

Yoga / Yogi

The word *yoga* and its derivatives occur frequently in Sanskrit literature of all periods as well as in mediaeval and modern Indian languages. Derived from the verbal root *yuj*, signifying, among other things, “to join”, “to attach”, “to harness”, “to yoke” (an often-cited English cognate), “to unite”, “to use”, “to employ”, “to apply”, “to concentrate” and “to bestow”, *yoga* can mean in Sanskrit “the act of yoking or attaching”, “a yoke or team”, “sum”, “expedient”, “means”, “supernatural means”, “magic”, “trick” and many other things, including “application of mind” and “concentration”. In modern Indian languages the word has an equally wide range of meaning. In Bengali, for instance, *yoga* (pronounced *jogo*), can signify “union”, “mixing”, “blending”, “relation”, “contact”, “expedient”, “medium”, “vehicle”, “auspicious time”, “remedy”, “food”, “addition”, and “the plus sign”.

In English, where its history goes back to the late eighteenth century, *yoga* has just two senses: (1) union with the Divine, or a system of practice leading to such union; (2) a particular method of yoga, properly *hathayoga*, that uses bodily postures, breath control and other techniques to promote good health and mental tranquillity. The first of these is generally considered the “real” meaning of the word, and is often mentioned in popular discussions of yoga philosophy and practice. “Union with the Divine” falls within the word’s semantic range, but this sense is not well attested in Sanskrit literature. One of the earliest occurrences of *yoga* in a mystical context is in the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*. Enumerating the aspects of the knowledge-self (*viññānamaya ātman*), the author says that its body (*ātman*) is *yoga* (translated by Hume and Radhakrishnan as “contemplation” and by Olivelle as “performance”).¹ The *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* explains that *yoga* comes when “the five [sense] knowledges cease along with the mind, and the intellect does not stir”.² The sense “psychological or mystical discipline” is well established by the time of the *Śvetāsvatara* and other late *upaniṣads*.³ This may reflect the

influence of the most important early work devoted to yoga, the *Yoga Sūtra* attributed to Patanjali. This is the primary text of the school of philosophy known as Yoga, which is one of India's six classical schools. The second verse of the *Yoga Sūtra* provides a classic one-line definition: "Yoga is the cessation of the turnings of thought" (*yogaḥ citta-vṛtti-nirodhaḥ*).⁴ A later group of sutras sketches the eight "limbs" of yoga: moral principles (*yamas*), such as nonviolence and truthfulness; observances (*niyamas*), such as bodily purification and contentment; postures (*āsanas*), breath control (*prāṇāyāma*), withdrawal of the senses (*pratyāhāra*), concentration (*dhāraṇā*), meditation (*dhyaṇa*), and pure contemplation (*samādhi*).⁵ Through the cultivation of this eightfold (*aṣṭāṅga*) yoga, the practitioner attains liberation (*kaivalya*, literally "aleness") from material nature and its defilements. Liberation is also the aim of Sankhya (a school closely related to Patanjali's Yoga), as well as Jainism and Theravada Buddhism. But in their earlier forms, the two latter systems generally use *yoga* in a negative sense. A common meaning in Jainism is "contact" or "mixing" with the impure material world. In the Pali Canon of Theravada Buddhism, *yoga* generally means "bondage".⁶

The text that, along with the *Yoga Sūtra*, has done most to establish the received philosophical and spiritual sense of *yoga* is the *Bhagavad Gītā*. This episode of the *Mahābhārata* takes for granted a familiarity with the spiritual senses of *yoga*; it also provides some specialized definitions: "yoga is known as equanimity (*śamatva*)", "yoga is skill in actions", "it is the disjunction of the union (*saṁ-yoga*) with suffering that is known as yoga" (here, interestingly, the negative, Theravada, sense of *yoga* is incorporated in a positive definition).⁷ The *Gītā* mentions three great lines of yoga-practice: *karmayoga*, the yoga of works; *jñānayoga*, the yoga of knowledge; and *bhaktiyoga*, the yoga of devotion. The first two are distinguished as follows: "in this world there is a twofold path, the yoga of knowledge, for the followers of Samkhya, and the yoga of action, for the followers of Yoga".⁸ The yoga of devotion is stressed in later chapters, which may be by another hand. Here devotion is defined as love

and worship of Lord Krishna, the incarnation who is the principal speaker of the *Gītā*. “The one who serves me by the yoga of devotion”, Krishna explains, “is fit to become the Absolute (*brahman*).”⁹

