverse process one then received the “relief” or benefit from practice. In short, modern yogis are doing everything backwards.

There are many other components of modern yoga that are simply misunderstood or incorrectly executed. Unfortunately modern yoga’s incorporation of tantric philosophies and practices has created a very unrealistic reality of proper practice. “The Tantric physiology that underpins traditional expression of hatha

yoga has also generally played only quite a minor role in popular modern yoga” (Singleton) Since recent yoga interest has shifted and the desire of traditional ancient yoga practice knowledge is desired, it is essential for scholars to continue providing factual knowledge.

While yoga is not specifically religious in context and more spiritual in nature it is a fact that it has had Hindu and Buddhist origins. The spread of yoga over the past millennium has created a conglomerate of influences for modern yoga. “What is known as modern yoga is derived not from a pure ancient classical source, but from a botchpotch of medieval spiritual practices of Buddhist, Vaisnavas, Salvias, Muslims, and tribal ascetics” (Lieberman) While these other sources are not necessarily wrong in ways of practice, they have created different deviations to adjust to their liking, creating a separation from “pure” ancient practice. The passing of time has further dramatized the changes from the original source.

Other minor (yet significant for mention) problems of modern yoga include the excessive reliance on photography. This is an inevitable and efficient way to spread postural practices quickly to large audiences in the modern world. “Advances in photography and print distribution created the conditions for a popular yoga of the body and dictated to a large extent the feature of that body. The result of modern yoga’s overwhelming reliance on photographic realism has elided the body of ‘traditional’ hatha yoga” (Singleton.) An additional problem is that “real” yoga needs to be practiced in Sanskrit to work; repeating the necessary sounds is different than “knowing” and “feeling” them as if they were part of one’s language. Since the Sanskrit sounds work magically when they are pronounced well, it is essential to make sure they are executed correctly. For the modern practitioner it may be next to impossible to know what is truly “correct.”. Sanskrit interpretation usually leads to improper understanding. Additional English translation usually creates significant inadequacies, not only in interpretation, but of factually translation. A prime example of this is John Woodroffe's flawed 1918 translation of a text on the chakras written in Sanskrit in 1577. John Woodroffe also happens to be one of the greatest influences of modern western yoga. Some flaws of his teachings have rampantly spread and directly, and inadvertently influenced millions of next generation yogis around the world. Developing a relationship with a yogi who has had been passed down and taught proper Sanskrit and ancient yoga techniques through generations would be ideal if the desire is to seek true and proper meanings and to achieve ideal results.

Going further into detail, Christopher Wallis’ and Christopher Thompkins’ research on ancient tantric yoga shows significant flaws and misunderstandings of the chakra’s and the chakra system in modern tantric yoga practice. “The West (barring a handful of scholars) has almost totally failed to come to grips with what the chakras meant in their original context and how one is supposed to practice with them” (Wallis) Having a proper understanding of how to use the chakras is crucial to proper tantric practice. In addition, there are hundreds of different chakra techniques, all encompassing chakra systems with different amounts of “relevant” chakras. This has greatly confused modern yogis and the answer may be easier than imagined. Since all of the popular well-written chakra systems include all of the basic “core” chakras, it is okay to use whichever system works best for the yogi. The

necessary part is to find a credible source and then to stick to the teachings. Having uncertainty and overthinking methods due to information overload creates confusion and can slow or even halt any spiritual progress.

To give credit to practitioners and yogis worldwide, there is significant effort put forward to learn the “true” ways of practice but the reality is that quantity of resources greatly outweighs the quality. Unfortunately, it seems that modern yoga has created its own realm, of sorts, and while it has been able to reach more people in less time than ever before, it has created an uncertain guide for an aspiring yogi. Over the past century yoga has come a long way: from general acceptance to being part of mainstream western pop culture. However, it has yet to come out of the shadow that it is cast under. The determined desires for factual knowledge and persistent research by ancient yoga scholars such as Christopher Thompkins, Christopher Wallis, and many others will eliminate the majority of misinformation and guide modern yogis in the direction of yoga nirvana.

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