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## Modern Yoga in America

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MODERN YOGA IN AMERICA

by

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2020

On a beautiful morning in April 2009, rows of brightly colored yoga mats were spread on the lawn for students of all ages to practice their ‘downward facing dog’ pose along with hundreds of other people. Excitement filled the air as participants waited patiently for the guests of honor to arrive. Clearly, this was not an ordinary yoga class; this class was being held on the vast green lawn surrounding the White House as part of the annual Easter Egg Roll celebration, and students would be greeted by then-President Obama and First Lady, Michelle Obama. Yoga had been selected as one of the activities that would represent Michelle Obama’s message of healthy eating and exercise.<sup>1</sup> Subsequent years during the Obama administration continued to include yoga as part of the presidential activities, which sends a clear message: yoga has been woven into the fabric of mainstream American society.

Yoga’s immense growth and popularity during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, along with its proliferation into countless varieties and styles, presents teachers, students, and scholars with the question: “*What is yoga?*” Answering this question requires the investigation of a number of cultural, historical and philosophical tensions at play in modern expressions of this ancient tradition: (1) Is modern postural yoga (MPY)—the yoga widely practiced in studios across the country today—an authentic expression of yoga or is it simply another form of physical fitness? (2) Does the modern focus on the physical dimension of yoga forsake its original purpose of pursuing spiritual enlightenment? (3) Should the academic study of yoga proceed through a scientific study of yoga’s health benefits or through a humanistic study of yoga as a religious, cultural and philosophical phenomenon? This paper will explore these questions by tracing the history of modern postural yoga to uncover the sources of these tensions

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<sup>1</sup> Stephanie Syman, *Subtle Body: The Story of Yoga in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2011), 1-2.

and the cultural forces that have kept them in play. The paper will then offer suggestions as to how such tensions can be navigated productively by both scholars and practitioners.

## THE ADAPTABILITY OF MODERN YOGA

Definitions of yoga are as diverse as it's methodology. The etymological root of yoga is 'yuj' which means to 'join' or 'yoke.'<sup>2</sup> While many contemporary yoga practitioners may define yoga as a union between the self and God, or the finite to the infinite, there are a broad range of meanings that include "skill in work, desireless action, acquisition of true knowledge, indifference to pleasure and pain, addition (in arithmetic), and conjunction (in astronomy)."<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, each definition carries its own set of metaphors and symbolic meanings that may change based on the preference and perspective of each lineage, tradition, or even each individual devotee.

Historical accounts show that the ideas, practices, and purposes for practicing have continuously adapted and evolved over the centuries. As yoga gained popularity in the West around the early twentieth century, variations became even more prevalent as Eastern and Western ideas merged to create the varieties now referred to by scholars as "modern postural yoga," which refers to disciplines of yoga that are rooted in South Asian culture and have merged with Western ideas over the past 150 years.<sup>4</sup> This paper will focus specifically on modern postural yoga.

In the United States today, the term yoga is likely to call up images of neighborhood studios full of strong, supple bodies practicing downward facing dog. Yet, the postures that make

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<sup>2</sup> William Dwight Whitney, *The Roots, Verb-Forms and Primary Derivatives of the Sanskrit Language* (Delhi: Motilal Bandarsidass, 1997), 132.

<sup>3</sup> S.C. Banerji, *Studies in Origin and Development of Yoga* (Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1995), 44.

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga: Patañjali and Western Esotericism* (London: Continuum, 2008), 2.

up popular yoga practice today stem from the word *āsana*, defined in Sanskrit by early literary texts as a meditative ‘seat,’ which refers to the physical act of sitting. As a practice, *āsana* falls under *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* *astanga* system of *hatha* yoga, which encompass a variety of practices meant to cleanse, strengthen and prepare the body for the seated practices of *pranayama* (breathwork) and *dhyana* (meditation).<sup>5</sup> This raises the question of how yoga has developed from a system that was once primarily focused on the introspective practices of meditation toward a modern fast-paced series of postures that focus on physical strength and flexibility.

#### AN OVERVIEW OF CURRENT SCHOLARSHIP ON YOGA

Academics have been wrestling with the inquiry of whether modern postural yoga is a classical or authentic expression of yoga, meaning that forms of yoga *asana* are continuous with its Indian origins, or if it is simply another form of physical fitness. As a response to this question, researchers have focused on the history of modern yoga and how it has changed over time. Leading yoga scholar Elizabeth De Michelis outlines a useful typology depicting five types of modern yoga: (1) Early modern psychosomatic yoga, referring to the interaction between mind and body, presented by Vivekananda (1863-1902) through his book *Raja Yoga*. (2) Neo-Hindu yoga, which refers to Hinduism-inspired new religious movements and combines nationalistic and religious ideals with a physical component influenced by martial and gymnastic practices from both indigenous and western origins. (3) Postural yoga, which developed from around the 1920’s onward, encompasses physical postures (*asanas*) and may or may not have ties to religious or philosophical teachings. This type of yoga is often what is most familiar to the general population in the United States. (4) Meditational yoga, an ancient practice that gained

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<sup>5</sup> Edwin F. Bryant, *The Yoga Sutras of Patañjali* (New York: North Point Press, 2015), 283-289.

popularity in America from the 1920's onwards, focuses on a specific set of meditational practices, often involving concentration on an object (*dharana*). Meditation-centered yoga may have more explicit ideological content than postural yoga practices and may overlap with (5) Denominational yoga which focuses on a distinctive belief system which has always been central to yoga in India but appeared to have taken root from about 1950's onward in the United States. Denominational yoga focuses more on doctrine, and often reveres a particular guru or avatar (an incarnation of a divine being in a human form).<sup>6</sup> These five distinctions offer a glimpse into the multifaceted traditions of modern globalized yoga and are useful for understanding various contemporary manifestations of yoga. Those who teach and practice often embody multiple types.<sup>7</sup>

Early research on modern yoga began around 1990 and started to pick up momentum by 2000.<sup>8</sup> Modern yoga has primarily been studied in two ways: first, as a discipline in the humanities and social sciences, which focuses on the history, social dynamics, and religious or philosophical dimensions of modern yoga. Second, as a discipline of health and exercise science, which focuses on therapeutic and holistic approaches to well-being.<sup>9</sup> Central to the study of modern postural yoga is the question of whether or not modern postural yoga is classic expression of yoga, or if it is merely another form of physical fitness? Answers to this question have been explored by yoga scholars in a variety of ways.

In 2004, Joseph Alter examined the relationship between science and philosophy focusing heavily on medical and scientific experiments carried out by Swami Kuvalayananda

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<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth De Michelis, "A Preliminary Survey of Modern Yoga Studies," *Asian Medicine* 3, no. 1 (2007): 1-19, doi:10.1163/157342107x207182.

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth De Michelis, "Modern Yoga: History and Forms," in *Yoga in the Modern World: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Mark Singleton and Jean Byrne (London: Routledge, 2008), 21-22.

<sup>8</sup> De Michelis, "A Preliminary Survey," 1-19.