These references from classical Sanskrit literature help determine the range of spiritual and psychological meaning that the word *yoga* possessed from perhaps 700 BCE to around 700 CE. But they tell us little about how *yoga*, or rather the techniques that eventually were subsumed under that name, was actually practiced during this period or before. The earliest textual references presuppose a long history of practice of mental and physical techniques intended to bring about inner mastery and freedom on the one hand, and mastery of natural and supernatural forces on the other. One hymn of the *Ṛg Veda* mentions long-haired ascetics who “mount the wind” (perhaps a reference to what was later called *prāṇāyāma*) and gain extraordinary powers.¹⁰ Many hymns of the *Atharva Veda* are meant to bring about the satisfaction of desires, or the removal of ills, by supernatural means. (Such practices, which may have their origins in prehistoric shamanism, are found also in later forms of yoga.) The *upaniṣads*, along with early Buddhist and Jaina texts, demonstrate that ascetic techniques meant to promote freedom from fundamental psychological suffering (*duḥkha*) were widespread in northern India around 600 BCE. Classical texts like the *Yoga Sūtra* and *Bhagavad Gītā*, which use the term *yoga* when referring to such techniques, formulated systems of practice that evidently had developed over the course of many centuries.

This development continued after the end of the classical period. By the middle of the first millennium, *yoga* had become a generic term used by a wide range of traditions for techniques for the attainment of liberation or power. *Vijñānavāda*, a major school of Mahayana Buddhism, is also called *Yogācāra* on account of the importance it gives to practical yoga-techniques. A class of Buddhist and Hindu texts known as Tantras are interested especially in the development of extraordinary powers. The techniques they recommend — repetition of *mantras*, worship

of the divine *śakti* or female energy, esoteric sexuality — are sometimes referred to as “Tantric Yoga”. Such techniques were spread by individuals and groups in various parts of India, and are preserved in texts written in Bengali, Kashmiri, Tamil and other languages. Most prominent among the schools that took shape around this time is that of the *Nāth* or *Kānpḥaṭa* (split-eared) *yogīs*, whose founder, Gorakshanath or Gorakhnath, is supposed to have lived around the tenth or eleventh century. Texts ascribed to Gorakhnath give special importance to breath control (*prāṇāyāma*), postures (*āsanas*), and other physical techniques, which became known collectively as *haṭha* (“forceful”) *yoga*.

When Central Asian and European travellers, traders and soldiers began to arrive in India in the early part of the second millennium, they found a class of people known as *yogīs* or, more usually, *jogīs*, in different parts of the country. *Yogī* is the nominative form of the masculine Sanskrit noun *yogin*, meaning “a (male) practitioner of yoga”. (The feminine noun is *yoginī*.) By a common phonetic transformation, the *y* of *yogī* became *j* in Hindi and other regional languages, and it is as *jogis*, *joghis*, *joguedes*, *jogues*, *jauguis* (and so forth) that such people are referred to in Persian, Portuguese, French, Italian and English accounts of the thirteenth to eighteenth centuries.¹¹ Most such *jogis* presumably were members of the Gorakhnath sect, which was still widespread at that time. The foreigners who observed them wrote mostly about their exotic appearance and strange habits: nakedness, long hair, physical austerities and supernatural abilities. By the seventeenth century it was understood that these *jogis* were practitioners of *yoga*, a subject about which European scholars were becoming better informed by reading texts like the *Bhagavad Gītā* and *Yoga Sūtra*.¹² Over the next three centuries, Orientalists of various sorts, basing themselves on informal ethnographic observation as well as textual study, enlarged their idea of the *yogi*. Quintin Craufurd wrote in 1792: “With the precise distinction between the *Yogey* and *Saniassy* [*sannyāsī*], I am unacquainted. The former, in Sanscrit, signifies a devout person; the latter, one who has entirely forsaken the

