

Premodern Yoga Systems

“Yoga” has a wider range of meanings than nearly any other word in the entire Sanskrit lexicon.

—DAVID GORDON WHITE (2012: 2)

WHEN WE THINK of yoga today, most of us envision spandex-clad, perspiring, toned bodies brought together in a room filled with yoga mats and engaged in a fitness ritual set apart from day-to-day life.¹ In that space, Christians, Hindus, atheists, and others gather to enhance something they deem sacred: their bodies, their selves.² In popularized yoga classes today, we most frequently find some variety of postural yoga, a fitness regimen made up of sequences of often onerous *asanas* or bodily postures, the movement through which is synchronized with the breath by means of *pranayama* or “breath control.”

Though these are images never seen before in the history of yoga, well-known proponents and opponents alike associate them with the “ancient yoga” of South Asia, claiming it is there that we can locate this widespread practice’s “origins.”³ In popular yoga discourse, claims to a linear trajectory of transmission—premodern yoga functions as what Mark Singleton describes as “the touchstone of authenticity” for proponents of modern yoga (Singleton 2010: 14)—are frequently made and assumed to be historically accurate. For example, postural yoga giants B. K. S. Iyengar (b. 1918) and K. Pattabhi Jois (1915–2009) have claimed direct historical ties between their postural yoga methods and ancient yoga traditions. While Iyengar has historically claimed ties between Iyengar Yoga and the ancient yoga transmission going at least as far back as the *Yoga Sutras* (circa 350–450 C.E.), he recently introduced a Sanskrit invocation to Patanjali at

the beginning of each Iyengar Yoga class in order to further associate his yoga system with that transmission.⁴ In like manner, Jois has suggested that verses from the earliest Vedas delineate the nine postures of the *suryanamaskar* sequences of postures in his Ashtanga Vinyasa yoga system (Singleton 2010: 221–222, n. 4).⁵

In the popular imagination, the development of a 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 Civilization (circa 2500–1500 B.C.E.).⁶ Consider, for example, a statement about yoga on a PBS website featuring a special series entitled *The Story of India*:

Seals from the Indus Valley Civilization dating to the 3rd millennium BCE depict what appear to be yogic poses. The *Bhagavad Gita*, *Puranas*, and *Mahabharata* are among the texts that describe yoga's teachings, which were codified at about 150 BCE in the *Yoga Sutra* written by Patanjali. (PBS 2008)

Such statements about the history of yoga, which presume an unbroken lineage, do not reflect historical reality, which is far more complex and about which scholars are far more uncertain, especially given the extreme ambiguities involved in dating South Asian texts, events, and figures.

Yet, because such statements are common in popular discourse and make up the narratives that function to reinforce the postural yoga world's self-images, values, ideas, and practices, any study of postural yoga necessitates serious consideration of yoga's actual premodern history. For that reason, this chapter provides the premodern backdrop for the modern popularization of postural yoga. Though there is not nearly enough room in this chapter to provide exhaustive coverage of what scholars have uncovered about premodern yoga, I draw on recent secondary scholarship in order to make two points particularly relevant to my analysis of the popularization of yoga. First, modern postural yoga is radically distinct from premodern yoga traditions. Second, premodern yoga traditions were not monolithic; rather, they were dramatically heterogeneous, taking a wide range of forms, including Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain ones. I hope to frame these points in nuanced ways that challenge common assumptions about the history of yoga, especially the assumption that a static, monolithic yoga tradition gradually, increasingly, and in a linear way underwent popularization from the nineteenth to the late twentieth centuries.

We will look at the modern history and recent popularization of yoga much more closely in proceeding chapters where I will suggest, on the one hand, that the early history of modern yoga features yoga systems that are distinct from premodern ones and reflect instead modern countercultural ideas and values.⁷ I will add that popularized systems of modern yoga, on the other hand, are also distinct from premodern ones but instead reflect modern consumer cultural ideas and values.⁸ For now, it is sufficient to note that there is no direct, unbroken lineage between the South Asian premodern yoga systems and modern postural yoga (Alter 2004; de Michelis 2004; Singleton 2010). In other words, today's popularized yoga systems are new, not continuations of some static premodern yoga tradition from which practitioners and nonpractitioners alike often claim they originate. Even postures and breathing exercises were marginal to the most widely cited sources on yoga prior to the twentieth century, and the forms of postures and breathing exercises that were present in those sources dramatically differ from those idiosyncratic forms found in postural yoga today (Singleton 2010). For example, though pranayama appears in both the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Yoga Sutras*, it means the "complete cessation of breathing" in those sources (Bronkhorst 2007: 26–27) rather than the synchronization of breath with postural movement found in most postural yoga sites today.⁹ Furthermore, the dominant aims of postural yoga—health, stress reduction, beauty, and overall well-being according to modern biomedicine and contemporary cultural standards (Alter 2004; de Michelis 2004; Strauss 2005; Newcombe 2007; Singleton 2010)—are also absent in those sources. These absences even apply to the most widely cited "classical" sources on yoga, including the *Yoga Sutras*, the *Bhagavad Gita* and other material from the *Mahabharata*, as well as the *Yoga Upanishads*.

