



BOOK REVIEW

Biography of a Yogi: Paramahansa Yogananda and the Origins of Modern Yoga. Anya P. Foxen. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. 238 pages.

First published in 1946, *Autobiography of a Yogi* by Paramahansa Yogananda has to date sold over four million copies. It is by far Yogananda's most popular book and has been translated into thirty-three languages. Aside from South Asian religio-philosophical texts, *Autobiography of a Yogi* is perhaps the most widely read publication on the life of a yogi of all time.

Yogananda (Mukunda Lal Ghosh, 1893–1952) was born in Gorakhpur, in the state of Uttar Pradesh. He was initiated into Kriya Yoga in 1907 in Calcutta, together with his best friend Manomohan Mazumdar (later known as Swami Satyananda). The two men were initiated by Swami Kebalananda, a disciple of Swami Lahiri Mahasaya of Banaras (who was also the guru of Yogananda's parents). In 1915 Yogananda received an initiation as a *sannyāsī* by Sri Yukteswar Giri, thus becoming Yogananda Giri. Yukteswar's guru was Lahiri Mahasaya, whose guru was the semi-mythical Babaji; this was the lineage of teachers that transmitted Kriya Yoga.

Yogananda sailed from Calcutta to Boston in 1920 to attend as an Indian delegate the International Congress of Religious Liberals that was convening in Boston; there he delivered a lecture on "The Science of Religion." Yogananda taught his version of Kriya Yoga philosophy and practices in the USA from 1920 until his demise in 1952. He made a return trip, via several countries, to India (1935–1936), where he received a hero's welcome, in similar circumstances to those of Vivekananda, another Calcuttan who had returned triumphantly from the USA in 1897, a generation previously.

In 1920, shortly after arriving in the USA, Yogananda founded the Self Realization Fellowship (SRF), which established its administrative headquarters in the Los Angeles area in 1925. Since then, around 500 of the organization's centres have been established



worldwide. The Indian wing of the organization is known as the Yogoda Satsanga Society, a name also used for some of its operations in the USA. It was first established near Calcutta, then at Ranchi, in the state of Bihar, by Yogananda and his younger brother Bishnu Charan Ghosh. Bishnu later became the *āsana* teacher of Bikram Choudhuri, the founder of Bikram Yoga.

Yogananda taught Kriya Yoga as a four-stage sequence (134–5), which he referred to as a “science.” It was primarily based on meditation but also incorporated modified Tantric *haṭhayoga* techniques, including the concept that there are six energetic centres (*cakras*) arranged along the spine in the body, which have astrological correspondences. To his advanced disciples he taught *prāṇāyāma* and a limited number of basic *āsanas* (but not *padmāsana*); he also taught *mantra* recitation (particularly *haṃsa* and *om*), visualizations, *khecari mudrā* (which he taught to just a few people), and several modern stretching exercises that employ the systematic tension and release of various muscles. Yogananda referred to this package of practices as “Yogoda.”

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Several other biographies of Yogananda have been published in the last few decades, notably by Sananda Lal Ghosh (1980), Brenda Lewis Rosser (1991), Lola Williamson, (2010), and Philip Goldberg (2018). Yogananda’s life was also discussed within a series of biographies on Kriya Yoga gurus by both Swami Satyeswarananda Giri (1983; 1984; 1985; 1991; 1994) and Swami Satyananda (2004). However, Foxen’s work is most welcome, as it examines Yogananda’s life and works critically and in a broader historical and sociological context, making his legacy more readily discernable.

For an enthusiast for the “mystery and wonder” of India, *Autobiography of a Yogi* does not disappoint. As told in the *Autobiography*, Yogananda’s life was a parade of miraculous events and reality-bending yogis, many of whom could perform superhuman feats, such as magically appearing and disappearing or producing objects out of thin air. The *Autobiography* also presents aspects of science and interpretations of religious experience that were *courant* at the time, which are blended into the divine metaphysics of Kriya Yoga. From his childhood onwards, Yogananda had a fascination with hypnotism and occult powers (96–8). For sceptics, of course, even just one miracle

opens the door to as many miracles as one could wish for. Foxen remarks (xii) that when she first read *Autobiography of a Yogi* she didn't finish it, as it seemed "kind of nutty."

Fortunately for us, Foxen not only returned to the *Autobiography* but also comprehensively plumbed its creation and the "real" life of its author, Yogananda. Foxen's *Biography* comprises an introduction, five chapters, and an epilogue. The first two chapters focus on the people and ideas that shaped the avant-garde understanding of yoga and religious experience in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Chapter 1 focuses on other influential yogis of the time, while Chapter 2 assesses the influence of the metaphysical ideas in Mesmerism, New Thought, Theosophy, and other popular theories. Chapter 3 examines the life of Yogananda from numerous sources, including the autobiography, alternative biographies, popular media, and community records. Chapter 4 analyses the teachings of Yogananda in the USA, observing how his teaching of "traditional" *hathayoga* was significantly adapted and "universalized" to suit a western audience. In Chapter 5, the writing of the *Autobiography* is unpacked. The book, which has undergone numerous and sometimes substantial revisions and additions during the course of its many published editions, was in fact written in collaboration with perhaps four editors. In the epilogue, the extraordinary life of Bikram Choudhury is related, including accounts of the allegations of abuse and the sex scandals that surround him to this day.

As is commonplace in the world of celebrity of whatever stripe, the life of Yogananda, when examined under a critical, "non-hagiographical" eye, has several minor scandals, though perhaps not as many as the *Autobiography* has miracles. Foxen details Yogananda's legal cases concerning his business arrangements, a few alleged sexual innuendos, and the significant *furor* that erupted (106–12) after a series of lectures he gave in Miami in February 1928. He was banned from speaking there again after 200 irate husbands petitioned the authorities, concerned that their wives had been negatively influenced by his teachings. Yogananda was accused of proposing that their wives pay \$35 to attend private audiences with him to learn the secrets of his "mystic cult." Although material is provided on a few controversies surrounding Yogananda, it is proportionally a small part of the content of the study.

Biography of a Yogi is well written; it is engaging, carefully organized, and extensively researched. Overall, the book provides a balanced and interesting account of one of the world's most famous gurus, whose autobiography and transmission of Kriya Yoga to the



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USA and elsewhere significantly shaped the understanding and practice of yoga in the twentieth century.

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