<sup>9</sup> De Michelis, "A Preliminary Survey," 2.

from the 1920s in the Bombay area. Alter examines the challenges that arise when ancient methods merge with modernity,<sup>10</sup> arguing that science provides a context in which the practice of yoga may be understood across international boundaries, without the philosophical and theological issues tied to its religious roots. According to Alter, modern yoga is a product of India that was “modernized, medicalized, and transformed into a system of physical culture.”<sup>11</sup> I agree with Alter’s argument that science provides a way for yoga to be studied and practiced without its philosophical or theological dimensions. This does not, however, this does not define all manifestations of modern yoga. The typology of modern yoga provided by De Michelis offers a broad range of meanings, which portrays yoga’s fluid nature and adaptability. One of the fascinating features of yoga and reasons for its lasting influence, is its ability to adapt to meet the needs and interests of its practitioner. Furthermore, the study of yoga, even in a scientific context, must include an examination of its history which is rooted in philosophy and spirituality.

In 2010, Mark Singleton offered a revealing look at yoga’s history by presenting the ways in which postural yoga was initially developed. Singleton’s research points to the identifying characteristics that helped shape modern postural yoga, arguing that yoga may relate to the tradition of Indian hatha yoga, which includes *asana* from *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, yet cannot be considered a direct successor of Indian tradition. He argues that modern postural yoga is the result of combining Indian religious ideas and physical culture techniques such as harmonic gymnastics, martial arts, dance, and body building, all of which gained popularity during the international physical culture movement in the early twentieth century.<sup>12</sup> He makes it clear that his intent is not to prove that yoga is merely a form of gymnastics, but instead to

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<sup>10</sup> Joseph Alter, *Yoga in Modern India: The Body Between Science and Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), xv.

<sup>11</sup> Alter, *Yoga in Modern India*, 10.

<sup>12</sup> Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Yoga Practice* (Oxford: University Press, 2010), 5.

understand the development of modern postural yoga as it is practiced today.<sup>13</sup> His book generated a heated debate among yoga scholars, teachers and practitioners about what yoga is, and whether or not we are practicing an ancient method rooted in history and tradition, or if we are simply drawing from a variety of modern disciplines that have been altered to resemble ancient yoga techniques. Singleton's research on the development of modern postural yoga represents another example of yoga's ability to remain fluid yet rooted to ancient tradition.

Some of Singleton's historical claims regarding the evidence and diversity of *asana* in India prior to the physical culture movement have been disputed most recently by yoga scholar Jason Birch, whose examination of unpublished Sanskrit yoga manuscripts in 2011 reveal that more than eighty-four asanas were practiced in some traditions of *hatha* yoga before the British arrived in India. He notes that the majority of these asanas were not seated postures, but complex and physically demanding postures linked through repetitive movement and breath control practices.<sup>14</sup>

Building on Birch's study, Seth Powell writes about sculpted visual material that shines new light on the historical development of physical yoga postures. In 2016, Powell photographed and surveyed a number of sculpted images of yoga ascetics practicing a variety of non-seated yoga *asanas* displayed on the pillared halls of the Vijayanagara temple complexes in South India, dating from the early sixteenth century. These sculptures represent early visual evidence of the practice of non-seated yoga postures in late medieval South India.<sup>15</sup> These studies align with

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<sup>13</sup> Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 14.

<sup>14</sup> Jason Birch, "Unpublished Manuscript Evidence for the Practice of Numerous asanas in the 17-18th Centuries." Conference paper presented at "Yoga in Transformation." International Conference, University of Vienna, 2013. September 19-21. Retrieved from: [https://www.academia.edu/4569479/Unpublished\\_Manuscript\\_Evidence\\_For\\_The\\_Practice\\_Of\\_Numerous\\_Asanas\\_in\\_the\\_17th-18th\\_Centuries](https://www.academia.edu/4569479/Unpublished_Manuscript_Evidence_For_The_Practice_Of_Numerous_Asanas_in_the_17th-18th_Centuries). Accessed on: September 14, 2019.

<sup>15</sup> Seth Powell, "Etched in Stone: Sixteenth-century Visual and Material Evidence of Śaiva Ascetics and Yogis in Complex Non-seated asanas at Vijayanagara," *Journal of Yoga Studies* vol. 1 (2018): 47.



James Mallinson's assertion that although non-seated postures are not taught in yoga texts until the end of the first millennium, CE, Indian ascetics have been using forms of physical postures, often as ascetic endurance practices, for at least 2500 years.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, while Singleton's extensive research into the background and development of modern postural yoga lends a useful understanding of its history, I would argue that he places too much emphasis on the development of physical shapes and methods of movement as he relates it to *asana*. *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* use the word *asana* as a seated posture for breath control and meditation.<sup>17</sup> Later texts refer to it as "any bodily posture and even repeated dynamic physical movements."<sup>18</sup> Based on *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, the physical components of the practice are a preliminary step toward understanding breath work and meditation. I would argue that in spite of the fact that physical forms of the practice have changed, if proper breath control and concentration remain central to the practice, then the original benefits and purposes associated with *asana* will remain accessible to the practitioner. Ultimately, it is left up to the student to place yoga in a context that resonates with their purpose for practicing. As David Gordon White points out, this is not the first-time yoga has been reinvented. This evolution is a process that has been going on for at least two thousand years. "Every group in every age has created its own version and vision of yoga."<sup>19</sup>

## YOGA ARRIVES IN AMERICA

Yoga's history offers a spectacular and multifaceted array of ancient stories, myths, symbolism, practices, traditions, and cultural influences. Its original diversity only expanded as it

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<sup>16</sup> James Mallinson and Mark Singleton, *Roots of Yoga* (United Kingdom: Penguin Books, 2017), 88.

<sup>17</sup> Bryant, *The Yoga Sutras of Patañjali*, 283.

<sup>18</sup> Mallinson and Singleton, *Roots of Yoga*, 86. The earliest known usage of the *asana* to refer to a physical posture is found in Asvaghosa's c. 50 CE *Buddhacarita* (v. 12.120; Gharote 1989).

<sup>19</sup> White, "Yoga, Brief History," 2.

merged with Western influences and wove its way into American culture. Here, I will present a brief history that demonstrates how yoga found a home in the United States. I will examine the influences of early yoga teachers, cultural influences, changing perceptions of yoga, and an American audience eager to learn about Eastern ideas and practices. Yoga's adaptability helped it seamlessly integrate with already existing spiritual and cultural movements in America. These include the Transcendentalist Movement, the physical culture movement, and the counterculture movement, all of which supported American interest in alternative forms of creativity, health, spirituality, and expression. While yoga in India may be tied to Indian religious belief systems, Americans reinvented it in ways that have resonated with their own perspectives. For some practitioners, it has meant relating yoga to spirituality, for others it represents scientific exploration relating to the practical functions of the body. Early development of modern postural yoga in the West was influenced by the need for Western students to create context for yoga that supports their own cultural and historical needs. Examining this history will help yoga educators understand why students have been drawn to the practice of yoga in the United States and how culture, education, and society have influenced its growth and increasing popularity.