Since Mircea Eliade's distinguished monograph *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* (1990 [1958]), a late Orientalist study concerned with identifying the "ideal of Yoga" across traditions (363), many scholars have preferred to attend to the particularities of yoga traditions, which vary based largely on social context. These scholars have produced studies that resist Orientalist misrepresentations of yoga as having a single "ideal." In other words, they reject any notion of yoga as timeless, monolithic, and characterized by an unchanging essence, instead suggesting that empirical data evidence that premodern yoga systems, made up of a variety of complex ritual, religious, philosophical, and narrative traditions, never appear

outside of social contexts. By drawing on a number of such studies, I will emphasize premodern yoga's context-sensitivity, heterogeneity, and malleability, rather than any central quality or essence presumed by some to be present across systems.

Based on historical scholarship that confirms that premodern yoga took a wide variety of forms, Geoffrey Samuel defines it broadly and heterogeneously as composed of "disciplined and systematic techniques for the training and control of the human mind-body complex, which are also understood as techniques for the reshaping of human consciousness towards some kind of higher goal" (Samuel 2008: 2). Samuel argues for a "culturally and historically situated understanding," since yoga continuously undergoes transformations in response to shifting temporal and spatial contexts (Samuel 2007: 186). He adds:

[Yoga] has retained some of its integrity as a specific set of techniques for self-cultivation through all of these transformations. To make sense of such a historical complex and varied phenomenon as yoga, it is, however, essential to retain as much awareness as possible of the social environment and historical specificity of each specific context within which it was adopted and transformed. In this way, we can begin to give meaning to each of these various forms of yoga, and to understand them within the life and culture of those who created them and shaped them. (Samuel 2007: 186)

Evidence of the existence of yoga has been claimed to go as far back as the Indus Valley Civilization, which can be dated to circa 2500 to 1500 B.C.E. Others claim such evidence goes as far back as the earliest known collection of Hindu literature, the Vedas, the first of which can be dated to circa 1700 to 1500 B.C.E. Contemporary scholars debate whether or not archaeological artifacts from the Indus Valley Civilization or textual evidence from the early Vedas are evidence of yoga's origins and resist treating any single textual source on yoga as the yoga "ur-text."

Those in favor of the argument that yoga was present in the Indus Valley Civilization point to specific artifacts, especially the famously titled "Pashupati Seal" (Mohenjo-daro seal No. 420), which depicts a possibly ithyphallic figure with horns, surrounded by animals, and in what some interpret to be a seated yoga posture.¹⁰ The seal was named after what Sir John Marshall, Director General of the Archaeological

Survey of India, thought was the figure's resemblance to the Hindu deity Shiva (Marshall 1931: 7). Shiva is nicknamed Pashupati or "Lord of the Beasts," and Hindu devotees celebrate him for his outstanding yogic abilities. Thomas McEvelley points to other Indus Valley seals and suggests they depict early forms of postures found in much later yoga systems, including modern postural yoga, specifically the *utkata asana* (*Gheranda Samhita* II.27) or *mulabandha asana* (Iyengar 1966: Fig. 459–463) (McEvelley 1981: 49).

The links between the Indus Valley Civilization and yoga, however, are highly speculative. Doris Srinivasan (1984) reviews the artifacts cited for the existence of proto-Shiva forms—most significantly certain characteristics of the Pashupati Seal¹¹—and concludes that there is nothing that conclusively shows that the seal depicts a proto-Shiva figure. Samuel adds that any evidence of yoga in the Indus Valley Civilization is "so dependent on reading later practices into the material that it is of little or no use for constructing any kind of history of practices" (2008: 8).

Since interpreting material culture poses a number of difficulties for the modern historian of yoga, our knowledge of premodern yoga primarily depends on the historical-critical study of the South Asian literary tradition. This is the case even though locally constituted yoga traditions were probably distinct from textual ones (Smith, Frederick 2011), and texts do not tell us exactly how yoga was put into practice (Samuel 2011: 311). Despite such complications, textual traditions reveal much about the multifarious nature of premodern yoga.

The term *yoga* in the South Asian literary tradition had a wide range of meanings specific to particular contexts. In fact, according to David Gordon White:

"Yoga" has a wider range of meanings than nearly any other word in the entire Sanskrit lexicon. The act of yoking an animal, as well as the yoke itself, is called yoga. In astronomy, a conjunction of planets or stars, as well as a constellation, is called yoga. When one mixes together various substances, that, too, can be called yoga. The word yoga has also been employed to denote a device, a recipe, a method, a strategy, a charm, an incantation, fraud, a trick, an endeavor, a combination, union, an arrangement, zeal, care, diligence, industriousness, discipline, use, application, contact, a sum total, and the Work of alchemists. But this is by no means an exhaustive list. (White 2012: 2)