things of the world.” He was careful to distinguish the “Brahmans, or regular priesthood” from devotees like the “Yogeyes”.¹³ Some missionary writers arrived at a fairly sophisticated understanding of *yoga* as presented in Sanskrit texts, while retaining their Christian prejudices as regards religious practices. Citing the *Yoga Sūtra* and *Gorakṣa-Saṁhitā*, the Rev. W. Ward wrote in 1817 of the “most singular ceremony” of *yoga*, which was “formerly practiced by ascetics to prepare them for absorption”. At the same time he insisted that no yogis existed “who perform these bodily austerities to the extent laid down in the shastrūs”. Those of whom he had knowledge claimed “to aim at abstraction of mind” but in fact they were “the greatest sensualists in the country”.¹⁴ Ward’s ambivalent view of the yogi was in part a reflection of the equivocal reputation that the holy man (and woman) had had in India for centuries. Popular legend and story is full of miracle-working saints and sages, and also deceptive, lascivious, and downright evil cheats, thaumaturges, and frauds.¹⁵

In the European popular imagination, the yogi remained primarily a trickster and magician till the end of the nineteenth century.¹⁶ This image changed radically after Indian practitioners of *yoga* began to visit the West and to publish books in European languages that presented a spiritual view of *yoga* based on the *upaniṣads*, the *Yoga Sūtra*, and the *Bhagavad Gītā*. The first such yogi to come to general notice was Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), who won acclaim at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. Vivekananda published books on four different paths of *yoga*: *Karma-Yoga*, *Jnana-Yoga*, *Bhakti-Yoga*, and *Raja-Yoga*. (These deal with the three traditional paths mentioned by the *Gītā*, and Patanjali’s system, of which *rājayoga* is one of several names.) Vivekananda defined the term *yoga* as follows: “To become harmoniously balanced in all these four directions [work, philosophy, emotion and mysticism] is my ideal of religion. And this religion is attained by what we in India call *Yoga* — union.” He added: “The man who seeks after this kind of union is called a *Yogi*.”¹⁷ This use of the Sanskrit *yogī* in place of the vernacular *jogī* became standard in English

works, and helped replace the negative significance, “magician, trickster”, with the positive one, “mystic, holy man”.

In India, the primary audience of Vivekananda and other modern-day yogis was members of the urban middle class. Educated in English schools, supported by the colonial economy, but still attached to traditional ways, they seized on yoga and Vedanta philosophy as evidences of the superiority of indigenous culture to the materialistic culture of the West. Some of these élites took up *hathayoga*, for centuries the preserve of a small number of *Nāth* ascetics, as a form of physical culture whose benefits could be scientifically proven. An adept of *hathayoga*, Yogendra Mastamani, opened a centre for the scientific study of yoga near New York in 1919. But *hathayoga* did not really take off in the United States until the Russian-born Indra Devi opened a classroom in Hollywood in 1947. It began to go mainstream when Richard Hittleman broadcast classes on network television in 1961. Now, it is said, 80% of all fitness clubs in America offer classes in “yoga”, by which is meant a combination of physical postures or movements, breathing exercises and relaxation. Within the world of yoga, there are various styles, some of which are trademarked (the so-called “designer yogas”). Popular at the time of this writing are Bikram Yoga, which is done in a room heated to 105° F, and Ashtanga Yoga (no obvious connection with Patanjali’s *aṣṭāṅga yoga*), in which the *āsanas* or postures are performed in linked groups known as *vinnyāsas*. “Hatha” is now viewed as a particular type of physical yoga, somewhat traditional in its emphasis on straightforward *āsanas* and *prāṇāyāma*.