As noted, yoga's central purposes, for at least two millennia, were spiritual and philosophical. Modern postural yoga, as practiced in most yoga studios today, came into being only in the early twentieth century. For this reason, when yoga arrived in America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it arrived as a spiritual, philosophical, and meditation-oriented discipline. Scholar Catherine Albanese illuminates some of the reasons that yoga as a spiritual discipline appealed to Americans at the time. Yoga was warmly welcomed by what she terms an "American Metaphysical Religion." She explains how metaphysical movements, such as Transcendentalism, New Thought, Theosophy and the New Age movement were influenced

by yogic concepts, and in turn, perceptions of yoga were influenced by them.<sup>20</sup> Let us look at each of these movements briefly.

Originating with Ralph Waldo Emerson, Transcendentalism was an idealistic literary, philosophical and social movement of the early nineteenth century that promoted the belief that people gain knowledge about themselves or the world that can ‘transcend’ what they can see, hear, taste, touch or feel. Spiritual knowledge comes through intuition, and an intuitive connection to nature rather than through logic or the senses.<sup>21</sup> The first Transcendentalists were Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, who were themselves much influenced by Indian philosophy. Thoreau quotes Indian texts in *Walden* and was in fact, the first American to call himself “a yogi.”<sup>22</sup> Transcendentalism also set the stage for later American spiritual movements and prepared many for the coming of yoga at the end of the century.

Stemming in part from the ideas presented through Transcendentalism, the New Thought movement took shape in the mid-nineteenth century as a popular current of esoteric American Protestantism that borrowed Indian ideas that were adapted to align with American beliefs. Agreeing with Albanese on the influence of the New Thought Movement, Singleton demonstrates the relationship between yoga and New Thought, noting that its development of vigorous regimes of fasting, diet, physical training and relationship to nature are similar to ancient hatha yoga practices that promote cleanliness and purity in order to achieve higher states of consciousness.<sup>23</sup> Albanese also highlights the relationship between yoga and Theosophy, a

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<sup>20</sup> Catherine L. Albanese, “Sacred (and Secular) Self-Fashioning: Esalen and the Transformation of Yoga,” in *On the Edge of the Future: Esalen and the Evolution of American Culture*, ed. Jeffrey J. Kripal and Glenn W. Shuck (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 45–79.

<sup>21</sup> “An Explosion of New Thought,” accessed January 21, 2020, [www.ushistory.org](http://www.ushistory.org).

<sup>22</sup> Richard H. Davis, “Henry David Thoreau, Yogi,” *Common Knowledge* 1 January 2018; 24 (1): 56–89. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1215/0961754X-4253822>

<sup>23</sup> Mark Singleton, “Suggestive Therapeutics: New Thoughts Relationship to Modern Yoga,” *Asian Medicine* 3, no. 1 (2007): 64–84

religion established in England in the late nineteenth century by Helena Blavatsky, who was heavily influenced by yogic ideas and Indian religion. In the 1970s, the New Age movement adopted many of the same spiritual and religious beliefs that were presented through Transcendentalism, New Thought and Theosophy as it carved its own place as a spiritual movement in American history.

Central to yoga's history in the United States was the arrival of Swami Vivekananda, a highly educated, well-spoken Indian monk, who took the stage at The World Parliament of Religions in 1893 and quickly became a favorite among the speakers as they stressed the importance of unity among religious belief systems.<sup>24</sup> Vivekananda captured the audience with his eloquent voice, charming demeanor and teachings as he introduced the spiritual and philosophical dimensions of yoga to the United States.

While Vivekananda spoke about yogic concepts, he was careful not to use the word yoga in his early speeches. Vivekananda may have been reluctant to mention certain concepts of yoga, fearing that they might be too obscure or foreign for his new American audience. As he continued to speak and travel through the United States, he carefully introduced topics that were palatable to his audience. His careful selection of topics demonstrates one of the earliest examples of how yoga was adapted to meet the needs of its students. Vivekananda's ideas were met with enthusiasm by many Americans who had already developed an interest in Eastern thought.<sup>25</sup> Three main components contributed to welcoming Eastern ideas: the post-Enlightenment crisis of Christianity, which was heavily influenced by the diffusion of Unitarianism and the spiritual quest of American Transcendentalists;<sup>26</sup> the success of the

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<sup>24</sup> Syman, *Subtle Body*, 41.

<sup>25</sup> De Michelis, "A Preliminary Survey," 5.

<sup>26</sup> Arthur Christy, *The Orient in American Transcendentalism: A Study of Emerson, Thoreau, and Alcott*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932).

Theosophical Society; and the development of printing and literacy, which contributed to the quick distribution of these subjects as they developed into the ‘self-help’ culture of the late nineteenth century.<sup>27</sup>

Vivekananda relied upon the ancient Indian scriptural text, *The Bhagavad Gita* to divide the multiplicity of yoga practices into four main groups that would serve students of various preferences and temperaments. The first of these is *karma* yoga, “the manner in which a man realizes his own works and duty.”<sup>28</sup> The second is *bhakti* yoga, “the realization of divinity through devotion to and love of a personal God.”<sup>29</sup> The third is *raja* yoga, described by Vivekananda as “the realization of divinity through control of the mind,” as it is depicted in the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*.<sup>30</sup> The fourth is *jnana* yoga, described as the realization of man’s own divinity through knowledge.<sup>31</sup> Missing from Vivekananda’s list was the physical practices of *hatha* yoga. His early speeches mention very little about *hatha* yoga, stating that it is a practice that deals with the physical body for the purpose of building strength, stating that “if the body is not in a fit state, the practice will be obstructed. Therefore, we have to keep the body in good health we have to take care of what we eat and drink, and what we do. . . that is all—nothing further of the body. We must not forget that health is only a means to an end.”<sup>32</sup>

Vivekananda’s reference to *hatha* yoga may hold a very different meaning to how it is currently defined. Prompted by the question of how *hatha* yoga received its name, Jason Birch investigates the origin of *hatha* yoga, drawing from its literal translation as ‘yoga of force.’

Based on this translation, many Indian and Western scholars assume that its name represents the

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<sup>27</sup> De Michelis, “A Preliminary Survey,” 5.

<sup>28</sup> Suzanne Newcombe, “Development of Modern Yoga: A Survey of the Field,” *Religion Compass* 3, no. 6 (2009): 989, doi:10.1111/j.1749-8171.2009.00171.

<sup>29</sup> De Michelis, *History of Modern Yoga*, 123.

<sup>30</sup> De Michelis, *History of Modern Yoga*, 151.

<sup>31</sup> Newcombe, “Development of Modern Yoga,” 989.