The term *yoga* makes an appearance in South Asian literature's earliest known text, the *Rig Veda Samhita* (circa fifteenth century B.C.E.). Samuel suggests, however, "There is nothing [in the Rigveda or Atharvaveda] . . . to imply yogic practice, in the sense of a developed set of techniques for operating with the mind-body complex" (2008: 8). Rather, the term *yoga* (from the Sanskrit root *yuj*, meaning "to bind" or "to yoke") refers to the yoke used to bind an animal to a plow or chariot and also to an entire war chariot (White 2012: 3). More broadly, *yoga* refers to wartime itself (White 2012: 3). Vedic hymns also refer to the gods moving about heaven and earth on *yogas* as well as priests yoking themselves "to poetic inspiration and so journeying—if only with the mind's eye or cognitive apparatus—across the metaphorical distance that separated the world of the gods from the words of their hymns" (White 2012: 4). *Yoga's* warrior connotation was prevalent in ancient India as evidenced by the later text, the *Mahabharata* (circa 200 B.C.E. to 400 C.E.), in which dying heroic warriors are described as *yoga-yukta*, "yoked to yoga," the chariot believed to deliver them to heaven (White 2009: 73). White explains:

The image of the dying warrior who is "hitched to his rig" [*yoga-yukta*], or "ready to hitch up" in order to advance upward to the highest path, formed the basis for the earliest *yoga* paradigm, which privileged a dynamic of outward movement and conquest. Only later, in the period of the latest strata of the epics and of the "classical" Upaniṣads (i.e., the third to fourth centuries CE) would the goal of yogic practice be transferred to a place hidden within the body's deepest recesses, and the seven solar winds internalized into the inner breaths. Yet, even after this inward turn has taken place, the *yoga* of the chariot warrior persists in the language of later visionary practice. (White 2009: 73)

In the sense of a systematic set of techniques, Samuel and Johannes Bronkhorst both suggest that *yoga* developed in the context of a non-Vedic religious culture, the *śramana* culture of "Greater Magadha" (Bronkhorst 2007: 1–9), also known as the "Central Gangetic region" (Samuel 2008: 8). The *śramana* culture was primarily composed of Buddhist, Jain, and Ajivika renouncers (circa the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E.), those who rejected Brahmanical orthodoxy and whose axiological focus was salvation from the conventional and ordinary world, a goal that required ascetic practices.

Though participants in the early Brahmanical culture referred to their own ascetic techniques as *tapas*, they referred to the ascetic techniques found in the shramana culture as *yoga* (Bronkhorst 2011: 318–321).¹² In fact, *yoga* was first used as a term for a systematic set of ascetic techniques in Brahmanical sources but in reference to Buddhist practice (Bronkhorst 2011: 318).¹³ Although some shramana and Brahmanical texts describe ascetic practices that are based on “some shared assumptions,” those assumptions were not a part of the early Brahmanical tradition (Bronkhorst 2007: 28; Samuel 2008: 189).

Later, the shramana culture influenced the Brahmanical one (Bronkhorst 2007: 28), and consequently the Brahmanical emphasis on the ideal male warrior slowly transformed into the inner war of the *brahmacarin* or male celibate renouncer (Samuel 2008: 185).¹⁴ This celibate role at first applied to the “semi-ascetic (but married) role of the Brahman within caste society” but, over a long time, came to include the “fully-ascetic role of the *saṃnyāsīn* outside caste society proper” (Samuel 2008: 188).¹⁵

Though they differed from each other with regard to many aspects of belief and practice, the shramana traditions shared an assessment of rebirth as undesirable because of the preponderance of violence and suffering in the world. Consequently, they were organized around soteriological (salvation-oriented) goals, namely salvation from rebirth into the world. Bronkhorst suggests there were three main currents concerned with rebirth and karmic retribution and how to stop them (2007: 15–34). The Jain current was based on the assumption that abstention from all bodily and mental action prevents karmic retribution and thus rebirth. Buddhists prescribed a path concerned with controlling intention and, more specifically, requiring the cessation of desire. The third path, which was a product of the shramana culture but cannot be associated with any single particular movement within it (Bronkhorst 2007: 28), was based on the idea that knowledge of the nonactive nature of the self prevents karmic retribution and thus rebirth. Brahmanical orthodoxy slowly came to appropriate shramana ideas, especially from the last current. In fact, according to Bronkhorst:

Knowledge of the self as requirement for attaining liberation became a potent force in classical Brahmanism, and is a fundamental ingredient of all the classical schools of Brahmanical philosophy, with the exception of Mīmāṃsā. (Bronkhorst 2007: 32)

Though some of the Brahmanical paths toward salvation required postures and breathing exercises, the most widely cited Brahmanical sources on soteriological systems of yoga emphasize meditative or devotional techniques. The *Katha Upanishad* (circa third century B.C.E.), for example, provides the first extant systematic account of yoga. Consider the following verses:

