REVIEWS—FOCUS ON YOGA


Yoga literature is typically pre-occupied with deviance from an ‘authentic’ yoga tradition. In a classic case, Eliade’s *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* decries popularisations of yoga that overlap with Theosophical and New Thought ideas as ‘detestable “spiritual” hybridism’. However, if the ‘yoga’ being done today is to be understood, the idea of an authentic tradition must be revised. Sarah Strauss and Joseph Alter, among others, have offered contemporary anthropological descriptions of what is labelled yoga. Elizabeth de Michielis seeks to define and understand how ‘Modern Yoga’, i.e. yoga of the last 150 years, acquired its ‘peculiar characteristics’ without the weighty assumptions of a traditional authenticity.

*A History of Modern Yoga* is the first major discussion of the yoga practised in the modern world as a self-standing conceptual category. De Michielis makes a particular contribution by underlining the importance of Christian and more significantly the western esoteric ideas that were a crucial part of the environment in which what is now popularly understood as yoga developed. The book posits an intellectual lineage of modern yoga beginning with Vivekananda and his intellectual influences, in particular Keshubabha Sen’s ‘elaboration of Neo-Vedantic constructs’ in the Brahmo Samaj in nineteenth-century Calcutta. The Samaj was a forum for the Bengali middle classes to make sense of the European ideas that came with the Raj, e.g. Enlightenment Humanism, Unitarianism, and Transcendentalism. As a group of middle-class Indians, the Samaj attempted to balance social reform and affiliation with traditional Indian religiosity. This organisation created a Neo-Hindu, Neo-Vedanta apologetics, which has arguably become the predominant understanding of what Hinduism is in contemporary cosmopolitan circles. De Michielis posits Vivekananda’s *Raja Yoga* (1896) as the seminal moment in the development of modern yoga.

*Raja Yoga* was also heavily influenced by Vivekananda’s contact with the *fin de siècle* Bostonian and New York intellectual elite before and after the World’s Parliament of Religions at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair. De Michielis argues that Vivekananda’s explanation of Vedanta changed considerably after his time in the United States. She points out that concepts of ‘God’ and ‘Self-realization’ became crucial for Vivekananda’s formulation of Neo-Vedanta and that there were two models for this soteriology—the *samadhi* model and the *prana* model. She argues that Vivekananda’s notions of *prana*, as the mechanism of *kundalini*-based enlightenment, has been substantially influenced by the idea of a subtle fluid, or energy, that was the assumed mechanism responsible for mesmerism, or healing from ‘animal magnetism’, the manipulation of this physical energy is integral to spiritual evolution. Overlaps between modern yoga and alternative medicine, particularly its roots in the esoteric and mesmeric explorations of the late-nineteenth century, are highlighted throughout her book.

Under the *samadhi* model de Michielis argues that Vivekananda describes yogic process with terms shared with New Thought and William James’s psychology and constitutes a marked departure from Patañjali’s classic explanation. She notes that
William James and Vivekananda frequented the same Bostonian circles and that William James was asked to write a preface for *Raja Yoga*, although it never materialized. De Michelis untangles the variety of influences on and innovations by Vivekananda in the making of *Raja Yoga* and thereby adds substantially to an understanding of the origin of many popular ‘yoga’ assumptions.

In a quick shift, de Michelis reflects upon selected aspects of yoga during the second half of the twentieth century. First, she creates a useful typology of modern yoga derived from Vivekananda’s *Raja Yoga*, which differentiates groups by their psychosomatic or denominational focuses. The psychosomatic yoga’s focus on orthopraxy is further subdivided into those who put emphasis on postures (asanas) (Modern Postural Yoga) and those who accentuate ‘meditation’ (Modern Meditational Yoga). Modern Denominational Yoga in contrast is defined by its more intense concern with orthodoxy, although groups in this category may also have defining practices. After introducing these conceptual tools, de Michelis focuses her attention exclusively on what she delineates as Modern Postural Yoga. The serviceability of the other concepts and the authenticity of their genealogy from Vivekananda’s *Raja Yoga* are left for future researchers.

De Michelis then considers B.K.S. Iyengar’s ‘Modern Yoga trilogy’ of *Light on Yoga* (1966), *Light on Pranayama* (1981) and *Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* (1993). She underlines the core of ‘orthoperformance’ in Iyengar’s formulation of yoga, but also argues that layers of Neo-Vedanta and Harmonial (metaphysic and mesmeric ideas) are further key elements in Iyengar’s work and suggests that these are characteristic of all Modern Postural Yoga. De Michelis gives the reader no reason to believe that Iyengar was personally influenced by Vivekananda’s *Raja Yoga*. While lack of a direct connection does not invalidate the categorisations, it does raise questions about the genealogical projection.