<sup>32</sup> Swami Vivekananda, *Raja Yoga*. (Chicago, 1896), 20.

effort required to practice difficult physical postures.<sup>33</sup> Esoteric definitions of *hatha* yoga define it as the union of ha (sun) and tha (moon), the union of *prana* (energy) and *apana vayus*. *Vayus* are defined as ‘winds’ and represent movement of *prana* in the body. *Prana-vayu* relates to upward moving energy and is stored in the chest region, while *apana-vayu* correlates with downward moving energy, and is stored in the abdomen. The *prana* and *apana vayus* also relate to the inhale and exhale breath, respectively.<sup>34</sup> In examining early introductions of the term, Birch argues that it often appears in conjunction with *raja* yoga, a meditative approach that is commonly viewed as superior to *hatha*, based on *raja*’s efficacy and ease in contrast to *hatha* yoga’s effort and difficulty. Birch traces the relationship between *raja* and *hatha* yoga, which he argues, began as a rivalry depicted in a text known as the *Amanaskayoga* in the eleventh to twelfth century.<sup>35</sup> Later texts such as the *Dattatreya yoga sastra* in the twelfth to thirteenth century, depict a reconciliation of *hatha* and *raja* yoga, in which they appear as one of four yogas: *mantra*, *laya*, *hatha*, and *raja*. *Hatha* and *raja* were later brought together as being dependent on one another in the *Hathapradipika*.<sup>36</sup>

Birch argues that the word *hatha* does not refer to violent means or forceful effort in *hatha* texts, as previously thought, but instead denotes a more neutral word for effort such as ‘carefully’ or ‘diligently.’<sup>37</sup> Birch points out that descriptions of *hatha* yoga in the *Amanaskayoga*, introduced it as preparation for the more advanced practice of meditation, which requires the student to have attained a ‘perfected mind.’<sup>38</sup> The relationship between *hatha* yoga

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<sup>33</sup> Birch, “Meaning of Hatha Yoga,” 527.

<sup>34</sup> Birch, “Meaning of Hatha Yoga,” 532.

<sup>35</sup> Birch, “Meaning of Hatha Yoga,” 527.

<sup>36</sup> Birch, “Meaning of Hatha Yoga,” 527.

<sup>37</sup> Birch, “Meaning of Hatha Yoga,” 531.

<sup>38</sup> Birch, “Meaning of Hatha Yoga,” 527.

as preparation for *raja* yoga may explain the interdependent relationship between the two as a complete system.<sup>39</sup>

The idea of *hatha* yoga as a “yoga of force” in early ancient texts may have prompted Vivekananda’s resistance to expose it to his new western audience. As his messages of yoga begin to gain support and interest in his widely popular book, *Raja Yoga* (1896), he softens to the idea of introducing a physical component to the practice, writing about the significance of physical movement as it relates to the discovery of more subtle aspects of the practice. In this text, he describes the relationship as follows:

We can know of them [subtle sensations] only as the mind, as it were, enters the body, and becomes more subtle. To get that subtle perception, we have to begin with the grosser perceptions, so we have to get hold of that which is setting the whole engine in motion, and that is the Prana, the most obvious manifestation of which is the breath. Then, along with the breath, we will slowly enter the body, and that will enable us to find out about the subtle forces, how the nerve currents are moving all over the body, and as soon as we perceive that, and learn to feel them, we shall begin to get control over them, and over the body. The mind is also set into motion by these different nerve currents, so at last, we shall reach the state when we have perfect control over the body and mind, making both our servants.<sup>40</sup>

This passage describes the way that gross body sensations in terms of muscle, tissue and bones may lead the student toward a more subtle experience which may be accessed through the breath. The breath exists as a bridge between the gross and the subtle. It is not as tangible as the physical body, and yet not as subtle as *prana* (energy). In order to access the sensation of *prana*, the student must first develop a clear sensation of the breath and how it may be moved or manipulated in the body through a series of breath work practices (*pranayama*), seals or ‘locks’ in the body (*bandhas*), and postures (*asana*).

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<sup>39</sup> Birch, “Meaning of Hatha Yoga,” 546.

<sup>40</sup> Vivekananda, *Raja Yoga*, 26.

Vivekananda goes on to discuss the importance of the breath as a means for controlling the fluctuations of the mind, stating that “Breath is like the fly-wheel of this machine, the body. In a big engine you find the fly-wheel first moving, and that motion is conveyed to finer and finer machinery until the most delicate and finest mechanism in the machine is in motion. The breath is that fly-wheel, supplying and regulating the motive power to everything in this body.”<sup>41</sup> Vivekananda explains that we know very little about our own bodies; that our attention is not focused enough to be aware of the very subtle sensations that are going on within us.<sup>42</sup> I would argue that the practice of *hatha* yoga is meant to draw the student toward those subtle sensations, and in doing so, heightens one’s ability to concentrate, focus, and ultimately still the mind for meditation. As students approach the physical aspect of yoga, they learn to develop their sense of feel, beginning with obvious muscular sensations and eventually leading toward more subtle and refined sensations.

## YOGA AS A PHYSICAL PRACTICE

In spite of Vivekananda’s reluctance to teach *hatha* yoga, its physical benefits continued to attract students as early modern *hatha* yoga classes and texts began to emerge in the early part of the twentieth century. Considered an important influence in the introduction of modern *hatha* yoga in the United States and its revival in India, Sri Yogendra (1897-1989) began teaching modern *hatha* yoga classes between 1920 and 1922 in Harrison, New York. His classes emphasized the health benefits of physical postures, which along with his publications, *Yoga Asanas Simplified* (1928) and *Yoga Personal Hygiene* (1931) played a significant role in the public health and fitness approach that dominates yoga today.

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<sup>41</sup> Vivekananda, *Raja Yoga*, 24.

<sup>42</sup> Vivekananda, *Raja Yoga*, 25.



Yogendra began teaching during a period of time when yoga was perceived as a mystical and mysterious practice. Teachers of yoga were referred to as yogis, swamis, wonder-workers, jugglers, and mystics.<sup>43</sup> The words “yoga” and “yogi” were often associated with breathing, philosophy, psychology, occultism and mysticism.<sup>44</sup> Yoga at this time was adapted and repurposed within strains of Albanese’s “American Metaphysical Religion” such as Transcendentalism, New Thought, and Theosophy.<sup>45</sup>

In the early 1900’s, academics focused on supernatural elements of yoga, de-emphasizing yoga’s attention to mental obstacles and ethics.<sup>46</sup> Perceptions of yoga were influenced by traveling yogis who would entice students with hypnotism, supernatural abilities, and scholarly interest in the classical texts of yoga, with little consideration for physical practices.<sup>47</sup> In his 1901 article, “Yoga Techniques in the Great Epic,” E.W. Hopkins’ stressed yoga’s exotic and mystical nature, wherein he succinctly states, “The exercise of yoga imparts magical powers.”<sup>48</sup>

Adding to yoga’s reputation as a mystical practice in the early twentieth century, was the popularity of Kundalini yoga, which focuses on practices that awaken dormant energy rooted at the base of the spine. Carl Jung’s *The Psychology of Kundalini Yoga*, published in 1932, was influential in bringing the esoteric practice to the forefront of academic thought.<sup>49</sup> Yogendra clearly attempts to change popular notions of yoga as an occult practice by stating clearly in his first book, *Yoga Asanas Simplified*:

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<sup>43</sup> Philip Deslippe, “The Swami Circuit: Mapping the Terrain of Early American Yoga,” *Journal of Yoga Studies* Vol. 1 (2018): 8.

<sup>44</sup> Deslippe, “Swami Circuit,” 8.

<sup>45</sup> Deslippe, “Swami Circuit,” 8.

<sup>46</sup> Laura Douglass, “The Yoga Tradition: How Did We Get Here? A History of Yoga in America, 1800-1970,” *International Journal of Yoga Therapy* no. 17 (2007): 38.

<sup>47</sup> Deslippe, “Swami Circuit,” 13.

<sup>48</sup> E. W. Hopkins, “Yoga Technique in the Great Epic,” *Journal of Religion* 8 no. 4 (1928): 618-620.