When the five organs of knowledge stand still together with the mind (*manas*), and the intellect (*buddhi*) does not stir, that they call the highest course (10). This they consider as Yoga, a firm fixing of the senses. Then one becomes careful, for Yoga is the origin and the end (11). (*Katha Upanishad* 6:10–11, quoted in Bronkhorst 2007: 25–26)

The author concludes by stating that “the whole method of Yoga” has been presented (*Katha Upanishad* 6:18, quoted in Bronkhorst 2007: 25–26). Yoga, according to this account, includes a number of characteristics that, in varying degrees, constituted some later yoga systems, including a yoga physiology; a nondualist ontology—*atman*, the individual self, is identical to *Brahman*, the cosmic essence; a hierarchy of mind–body constituents—the senses, the mind, the intellect, and so forth; the idea that the realization of higher states of consciousness requires an ascent through the mind–body constituents; and the use of mantras, acoustic spells or formulas (White 2012: 4).

Yoga also appears in the *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* (circa third century B.C.E.). The text directs the aspirant:

Holding the body straight, three parts of it stretched up, causing the senses to enter into the heart by means of the mind, the wise one should cross over all the frightening streams with the help of the raft which is Brahman (8). Having here suppressed his breaths and having brought his movements under control (*yukaceṣṭa*), when his breath has been diminished, he should take breath through his nose. Being careful, the wise one should restrain (*dhārayeta*) his mind like that chariot yoked with vicious horses (9). (*Shvetashvatara Upanishad* 2:8–9, quoted in Bronkhorst 2007: 26)

In this context, body practices are apparently central.

Yoga also makes an appearance in Brahmanical literature included in the category of *smṛiti* (that is, regarded as being of human authorship),

which comprises texts concerned with *dharma* or rules of conduct and fantastic tales about powerful people and deities (the epics—the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*—and the *Puranas*). Some authors attempt to fit what were initially ascetic ideas into Brahmanical themes, most notably *dharma*, the duties of high-caste male Hindus as determined by their *varna* or caste/social class and *ashrama* or stage of life (Olivelle 1993; Bronkhorst 2007). The householder life of most high-caste adult Hindus affirms the values of duty to society (*dharma*), wealth (*artha*), and erotic and aesthetic pleasure (*kama*). In short, the householder affirms worldly life and social values in pursuit of health, wealth, and, more generally, a better life in this lifetime and the next as well as general social stability through maintaining the strict rules of a hierarchical society. Ascetic ideas common to yoga traditions, however, were also incorporated into “the orbit of *dharma*”:

The *āśrama* system, it appears, sought to bring rival and often mutually exclusive life styles within the orbit of *dharma* by extending the use and meaning of *āśrama*. To call a mode of life an *āśrama*, therefore, was to give that life a theological meaning within the context of *dharma*.... The proponents of the system, in effect, were telling their Brāhmaṇical audience that the life of a celibate ascetic or student is as good as the life of a holy householder. (Olivelle 1993: 26)

Some sections of the *Mahabharata* (composed between circa 200 B.C.E. and 300 C.E.), for example, testify to the Brahmanical appropriation of yoga and the goal of *moksha* (Fitzgerald 2012: 44):

[The “Prescription for Yoga:” Chapter 12.289 of the *Mahābhārata*] offers a glimpse of a well-developed tradition of reflection and praxis on body and mind that on its face is directed toward freeing a person in different ways—Absolute Liberation, *mokṣa*, and, by merging with the Supreme God Nārāyaṇa in the end, beatitude. At the same time, its *yoga*-harnessing can be, and is, directed toward the development of very high degrees of power and control within the phenomenal world for as long as the *yogin* may wish. And finally, this text presents all of this as a self-conscious “School” of thought (a *darśana*, a “View” of important matters of reality and knowledge) to be known as the “Yoga” School... (Fitzgerald 2012: 47)

The *Yoga Sutras*, most frequently ascribed to a figure by the name of Patanjali, includes 195 aphorisms on yoga, a discipline that also requires body practices. The *Yoga Sutras* are philosophically grounded in Samkhya dualism (Bronkhorst 1981; Larson 1989; Larson 1999; Larson 2012), which maintains that consciousness, *purusha*, is ontologically distinct from *prakriti*, materiality. *Prakriti* includes all aspects of material existence, from the body to ordinary awareness. The *Yoga Sutras* emphasize “meditation training relating to the functioning of ordinary awareness (*citta-vṛtti*)” (Larson 2012: 73). Through meditation, the aspirant strives to achieve the “cessation of the functioning of ordinary awareness” (*citta-vṛtti-nirodha*) (*Yoga Sutras* 1.2), a yogic process that leads up to the key intuition that “ordinary awareness” is *kevala* or “isolated” from “consciousness” (Larson 2012: 78).