The final chapter of the book, which is more of a stand-alone article than a conclusion uniting various chapters, might be of the most immediate interest to practitioners of yoga and Asian medicine. De Michelis analyses the structure of a ‘typical’ Modern Postural Yoga class following from the work of anthropologists Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner on rites of passage. The ritual space of the yoga class is 1) defined as ‘introductory quieting time’ (the pre-liminal), followed by 2) the practice of *asana* and *pranayama* (the liminal state proper), and 3) a final relaxation (the post-liminal incorporation). The significance of a contemporary yoga class as ritual is the ‘healing’ occurring in a ‘secular’ context.

The scope of *A History of Modern Yoga* is immense, but the publisher’s title is misleading as the book is not properly a history. De Michelis has crafted astute vignettes about key elements in the history of modern yoga but does not present a coherent narrative. Following from the title of ‘history’, readers could expect a richer description of the Bengali ‘cultic milieu’ and a more extended discussion of the ideology and global influence of this particular association than is offered. Additionally, de Michelis’s choice of Keshubchandra Sen, Vivekananda, and Iyengar as the seminal historical exemplars of the development of modern yoga is not explained or justified. While these figures are unquestionably influential and important, Paramahansa Yogananda’s *The Autobiography of a Yogi* or the global network inspired by Swami Sivananda is not referred to in the analysis. It is difficult to accept a seminal place for *Raja Yoga* or Iyengar in defining modern yoga without this comparison. However, the amazing quantity and diversity of modern yoga literature makes comprehensive comparative analysis extremely challenging. It appears that de Michelis’s intention in this book is to establish a foundation for modern yoga research, rather than write an inclusive history.

In *A History of Modern Yoga*, de Michelis has introduced insightful categories and typologies for analysing the theological, social and physical dimensions of the prac-
tice of yoga during the last 150 years. Future scholars will have the advantage of being able to use Michelis’s terminology and detailed research as a springboard for an increasingly refined discussion.

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Joseph Alter’s book examines the production of transnationalised yoga and alternative medicine in colonial and post-colonial India, and takes up many of the critical tensions that are found in his previous work. His ‘discursive field’ is the sprawling body of what he calls ‘yogic pulp nonfiction’, which proliferated from the 1920s onwards. Indeed, throughout the book, Alter is concerned with the populist and generally anti-mystical formulations of yoga that centre on the health and efficiency of the body, physical education and ‘natural’ medicine. Rejecting late-Orientalist approaches such as Eliade’s—where yoga is an ultimately transcendental system based on the ‘gold standard’ of classical texts—Alter’s ethnography attempts to draw out the messy, human, and radically physicalised aspect of yoga’s recent history. It is worth noting, however, that despite his avowed departure from the Orientalist project Alter nonetheless continues to cite Eliade (and, surprisingly, Georg Feuerstein) as his main authorities on the classical yoga tradition.

The first part of the book identifies some of the problems inherent in the study of modern yoga. One of the central concerns is the ambivalence of modern yoga’s self-representation as both science and object of science. In the first instance, yoga aims at the investigation and experiential realisation of states beyond the ordinary empirical ken, but in the second such unquantifiables are embodied and made subject to objective, ‘scientific’ scrutiny. It is in this space of slippage, confusion and paradox, where nerves become *nadis*, and the duration of breath retention indexes states of *samadhi*, that Alter locates the foundational ‘mistake’ of modern yoga. This is the book’s most engaging idea, and one that is elaborately developed. An important analytical tool used to understand the contradictions of this materialist/biological metaphysics is Donna Haraway’s theory of cyborgs: the modern yogi seeks to materialise the non-human aspect of the Ultimate within the biological materiality of the human frame, much as the cyborg incorporates flesh and machine into a single unit. Another recurring heuristic emblem that clearly fascinates Alter is Dr K.N. Udupa’s head-standing laboratory rats, which he takes as illustrative of the ‘rupture of planes’ (of meaning and mimesis) inherent in the science of yoga.

Four case studies are used as the basis for sustained theoretical elaboration. The first, on the laboratory work of Swami Kuvalayanada, is the most interesting and relevant from the perspective of a history of yoga in modern times. If Kuvalayananda’s work began as scientific nationalism in pre-Independence India, it eventually grew into a kind of transnational corporeal humanism that could be, and was, exported with little or no apparent cultural baggage. Early experiments such as the yogic isolation and ‘rolling’ of the rectus abdominus muscles (*nauli*) and its effect on intra-intestinal pressure are exemplary, Alter argues, of the manner in which the subtle power of yogic technique and gross physiology are made to converge in Kuvalayananda’s research. Given that yoga belongs to an ontological sphere that subverts and ultimately undermines the laws of nature (by transcending them), Alter judges that Kuvalayananda’s experiments paradoxically proved nothing, but that they did create the condition of ‘harmonic hybridity’ necessary for yoga’s subsequent ‘colonisation’ of the west.