<sup>49</sup> Douglass, “The Yoga Tradition,” 38.

Various shades of misunderstanding seem to have prevailed and still continue to prevail regarding yoga—it's place in the life of man, his evolution and his achievements—not only in foreign lands but most unfortunately even in India, the place of its birth. The ignorant and the misinformed have come to believe that it is some form of white or black magic, obscure sorcery, pseudo-supernatural trickery, physical and mental mortification or orgies of secret ritualism through which, in some unaccountable manner, miraculous feats are performed. These misconceptions thus have frightened many; and they are still frightening not a few. The superstitious have come to regard it with awe and reverence, almost with fear.<sup>50</sup>

Yogendra states that yoga represents a rational way of living that supports “perfect health—physical, mental, moral and spiritual—so that what is ignoble in man is sublimated to what is most noble in him.”<sup>51</sup>

His book lists the eight limbs of yoga (*astanga-yoga*) as central to yoga practice as presented in the classic treatise, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*. The eight limbs include *yama* (moral discipline) and *niyama*, (self-discipline); *asana* (postures); *pranayama* (breath work); *pratyahara* (withdrawal from the senses); *dharana* (concentration); *dhyana* (meditation); *samadhi* (to bring together; merge, often referred to as complete absorption).<sup>52</sup>

Yogendra clearly honors the philosophical tradition of yoga but pulls away from notions of yoga as being mysterious and obscure. Instead, he draws attention to the fundamentals of postural yoga and summarizes a list of essential scientific approaches to the practice: (1) The vital issue of strengthening the internal organs in proportion to the external skeleton and muscular growth. He states that “real health is the health of many and delicate internal organs.” (2) The circulation of blood through the body, which is accelerated by movement, should be of the “highest purity if it were to derive the maximum benefit.” This is achieved through the elimination of carbon dioxide and the interchange of oxygen in the blood through proper

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<sup>50</sup> Shri Yogendra *Yoga Asanas Simplified* (Mumbai: The Yoga Institute, 1928), 19.

<sup>51</sup> Yogendra, *Yoga Asanas*, 20.

<sup>52</sup> Desikachar T.K.V., *The Heart of Yoga: Developing a Personal Practice*. (Vermont: Inner Traditions International, 1995), 107-109.

respiratory balance. (3) All practices of *hatha* yoga aim toward control over the nervous system, purification and coordination, rather than at muscular display and strength. This is achieved by focusing on “poise and control of the body and mind through non-violent and non-fatiguing type of physical education.”<sup>53</sup> Additionally, Yogendra stresses the importance of avoiding strain by modifying exercises to suit each individual who must adopt a unique rhythm of coordinated breathing and movement.<sup>54</sup> Yogendra begins to change perceptions of yoga from being mysterious and obscure to being a scientifically proven and sound method for achieving vibrant health.

Also central to the development of yoga as a scientific method was Swami Kuvalayananda, who served as director of physical education and sports in the Bombay Presidency and established a yoga research center near Pune, India, in the 1920’s. Kuvalayananda viewed yoga as inherently scientific and in need of analysis to prove its relevance for modernity.<sup>55</sup> His research focused on the physiological effects of *asana*, *pranayama* and the development of yoga therapy for the treatment of various diseases. He measured the effects of yogic practices on blood pressure, digestion, circulation, nerves, and respiration for development of physical health and fitness.<sup>56</sup>

In 1924, Kuvalayananda founded the Kaivalyadhama Health and Yoga Research Center in Lonavla, Maharashtra, to provide a laboratory for his scientific study of yoga. Results of his research were published in a series of scientific journals titled *Yoga Mimamsa*. The center still exists as a thriving education and research center, and the *Yoga Mimamsa* continues to produce

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<sup>53</sup> Yogendra, *Yoga Asanas*, 54-55.

<sup>54</sup> Yogendra, *Yoga Asanas*, 61.

<sup>55</sup> Joseph S. Alter, “Yoga and Physical Education: Swami Kuvalayananda’s Nationalist Project.” *Asian Medicine* 3, (2007): 20-36.

<sup>56</sup> Alter, “Yoga and Physical Education,” 23.

quarterly publications. An advocate for yoga education, Kuvalayananda generated a nationalist campaign to develop postural yoga as a form of physical education, ultimately leading to the establishment of the Seth Gordhandas Seksaria College of Yoga and Cultural Synthesis in Lonavla, Maharashtra, India. The focus of the college was to train yoga educators to be certified teachers of yoga physical education.<sup>57</sup>

Both Sri Yogendra and Swami Kuvalayananda paved the way for future research on the therapeutic benefits of yoga. Perceptions of yoga as a scientific physical regimen led to an expansion in the study of *hatha* yoga which led to studies on relaxation research that were reported in American scientific journals in the late 1950's. As a result, yoga and meditation studies started to be taken more seriously.<sup>58</sup>

Perceptions of yoga as a therapeutic practice were also heavily influenced by Tirumalai Krishnamacharya. Regarded as one of the most influential yoga teachers of the twentieth century, Krishnamacharya is often referred to as “the father of modern yoga.”<sup>59</sup> Krishnamacharya's students include several of modern yoga's most renowned teachers, including Indra Devi, K. Pattabhi Jois, B.K.S. Iyengar, and his son, T.K.V. Desikachar. All four of which played a significant role in the introduction and development of *hatha* yoga practices in the United States in the second half of the twentieth century.

As he developed a system of *hatha* yoga, Krishnamacharya relied on multiple sources that ranged from twelfth-century yoga texts to Indian gymnastics and military drills. His system of yoga would later become the most popular form of yoga practiced in America.<sup>60</sup> While Krishnamacharya focused on the more physical components of the yoga practice, his teachings

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<sup>57</sup> Alter, “Yoga and Physical Education,” 23.

<sup>58</sup> De Micheles, “A Preliminary Survey,” 12.

<sup>59</sup> “Memories of a Master,” accessed April 20, 2019, [www.yogajournal.com](http://www.yogajournal.com).

<sup>60</sup> Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 3.

remained deeply rooted in the philosophical and spiritual dimensions of yoga which included breathwork and meditation. Krishnamacharya viewed asana practice as a method for stilling the mind for meditation, following the definition of yoga given in *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* second sutra, “*yogas citta-vrtti-nirodhah*,” (yoga is the stilling of the changing states of the mind).<sup>61</sup>

Krishnamacharya’s son, T.K.V. Desikachar states that his father’s approach to yoga was unique in the way that he tended to each individual and to his or her uniqueness; that the practice is meant to be tailored to fit each person and their individual circumstances.<sup>62</sup> Krishnamacharya was considered a healer and felt that optimal health required physical, mental and spiritual wellness, all of which could be accessed through the practices of yoga.<sup>63</sup> His approach emphasizes movement in union with breath and the importance of listening for clarity and quality of breath during asana practice. Desikachar states that “although it theoretically appears possible for body, breath and mind to work independent of one another, the purpose of yoga is to unify their actions. It is primarily the physical aspect of the practice that people see as yoga . . . much more important than these outer manifestations is the way we *feel* the postures and the breath.”<sup>64</sup> Desikachar goes on to explain that the most important aspect of asana practice is joining breath with movement, that the breath is the intelligence of the body, which unites the inner and outer body.<sup>65</sup>

The American immigration law between 1924 and 1965 limited the number of Indian-born yoga teachers in the country, resulting in a decrease in yoga instruction during this time, yet

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<sup>61</sup> Bryant, *Yoga Sutras*, 10.