The yoga *sadhana* or “practice” that leads to this intuition is composed of eight “limbs.” The first five limbs (*Yoga Sutras* 2:28–55) are “external limbs,” which Gerald Larson defines as “largely practical, preparatory exercises” (Larson 2012: 79). These external limbs are (1) *yama*: behavioral restraints common in South Asian renouncer traditions—*ahimsa* (nonviolence), *satya* (telling the truth), *asteya* (restraint from stealing), *brahmacharya* (celibacy), and *aparigraha* (restraint from attachment); (2) *niyama*: ritual observances; (3) *asana*: postures; (4) *pranayama*: “breath control” exercises; and (5) *pratyahara*: “sense withdrawal” exercises. The final three limbs (*Yoga Sutras* 3:1–8), called “internal limbs,” are described as “comprehensive reflection” (*samyama*) (Larson 2012: 80) and are (1) *dharana*: “spatial fixation on the object of meditation;” (2) *dhyana*: “temporal flow regarding the object of meditation;” and (3) *samadhi*: “cultivation of one-pointed ‘concentration’” (Larson 2012: 78).

Although meditation is usually interpreted to be the preeminent component of yoga in the *Yoga Sutras*, numerous techniques, including techniques associated with contemporary postural yoga, namely asana and pranayama, are prerequisites for successful meditation. Asana, however, here includes “simply any posture of the body that is ‘comfortably steady’ for the sake of meditation practice ([*Yoga Sutras*] 2:46)” (Larson 2012: 80), and pranayama here entails “cutting off the movement of breathing out and breathing in” (*Yoga Sutras* 2:49, quoted in Bronkhorst 2007: 26–27), which serves to “increase the periods of the retention of breath (either after inhalation or exhalation)” (Larson 2012: 80; Larson cites *Yoga Sutras* 2:50). Therefore asana and pranayama in the *Yoga Sutras* do not resemble the types of asana and pranayama that dominate popularized varieties of postural yoga today.

According to the *Yoga Sutras*, the key method for attaining salvation is meditation whereby one realizes the self as pure consciousness, distinct from the mind–body complex. Similar, though not identical, systems appear in the late Upanishad, the *Maitrayaniya Upanishad*, which includes a six-fold yoga system, and in Virahanka Haribhadra’s Jain text, the *Yoga Bindu* (circa 550 c.e.), which includes a five-fold yoga path (Williams 1965; Dixit 1968; Chapple 2003).

Turning inward and realizing that the self is pure consciousness was, however, not the only aim of early systematic yoga systems. Rather, turning outward, toward external objects or beings (a yogic process we tend to associate with later tantric yoga systems), was a common and perhaps the *most* common aim of early yoga systems. White, in fact, pushes against a vision of yoga as an inner-directed practice, based on a “closed” model of the body, and points out that yoga has often been about the body as “open” (White 2006: 6–12). According to White:

This, I would argue is the most perennial and pervasive understanding of yoga in South Asia: not the identification of the individual self with the universal Self in meditative isolation (*kaivalyam*), but rather the yoking of the mind-body complex to an absolute located outside of the self—often behind the sun—or to that of other bodies, other selves... (White 2006: 12)

Yoga was a term used in some sections of the *Mahabharata*, for example, to refer to a dying warrior’s attempts to transfer himself to the sun (White 2006: 7–8). It was also used in the *Mahabharata* (White 2006: 8–10), as well as in Hemacandra’s Jain text, the *Yoga Shastra*, to refer to techniques for transferring the practitioner’s consciousness into another body (Qvarnström 2002). Even the *Yoga Sutras*, though usually interpreted as being concerned with meditative isolation (especially according to those who tend to reify a notion of “classical” yoga), refers to both of these applications of the term *yoga* (White 2006: 10–11; see also Whicher 2002–2003).¹⁶

We will look at the reification of classical yoga more closely in proceeding chapters, but for now I would simply like to note that the concept is primarily a result of nineteenth-century Orientalist scholarship as well as Indian reform movements, most notably that of Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), that prescribed a so-called classical form of yoga, usually termed *raja yoga* or “royal yoga.” Although evidence does not suggest that

the *Yoga Sutras* consistently functioned as the primary source on yoga in South Asia, it is frequently identified in popular discourse as the primary source or ur-text of what has become a reified concept of classical yoga—consider PBS’s reference to the *Yoga Sutras* as *the* codification of yoga (PBS 2008).

The other frequently cited source on so-called classical yoga is the *Bhagavad Gita* (circa second century B.C.E. to first century C.E.). This text consists of a dialogue between the warrior, Arjuna, and his charioteer, Krishna, on the eve of a great war. The dialogue serves as a key scene from the *Mahabharata*. Krishna, who slowly reveals himself as Bhagavan, the transcendent Lord, prescribes yoga as a multivalent path to salvation through him. That path requires detachment from the fruits of actions (*karma yoga*), *bhakti* or “devotion” to Krishna (*bhakti yoga*), and the cultivation of mystical knowledge (*jnana yoga*).