Most practitioners of physical yoga understand that the discipline “has a spiritual side”, which may include such things as meditation, chanting, the use of mantras and burning incense before pictures of Hindu gods. For the most part, however, yoga is viewed by the American and European public as a form of exercise that helps the student become flexible, relaxed and free from stress. The situation is much the same in middle- and upper-class India, where various forms of yoga are mentioned along with the Hollywood stars who practice them (Gwyneth Paltrow

does Ashtanga, while Julia Roberts does Bikram). The effect of this American packaging is so strong that some Indians now look on yoga as virtually a Western invention. “As the West leads the way in this investigation [of the beneficial physical effects of yoga],” one writer complains, “the rest of the nations, like a loyal band of chimpanzees, watch. Ignoring, sadly, the tremendous — and what must have been path-breaking in its time — work that has already been done in India.”¹⁸ For some urban Indians, the worldwide success of yoga has become a source of cultural anxiety rather than cultural pride. “Sure, this is OUR technique”, writes Seema Chowdhry Sharma, “(after all, our yogis have been practicing it for over 5,000 years), but do we really understand it better than those folks do over the Atlantic and Pacific (who keep raving about it)?”¹⁹

Such anxiety seems misplaced. The most respected contemporary masters of the schools of physical yoga practiced in the West, B. K. S. Iyengar of Pune and Pattabhi Jois of Mysore, have spent comparatively little time abroad. No self-respecting Western yoga-teacher can hang up a shingle before she or he has studied under these or other Indian teachers or their students. Some contemporary Indian yogis cater primarily to an Indian clientele. Swami Ramdev brings his message of health through yoga and ayurvedic medicines to an enormous television audience. He heaps scorn on the corrupt civilisation of the West, whose foods, drinks, medicines and entertainments are undermining the Indian body and soul.

Yoga as a phenomenon of popular culture will doubtless continue to go in and out of style. The practices associated with yoga — postures, breath control, meditation, and the rest — are likely to persist, because they offer a means of coming to grips with some of the perennial problems of embodied human life.

Peter Heehs
Sri Aurobindo Ashram Archives, Pondicherry

NOTES

1. *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* 2.4.1. Robert Ernest Hume, *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 285; S. Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upanishads* (New Delhi: HarperCollins, 1999), p. 545; Patrick Olivelle, *Upaniṣads* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 187.
2. *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* 2.3.10–11.
3. *Śvetāsvatara Upaniṣad* 2.11; 6.3.
4. *Yoga Sūtra* 1.2. Translation from Barbara Stoler Miller, *Yoga: Discipline of Freedom: The Yoga Sutra Attributed to Patanjali* (New York: Bantam Books, 1998), p. 29.
5. *Yoga Sūtra* 2: 28–55; 3.1–8, translation in Miller 50–60.
6. Maurice Walshe, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), p. 608.
7. *Bhagavad Gītā* 2.48; 2.50; 6.23.
8. *Bhagavad Gītā* 3.3.
9. *Bhagavad Gītā* 14.26.
10. *Ṛg Veda* 10.136.
11. Henry Yule and A. C. Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson: A Glossary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases*. First published 1886. (New Delhi: Rupa, 1986), pp. 460–61.
12. In 1676 Bernier (quoted in *Hobson-Jobson*, p. 461) wrote that the word *jogī* “signifies ‘united to God’”.
13. Q. Craufurd, *Sketches chiefly relating to the History, Religion, Learning and Manners of the Hindoos*, vol. 1 (London: T. Cadell, 1792), pp. 236–7, 248.
14. W. Ward, *A View of the History, Literature, and Religion of the Hindoos* (London: Baptist Missionary Society, 1817), pp. vii–ix.
15. Many such legends and stories are cited by Maurice Bloomfield in “On False Ascetics and Nuns in Hindu Fiction”. *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 44 (1924): 202–42.
16. See for example, Anon., “The Shepherd and the Jogie”, in *Folk-lore and Legends: Oriental* (London: W. W. Gibbings, 1892), pp. 184–85; O. Schuttlzsky, *The Soul of India: An Eastern Romance* (Berlin: William Süsserott, n.d.).
17. Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, vol. 2 (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1989), p. 388.
18. Mahesh Ramchandani, “Why Yoga”. *Man’s World* 4 (June 2003): 88.
19. Seema Chowdhry Sharma, “Update your Yoga IQ”. *Femina* 44 (June 2003): 15.