<sup>62</sup> Desikachar, *Heart of Yoga*, xvi.

<sup>63</sup> Desikachar, *Heart of Yoga*, xvi.

<sup>64</sup> Desikachar, *Heart of Yoga*, 17.

<sup>65</sup> Desikachar, *Heart of Yoga*, 22.

American devotees continued to share yogic ideas. As Westerners began to seriously study yoga, tension between academic and popular perceptions of yoga increased. Individuals began to question the validity of academic, intellectual knowledge without the felt experience of the practices. As more Americans studied in India, and Indian practitioners of yoga discouraged “mere” academic study,<sup>66</sup> personal exploration became a central component for the development of yoga studies. The first comprehensive text written specifically about the postural aspect of *hatha* yoga in the United States was authored by Theos Bernard in 1944. Bernard earned a doctorate degree at Columbia University with a dissertation which became the book *Hatha Yoga: The Report of a Personal Experience*. An early Western pioneer of modern hatha yoga, Bernard spent many years studying under the tutelage of an unnamed Indian teacher, traveling through India and Tibet, claiming that he was accepted as an incarnation of a Tibetan saint.<sup>67</sup>

Bernard’s book offers an extensive account of asanas with clear photographs and detailed descriptions. Bernard highlights the discipline of controlling various bodily functions but emphasizes the achievement of stilling the mind by the power of will as the central focus of yoga. Bernard also explains that discipline of the body will lead to discipline of the mind, considering *hatha* yoga as a practice that leads the student toward the ‘royal road’ of *raja* yoga.<sup>68</sup> As Bernard explains the importance of breath in relationship with asana work, he refers to the following passage:

*Hatha Yoga Pradipika* ii, 15-20: "Just as lions, elephants and tigers are controlled by and by, so the breath is controlled by slow degrees, otherwise (i.e., by being hasty or using too much force) it kills the practitioner himself. When Pranayama, etc. are performed properly, they eradicate all diseases, but an improper practice generates diseases. Hiccup, asthma, cough, pain in the head, the ears, and the eyes; these and other various kinds of diseases are generated by the disturbances of the breath. The air should be expelled with proper tact,

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<sup>66</sup> Douglass, “The Yoga Tradition,” 39.

<sup>67</sup> Theos Bernard, *Hatha Yoga the Report of a Personal Experience* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944), ii.

<sup>68</sup> Bernard, *Hatha Yoga*, 1.

and should be filled in skillfully, and should be kept confined properly. Thus, it brings success. When the nadis [energetic channels] become free from impurities, and there appear the outward signs of success, such as lean body and glowing color, then one should feel certain of success. By removing the impurities of the nadis the air can be restrained, according to one's wish, and the appetite is increased, the divine sound is awakened, and the body becomes healthy.”<sup>69</sup>

As an academic, Bernard started to break down obstacles to the study of yoga. Other scholars such as David White who studied yoga in the 1950s, encouraged the layperson, without Sanskrit knowledge to embrace “the wisdom of the East,” encouraging personal exploration to fully grasp what was being conveyed in the texts.<sup>70</sup>

All of the aforementioned teachers helped generate a growing interest of yoga in the West. While the physical culture movement and advances toward understanding yoga’s health benefits played a role in how it was practiced, early yoga teachers consistently merged the physical practice with its traditional roots. Teachers were careful to teach about the importance of the *yamas* and *niyamas*, breath work, concentration, meditation, and knowledge of yoga’s history alongside the physical components of the practice.

## YOGA AS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Yoga’s spiritual dimensions took on new forms as they merged with Western ideas such as Transcendentalism New Thought, Theosophy and the counterculture movement of the 70s. One of the best-selling authors on yoga in the early twentieth century was Yogi Ramacharaka, an American seeker named William Walker Atkinson who adopted an Indian name and authored *Hatha Yoga: The Yogi Philosophy of Physical Well-Being* in 1930. Like Yogendra, Ramacharaka proposed to change unfavorable perceptions of *hatha* yoga, but instead of presenting it as a

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<sup>69</sup> Bernard, *Hatha Yoga*, 1.

<sup>70</sup> David White, “Translation and Oriental Philosophy: An Introductory Study,” *Philosophy East and West* 6 no.3 (1956): 247-255.

scientific method, he taught yoga as a practice of positive thinking, physical discipline and mental fortitude that aligned with the laws of nature.

Drawing from texts such as the *Hathapradipika*, which depicts *hatha* yoga as preparation for *raja* yoga, Ramacharaka closely examines the purification of the physical body as a necessary component to understanding *raja* yoga as well as other systems such as *karma* yoga and *jnana* yoga. Ramacharaka stresses the importance of maintaining a natural state of health and well-being, emphasizing that “Hatha yoga is first, nature; second, nature; and last, nature.”<sup>71</sup> Ramacharaka offers lengthy explanations of the importance of proper food, digestion, elimination, breathwork practices, and the value of fresh air and sunshine.

While Ramacharaka stressed the importance of physical health and well-being through physical practices, he also emphasized New Thought ideas such as using the power of will and mental control for obtaining perfect health. His approach leans heavily on yoga’s relationship with the natural world, which may have been influenced by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman, who had embraced many Eastern religious and philosophical ideas. As many Americans were grappling with the question of what spirituality might mean outside of traditional Christianity, Emerson and Thoreau provided thought-provoking descriptions of union with the Divine as it is expressed through nature.<sup>72</sup> Thus, in the early twentieth century, yoga educators drew upon an American tradition of reverence for nature and stressed yoga is nature. Yogendra writes that the yoga tradition had its “birth, blossoming, and preservation in the forests...that the ancient seers engaged in the acquisition of knowledge in the heart of forests, on the hill-tops, in the caves, around the river banks, dwelling in their humble hermitages

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<sup>71</sup> Ramacharaka, *Hatha Yoga: The Yogi Philosophy of Physical Well-being* (Chicago, IL: Yoga Publication Society, 1930), 10.

<sup>72</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature* (Boston: James Munroe & Company, 1836).



surrounded by the vast beauty of nature.”<sup>73</sup> Ramacharaka’s emphasis on nature, New Thought ideas, and the physical culture movement came together to create a form of yoga the culture was ready to embrace. Yoga advertisements, whether they were spiritually or physically oriented, were often presented alongside New Thought advertisements, which further led to a relationship between the two.

The association between mind control techniques and physical yoga were also taught by Paramahansa Yogananda, author of the popular book, *Autobiography of a Yogi* (1946), which inspired several generations of western spiritual seekers with fascinating accounts of Indian yogis and their spiritual experiences. Yogananda taught a version of ‘muscle control’ which was heavily influenced by New Thought and Payotian bodybuilding that included “muscle recharging through will power.”<sup>74</sup> Yogananda promoted an auto-suggestive method of physical movement which is said to achieve “the highest possible degree of physical, mental and spiritual well-being at the minimum expenditure of time and effort.”<sup>75</sup> His ‘muscle control’ techniques were useful for developing optimal health. However, his primary focus was on meditation and the philosophical teachings of the Self-Realization Fellowship (SRF), which he founded in 1920.