The *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Yoga Sutras* are traditionally identified as Hindu texts. Yet the reification of the ideas and practices prescribed in those texts as exclusively Hindu is problematic. Buddhist and other non-Brahmanical renouncer traditions influenced the author of the *Yoga Sutras* (Bronkhorst 1993; Larson 1989). The *Yoga Sutras*, furthermore, require the practitioner to move beyond identifications of the self with notions tied to the mind–body complex, which, as interpreted by Edwin Bryant, would include any notion of religious identity (Bryant 2011). And yoga traditions based on the *Bhagavad Gita* state that individuals outside of the Brahmanical fold, and therefore outside of what is traditionally categorized as *Hindu*, can attain the highest states of devotion and therefore salvation (Bryant 2011).

An argument for an exclusively Hindu definition of yoga generally is problematic, since the history of yoga suggests that there was a “general climate of thought” in which participants drew from and reworked a shared set of religio-philosophical categories as well as textual traditions (Samuel 2008: 216). Examples include exchanges between the Buddhist Madhyamika school (second century C.E.), the Buddhist Yogacara school (third to fourth century C.E.), schools based on the *Yoga Sutras* (fourth to fifth century C.E.), Advaita Vedanta (circa eighth century C.E.), and Haribhadra Yakini-Putra’s Jain *Yoga Drishti Samuccaya* (eighth century C.E.) (on exchanges between traditions, see, e.g., De la Vallée Poussin 1936–1937; Dixit 1968; Larson 1989; Bronkhorst 1993; Bronkhorst 1998; Chapple 2003; Qvarnström 2003: 131–133; Samuel 2008: 216–218, 232). For example, Haribhadra, in his *Yoga Drishti Samuccaya*, appears to

have considerably drawn from the *Yoga Sutras*, Buddhist sources, as well as tantric sources in setting forth an eight-fold yoga path (Dixit 1968; Chapple 2003).

For all of these reasons, according to Samuel:

[I]t is important to take ‘yoga’ in a wide sense, and to include the variety of related Buddhist and Jain practices, which may or may not [*sic*] be called yoga, as well as the yogic and tantric traditions within the various religious currents that eventually led to modern Hinduism... developments within these various traditions were closely entwined with each other. (Samuel 2007: 179)

In Chapter Six, I will discuss in detail contemporary opponents of the popularization of yoga who define yoga as Hindu and will suggest that there is no historical precedence for such a narrow definition. For now, it is important to note that for many historical reasons, responsible historians avoid reifying the boundaries between South Asian yoga systems by ignoring the exchanges between participants in those systems.

In addition to avoiding the reification of boundaries between South Asian yoga systems, it is also important to avoid a reified notion of classical yoga since South Asian yoga persistently changed over time. Especially around the seventh and eighth centuries, yoga was reworked to a dramatic extent and came to include innovative ideas, largely with regard to the aim of immortality and a new interpretation of *prana*, the primary component of what was believed to be a subtle body (Samuel 2008: 255, 271–290).¹⁷ The textual traditions found in the Buddhist and Hindu *Tantras* as well as Jain appropriations of tantra, for example, maintained much from earlier yoga systems but also introduced radical innovations (White 2012: 12).¹⁸

As a component of tantra, yoga served to increasingly refine consciousness, not as a means to salvation from embodied existence, but as a means to achieving a state of divine consciousness while remaining in embodied existence (White 2012: 12). In the *Tantras* alone, the term *yoga* has a wide range of meanings, including “practice” or “discipline” in a broad sense; the goal of yoga (that is, “conjunction,” “union,” or self-deification); an entire tantric soteriological system; in Buddhist *Tantras*, the dual sense of both the means and ends of practice; a program of meditation or visualization; or specific types of discipline (White 2012: 13).

Tantra came in both exoteric and esoteric forms. Exoteric practices included 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 but only by intentionally transgressing normative ethical and purity standards. Esoteric practices included the symbolic or real consumption of forbidden substances, such as semen and menstrual blood, and ritual sex with conventionally forbidden women, often called *yoginis*, *dakinis*, or *dutis*. Such women were usually low-caste and were believed to embody Shakti, divine feminine “energy.”

In the tenth to eleventh centuries, furthermore, *hatha yoga* or “yoga of forceful exertion,” based largely on the *Shaiva Tantras*, emerged as yet another yoga system. Although many of the postural yoga systems discussed in preceding chapters claim to derive from or to be modern forms of hatha yoga, that claim cannot stand historical scrutiny. Hatha yoga did involve a variety of postures, but in preparation for “internal sexual practices”—that is, the tantric manipulation of the subtle body (Samuel 2008: 279, 336)—or for “curative” aims, for example destroying poisons (Singleton 2010: 29; Singleton cites the fifteenth–sixteenth-century *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* [I.33]). Furthermore, the methods and aims of hatha yoga, outlined below, would not be familiar to most contemporary practitioners of modern postural yoga.

Hatha yoga texts propound a notion of subtle physiology. The subtle body is composed of *nadis* or “veins” through which *prana* or subtle “breath” flows. A central technique is breath control, which serves to purify and balance the nadis and, in combination with other techniques, including postures and bodily *mudra* or “seals,” awakens Shakti in the form of a serpent, *kundalini* (from Sanskrit, *kundala* or “to coil”), who otherwise lies dormant, coiled up at the bottom of the spine. The techniques of hatha yoga draw her up through the central nadi, and, as she moves upward, she penetrates each major *chakra* or “wheel,” where subtle breath is concentrated, thus awakening the latent prana therein. Finally, she reaches the highest chakra at the top of the head, and this internal union results in *samadhi*.