An explosion of interest in yoga and Indian spirituality erupted in the late 1960s, and may have been caused by a number of reasons: rescinding of the Immigration Act of 1925; growing prosperity; increase of leisure time; and general challenges to conventional authorities. However, the cultivation of yoga as a household name can certainly be attributed to the media attention that surrounded the Beatles.<sup>76</sup> As the Beatles reached the pinnacle of success, they sought out musical

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<sup>73</sup> Yogendra, *Yoga Asanas*, 27.

<sup>74</sup> Paramahansa Yogananda, *Autobiography of a Yogi* (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1946), 374.

<sup>75</sup> Paramahansa Yogananda, *General Principles and Merits of Yogoda or Tissue-Will System of Body and Mind Perfection, Originated and taught by Swami Yogananda*, (Los Angeles: Sat-Sanga and Yogoda Headquarters, 1925)

<sup>76</sup> Newcombe, “Development of Modern Yoga,” 995.

exploration in India and came away with spiritual inspiration under the tutelage of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. In 1967, George Harrison affirmed that his life goal was “to manifest divinity and become one with the creator,” while Lennon affirmed that both Christianity and Transcendental Meditation were the answer.<sup>77</sup> For the general public, the Beatles’ interest in Transcendental Meditation defined a moment when yoga and meditation were becoming normalized.<sup>78</sup>

The intersection between popular culture and academic interest shocked some academics, while others saw the youth culture’s interest in yoga as a hopeful sign in which a new generation was struggling to embrace new ways of being.<sup>79</sup> Interest in meditative states of consciousness appeared to blur the lines with drug-induced altered states of consciousness in the late 1960s as Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert popularized the call to “turn on, tune in, and drop out.”<sup>80</sup> Leary and Alpert were clinical psychologists at Harvard University who conducted experiments under the Harvard Psilocybin Project to examine the effects of LSD as a therapeutic remedy in psychiatry. They were among many who believed that psychedelic drugs could “expand the mind and discover ones’ personal truth.”<sup>81</sup> As the effects of drugs began to take a toll on physical and mental health, expanding one’s mind without endangering one’s health became more and more attractive. Popular gurus such as Prabhupada Bhaktivedanta Swami of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, popularly known as the Hare Krishnas, Swami Satchidananda of the Integral Yoga Institute, and Maharishi Mahesh Yogi were uniformly antidrug.<sup>82</sup> As it became widely known that The Beatles had traded LSD for Transcendental Meditation (TM), its

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<sup>77</sup> Newcombe, “Development of Modern Yoga,” 995.

<sup>78</sup> Newcombe, “Development of Modern Yoga,” 995.

<sup>79</sup> Douglass, “The Yoga Tradition,” 39.

<sup>80</sup> Philip Goldberg, *American Veda: from Emerson and the Beatles to Yoga and Meditation--How Indian Spirituality Changed the West* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2013), 149.

<sup>81</sup> Gary Donaldson, *Modern America: A Documentary History of the Nation Since 1945*, (New York: Sharpe, 2007), 128.

<sup>82</sup> Goldberg, *American Veda*, 150.

popularity grew, and thousands of young people from North American and Europe signed up to take courses in TM as they sought bliss through meditation.<sup>83</sup>

In the 1970s yoga's popularity spread as it weaved its way through aspects of American society. Individual yoga schools began to offer certifications for teachers, and many focused heavily on physical fitness. Yoga was being offered alongside sports, stress management, medical therapy and prevention (psychological and physical), and catered to a variety of groups such as yoga for children, prenatal yoga, or yoga for the elderly.<sup>84</sup> In 1972, PBS started airing *Lilias! Yoga and You*, which featured yoga teacher Lilias Folan offering yoga instruction that included postures along with brief meditation and occasional discussions on how to live a more mindful life.<sup>85</sup> This brought yoga into living rooms across the country, helping to raise its status to a household name.

#### YOGA IN ACADEMIA

As yoga's popularity continued to grow, perceptions of the practice began to shift. In the 1960's yoga was primarily connected with spirituality and meditation. By the 1970's, it had become heavily associated with physical fitness and exercise. This shift has not yet been closely examined by yoga scholars; however, I would argue that one component of this transition can be attributed to debates that ignited during the 1960's regarding religion in schools. On June 25, 1962, the United States Supreme Court decided in *Engel v. Vitale* that a prayer approved by the New York Board of Regents for use in schools violated the First Amendment by constituting an establishment of religion. The following year, in *Abington School District v. Schempp*, the Court

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<sup>83</sup> Goldberg, *American Veda*, 153.

<sup>84</sup> De Michelis, *History of Modern Yoga*, 192.

<sup>85</sup> Goldberg, *American Veda*, 132.

banned Bible readings in public schools for similar reasons.<sup>86</sup> These two landmark Supreme Court decisions centered on the place of religion in public education, and while yoga is not considered a religion by most students in America,<sup>87</sup> the debate may have influenced the way it was being taught, contributing to the division between spiritual and secular practices of yoga.

The debate of whether or not yoga is a religion has been reignited in recent years by an American-Hindu organization that established ‘Take Back Yoga’ in 2011, claiming that yoga in America has strayed too far from its religious roots. The group’s mission is to “protect the dharma and authentic or traditional Yoga from relative obscurity, misconception and falsities perpetuated by the ‘New Age’, ‘Christian Yoga’ and American yoga instructors who do not recognize Yoga’s Vedic and spiritual roots.”<sup>88</sup> While groups such as ‘Take Back Yoga’ are attempting to reincorporate religious components into the practice, others, such as Judge John Meyer contend that American yoga has been, and will continue to be, separated from its religious roots. In July 2013, Judge Meyer dismissed a claim by a small group of parents in Encinitas, California who wanted to remove yoga classes from school because they thought yoga promoted Hinduism. Judge Meyer stated that the modern practice of yoga in the U.S. is a “distinctly American cultural phenomenon,” and that its use in schools does not advance or promote religion.<sup>89</sup>

Yoga in America may be considered a spiritual practice by many, yet perceptions of it as a secular practice prevail. In 2016, *Yoga Journal* and Yoga Alliance conducted a nationwide

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<sup>86</sup> Steven K. Green, “The Bible, the School, and the Constitution: The Clash That Shaped Modern Church-State Doctrine,” *Oxford University Press* (2012): <https://religionandpolitics.org/2012/06/25>

<sup>87</sup> “2016 Yoga in America Study Conducted by Yoga Journal and Yoga Alliance,” *Yoga Journal*, accessed December 05, 2018, <https://www.yogajournal.com/page/yogainamericastudy>.

<sup>88</sup> “Take Back Yoga,” Facebook Homepage: <https://www.facebook.com/pg/Take-Back-Yoga>

<sup>89</sup> Amanda Holpuch, “Judge Says Yoga Does Not Promote Hinduism in California Schools,” *The Guardian*, accessed November 30, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/02/judge-yoga-promote-hinduism-californian-schools>

study of yoga in America. The results show that yoga is growing at an astounding rate, with over 36 million yoga practitioners in 2016, up from 20.4 million in 2012. Of those practitioners, the study shows that the majority of students begin yoga practice for fitness, appearance, or health. Stress relief was the second reason students began practicing, and spiritual development was listed as the motivating factor by about one-fourth of those polled. None of the students had listed yoga as religious.<sup>90</sup>

While debates may continue about whether yoga is religious, spiritual or secular, many long-standing yoga teachers in the community are concerned about perceptions of yoga as being merely physical. Judith Hanson Lasater, who founded *Yoga Journal* in 1975, said in an interview, “I mourn the fact that many people in the United States know about asana just as a way of working out.”<sup>91</sup> The public perception of yoga as a health and fitness activity has undeniably brought yoga to the masses, which places yoga educators in a precarious position to strike a balance between offering the physically-oriented practice that students are drawn to while conveying the philosophical-spiritual foundation from which it came. On the one hand, I agree with Lasater and feel that it is disheartening to see so many people sidestep yoga’s tremendous meditative benefits in favor of a quick workout; however, a more mindful approach to the physical practice may be taught so that instead of becoming a sidestep, it becomes the first step toward understanding the deeper dimensions of yoga. Legendary saint Shirdi Sai Baba summarizes the predicament succinctly: “I give them what they want so they want what I have to give.”<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> “2016 Yoga in America Study Conducted by Yoga Journal and Yoga Alliance,” Yoga Journal, accessed December 05, 2018, <https://www.yogajournal.com/page/yogainamericastudy>.

<sup>91</sup> Goldberg, *American Veda*, 333.

<sup>92</sup> Goldberg, *American Veda*, 333.

As educators grapple with yoga's immense growth, academic institutions are providing a way to combine yoga's rich history with practical application. There are currently a small number of established academic programs in the United States, and several others that are in the early stages of development. In 2013, the yoga studies program at Loyola Marymount University offered the first master's degree of its kind. Director of LMU's yoga studies program, Dr. Christopher Key Chapple, states, "As yoga expands in the West, it is important for teachers and others in the field to fully understand the various roots of yoga and lenses to its understanding. That way, students are sharing with context, integrity, and a full appreciation for the various paths of Yoga."<sup>93</sup> Academic programs teach about religion, spirituality and philosophy without imposing belief systems onto their students. In LMU's program students study primary classical texts, learn the Sanskrit language, explore the health benefits of physical practice, and examine the placement of yoga in today's world. Additionally, students participate in social outreach as they venture out into the community to share yoga in prisons, homeless shelters, community centers and local schools.<sup>94</sup> Graduates of the program are contributing to the understanding of yoga in various ways. Some are pursuing Ph.D.'s in related fields and publishing research, while others are practicing yoga therapists, teaching in private practice or at colleges and universities. Many are running community yoga programs and collaborating with non-profit organizations to bring yoga into schools and recovery programs.<sup>95</sup>

The curriculum of the Master of Science in Yoga Therapy at Maryland University of Integrative Health is based on the health benefits of yoga with a comprehensive understanding of

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<sup>93</sup> Alison Mullin, "LMU's Yoga Studies Program Goes Beyond the Mat and L.A. to Offer Low-Residency M.A.," Bellarmine News, accessed December 11, 2019, <https://bellarminenews.lmu.edu/lmus-yoga-studies-program-goes-beyond-the-mat-and-l-a-to-offer-low-residency-m-a/>

<sup>94</sup> Mullin, "LMU's Yoga Studies Program," <https://bellarminenews.lmu.edu>.

<sup>95</sup> Mullin, "LMU's Yoga Studies Program," <https://bellarminenews.lmu.edu>.

the classical and theoretical applications of yoga therapy and biomedical systems from a holistic perspective. Their curriculum is anchored in a relationship-centered philosophy, honoring most traditions of yoga and acknowledging the complex relationship between body, mind and spirit. The program provides a strong foundation in the theories of health and disease relevant to the practice of yoga therapy and embraces the diversity of styles and approaches to this system of healing.<sup>96</sup> Graduates of this program are practicing yoga therapy in clinical, private and small group settings.

Yoga is a complex practice with a fascinating history that extends far beyond its arrival to the United States. Combining the physical practices of yoga alongside its vast and varied history is central to enhancing educational standards of yoga studies. As yoga's popularity continues to grow, high quality education is critical to preserving the tradition, history and extensive health benefits of yoga. As Americans continue to reinvent yoga to resonate with their own perspectives, education plays a significant role in providing a foundation from which students may generate their own ideas, opinions and practices.

From a research standpoint, yoga is simply too complex to be understood through the lens of a single approach or discipline. Practical approaches that place more emphasis on quantitative measurements, which are often used in scientific studies, may offer insight into how yoga works, but emphasis on the philosophical or ethical dimensions of yoga may offer important insights into the human condition. A balance of these two approaches may limit the isolating effects of excessive specialization. As yoga education develops, it is important to facilitate new ways of speaking across disciplines.<sup>97</sup> Education plays a significant role in

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<sup>96</sup> "Program Description: Master of Science in Yoga Therapy," Maryland University of Integrative Health, accessed December 11, 2019, [www.muih.edu](http://www.muih.edu).

<sup>97</sup> Douglass, "The Yoga Tradition," 41.

upholding the tradition of yoga as being a holistic system for both mind and body and is central to shaping perceptions of yoga as being a valid and worthy topic for continued research. Yoga educators stand at a powerful crossroads that lends access to the study of yoga's rich history and the innovative therapeutic opportunities of its future. As this brief history demonstrates, yoga represents a diverse blend of cultures, ideas, and practices that will likely continue to adapt and evolve for many generations to come.

## CONCLUSION

This paper demonstrates some of the ways that modern postural yoga has been adapted to meet the needs of modern-day American practitioners. Research clearly shows that yoga has been modified to incorporate a variety of physical movement practices. Yet, classic forms of *asana* remain central to modern postural yoga. Early yoga teachers such as Krishnamacharya, Desikachar and Iyengar, were careful to merge modern postural yoga with discussions of the *yamas* and *niyamas*, breathwork, and meditation techniques, which are all historical forms of practice.

I would argue that if physical postures are practiced in careful relationship with the eight limbs of *astanga* yoga, as listed in *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, then modern postural yoga will remain rooted to the tradition. More specifically, as physical postures are taught and practiced, focus should extend beyond the physical to include focused concentration, clear breath work cues and time for meditation and reflection. Even if postures are the central focus of the practice, the obvious sensations that accompany physical movement help the student develop a greater sense of awareness and focused concentration, which may ultimately lead toward an interest or desire to explore meditation or spiritual enlightenment. Whether or not a student decides to align postural yoga practice with spiritual devotion or attainment is decidedly a personal choice. The



academic study of yoga should include its history and tradition, which would include discussions about spiritual attainment and the traditional goal of yoga without persuasion or personal dogma. This approach honors the tradition of yoga and offers space for students to form their own ideas and opinions about what it means. Offering and expanding yoga studies in academia provides students the opportunity to learn about the history, tradition, and health benefits of yoga alongside the felt sensations of physical movement, all of which provide a rich and rewarding educational experience.

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