This *kundalini yoga* often takes on erotic symbolism. The copulation of Shiva and Shakti represent the nondual nature of reality itself, and it is erotic energy, sometimes believed to be located in the concentrated substance of sexual fluids, that is imagined as flowing from the bottom of the spine to the top of the spine, where the erotic union between Shakti and Shiva occurs. This is especially the case in some tantric traditions,

where techniques of erotic visualization or ritual copulation are used for the sake of stimulating and then sublimating energy toward higher states of knowledge, culminating in the realization of nonduality.

Though hatha yoga does not “belong” to any single South Asian tradition (Mallinson 2005: 113), and there was significant exchange between the Shaiva Nath yoga tradition (circa twelfth century)—members of which made up the only South Asian order to self-identify as *yogis* (White 2012: 17)—and other yoga traditions, from Vaishnavas to Sufis, founders of the Nath tradition were hatha yoga’s earliest systematizers.¹⁹ The earliest and best-known texts of hatha yoga include the *Goraksha Sataka* (circa twelfth century), ascribed to Gorakshanatha; the *Shiva Samhita* (fifteenth century); the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (fifteenth–sixteenth century); the *Hatha Ratnavali* (seventeenth century); the *Gheranda Samhita* (seventeenth–eighteenth century); and the *Joga Pradipaka* (eighteenth century) (Singleton 2010: 28).

In addition to Hindu tantra, there were also Buddhist and Jain tantric systems. Looking closely at Buddhist tantra in India, Ronald Davidson (2002) suggests that socioeconomic developments in early medieval India strongly influenced the rise and shape of tantra. Davidson shows how socioeconomic and sociopolitical developments, including economic and patronage crises, a decline in women’s economic participation, and the establishment of large monastic orders, influenced the Buddhist tradition that would come to serve as the foundational religiosities upon which Buddhist cultures in China, Tibet, and Japan would build (2002).

On Haribhadra’s Jain *Yoga Drishti Samuccaya*, Christopher Key Chapple suggests that Haribhadra, a medieval Jain thinker, perceived competition with tantra and thus, mirroring some oppositional Vedantic responses to tantra, critiqued its transgressive dimensions while appropriating aspects of it that were seemingly compatible with Jain thought (Chapple 1998: 29; Chapple 2003: 85). Chapple suggests that a comparison between the earlier Jain *Yoga Bindu*, in which tantra is absent, and the later Jain *Yoga Drishti Samuccaya*, in which tantra is present, supports Samuel’s argument that any account of yoga must acknowledge that it is a dynamic, perpetually changing phenomenon:

Presumably, Virahāṅka Haribhadra wrote the *Yogabindu* in the sixth century. This would account for its interest in Buddhism and its neglect of Tantra. Buddhism was still vital in India in the sixth century, and as we know from the legendary biographical accounts,

Haribhadra had perhaps been well-served by extending an olive branch to this competing tradition. Haribhadra Yākinī-Putra wrote the *Yogaḍṛṣṭīsamuccaya* in the eighth century. This would account for the vituperative protests against the Tantric Kaula *yogīs* and the interest in engaging the Vedāntins in conversation. The author includes but places less emphasis on the Buddhists. Tantra was in its ascendancy and a direct competitor with Jainism in Gujarat, and Vedānta was in the process of revitalization and quickly gaining Buddhist converts. (Chapple 2011: 333)

As stated above, yoga never appeared independent of specific contexts. And, in tantric contexts especially, yoga systems that served soteriological purposes were also appropriated for the sake of meeting *bhukti* or mundane objectives, often of royal courts (Samuel 2008). According to Samuel:

If we want to understand what early Śaiva Tantrics were doing, for example, it is surely relevant that they were probably doing it, much of the time, in the context of being employed as official sorcerers, healers and magical practitioners by local rulers and ‘big men’ . . . we have to see similar contexts for much Buddhist and Jaina Tantric practice as well . . . (Samuel 2011: 311)

The Shaiva Nath yoga tradition is especially known for the resources it offered such “big men,” since hatha yoga functioned for them as a means to bodily immortality, sexual pleasure, as well as supernatural and socio-political powers (White 1996; White 2009). Such benefits were associated with yoga prior to the Nath tradition, but its members were the first to identify these benefits as the explicit aims of the yogi (White 2012: 17–18). Sometimes these aims were nefarious, and thus Nath Yogis had reputations as sinister villains (see White 2009).

Medieval Jain appropriations of tantra provide a demonstrative example of yoga’s context-sensitivity when it came to the pursuit of mundane objectives. Overall, tantric thought and practice played minor roles in Jain traditions relative to Hindu and Buddhist ones. This is probably, in part, because Jains maintained a dualist metaphysics that was opposed to the nondualist metaphysics dominant in tantra (Dundas 2000; Qvarnström 2000). Nevertheless, even Jains, whose path toward salvation necessitated total renunciation of and disassociation from the material world, in the

medieval period embraced tantric yoga by regarding it as a system of different means (*sadhana*) for attaining mundane objectives rather than as part of the path to salvation (Qvarnström 1998: 37).

Chapple evaluates Haribhadra and his “cosmopolitan” interest in tantric yoga (Chapple 1998: 15). Haribhadra placed yogic techniques in an “orthodox Jain framework” in an attempt to expand his audience (Chapple 1998: 20). Haribhadra both criticized the Kula yoga tradition for its anti-nomian practices but also appropriated certain of its tantric elements into his own form of Jain yoga in an attempt to “co-opt” its lure (Chapple 1998: 26).²⁰ Chapple explains:

...[Haribhadra] emphasizes the path of purity as the only true yogic means to liberation. However, he attempts this in a subtle fashion. Rather than setting forth the particular (and stringent) aspects of Jain purification practice, Haribhadra cloaks the Jain *guṇashāna* system in the combined guise of Patanjali’s Aṣṭāṅga Yoga and a Tantric Aṣṭa Mātṛkā system. Some of the names he employs are well-known as Hindu goddesses or yoginīs; others are close approximations. Through this device, and by introducing the text with a thinly veiled reference to the threefold emphasis on Desire, Study, and Practice in Tantric traditions, Haribhadra attempts to demonstrate that the heterodox movements offer nothing other than what already exists in the practice of his form of Jain Yoga. (Chapple 1998: 29; see also Chapple 2003: 85)

On the topic of medieval Jain appropriations of tantra, John E. Cort suggests Jains used *vidyas*, multiword magical spells or invocations presided over by female deities and learnt by initiation and practicing the prescribed *sadhana* (Cort 1987: 237). Such *vidyas* were used for the sake of mundane objectives, not for progress along the path toward salvation (Cort 1987: 238). Likewise, Paul Dundas and Cort demonstrate how Shaiva transferences to Jain thought occurred during the medieval period, particularly in the development of a Jain *mantra shastra* and the attendant rituals for the sake of gaining magical powers (Dundas 1998; Cort 2000: 417; Dundas 2000: 232).

Whereas Hindu and Buddhist schools incorporated tantric practices into their soteriologies, Jain schools incorporated tantra only as a secondary tradition aimed at worldly goals rather than the goal of salvation, and thus tantra did not threaten orthodox soteriological doctrine (Cort

1987: 238–239; Qvarnström 1998: 37; Cort 2000: 417). In other words, we do not find a tantric path to salvation in Jain tantra. Rather, the Jain ascetic path remains the path to salvation, although Jain appropriations of tantra demonstrate that Jains maintained a concern not just with salvation from the world, but also with worldly goals (Cort 2000: 417). Such appropriations were for the sake of “co-opting” tantra’s popularity in order to adapt to the social climate of medieval South Asia, where the presence of tantra made certain religious complexes more attractive to large audiences (Chapple 1998; Qvarnström 1998: 40).

Conclusion

By the end of the first millennium c.e., yoga systems were widespread in South Asia, and Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain textual traditions prescribed them. Following the twelfth-century Muslim incursions into South Asia and the establishment of Islam as a South Asian religion, Sufis appropriated elements of yoga into their mystical thought and practice (see, e.g., Ernst 2012). Therefore, throughout its history in South Asia, yoga was culturally South Asian but did not belong to any single religious tradition. In the history of yoga leading up to the nineteenth century, rather than essentializing yoga by reifying its content and aims, it is more accurate to identify it as heterogeneous in practice and characteristic of the doctrinally diverse premodern culture of South Asia.

Reflecting on recent research (specifically Davidson 2002 and Samuel 2008) that emphasizes the significant role of social contexts in shaping yoga systems, Vesna Wallace reiterates the need for a contextual understanding of yoga: “the socio-political environments of the Yogic and Tantric practices at some point became replicated in the structures of these practices and determined their social values,” and “certain social principles that guide religious practices can become transformed and in some cases even nullified in response to historical and sociopolitical contexts” (Wallace 2011: 336). In short, yoga is contextual. I suggest we consider this the most notable lesson from the study of premodern yoga to consider as we approach the study of modern yoga.

Images of yoga from the premodern world, whether of philosopher-ascetics turning inward in pursuit of salvation through realization of the true self, ecstatic *bhaktas* or devotees turning outward in pursuit of divine union with Krishna, or sinister villains channeling bodily energy

in pursuit of sexual pleasure, are hardly the images that we tend to envision when we think of modern practitioners of yoga. In other words, modern yoga systems, including postural yoga ones, bear little resemblance to the yoga systems that preceded them. This is because what modern yoga systems do share with premodern ones is that they are specific to their own social contexts. It is to the contexts of early modern yoga that I now turn.