



BOOK REVIEW

Roots of Yoga. Translated and edited with an introduction by James Mallinson and Mark Singleton. London: Penguin Books, 2017. Paperback. xl + 540 pages.

With *Roots of Yoga*, James Mallinson and Mark Singleton have made a monumental contribution to the historical study of yoga in South Asia. This rich sourcebook makes available to the English reader a selection of hundreds of key passages (some translated for the first time), culled from more than one hundred premodern works composed in Sanskrit and a dozen other languages. As leading scholars of yoga studies at SOAS and researchers in the Hatha Yoga Project,¹ Mallinson and Singleton are well positioned to undertake this ambitious survey of yoga's history in texts. The book is concerned primarily with the practical (as opposed to the doctrinal and philosophical) dimensions of premodern yoga, a focus that meshes with the translators' expertise in postural forms of *haṭhayoga* and their modern reception. Mallinson and Singleton's respective specializations in philology and cultural history complement one another, producing a holistic engagement with the texts not as isolated documents but as windows onto past worlds of practice and identity. *Roots of Yoga* is a valuable reference work for research and teaching, as many scholar-teachers (myself included) have discovered since its publication in 2017. Yet reading this dense book cover-to-cover brings its own rewards, revealing important arguments about yoga's diversity of practices and practitioners, ideological and religious malleability, and overall fluidity as a cultural form. *Roots of Yoga* is an indispensable resource for historians of South Asian religions, Indologists, and scholars of yoga studies; moreover, given its accessible style and publication by a trade publisher, the work should attract the interest of modern yoga practitioners and an educated general public.

In the introduction, Mallinson and Singleton lay out the rationale and aims of the work and give a historical overview of the major texts and religious movements involved. Noting yoga's growing popularity but criticizing its reduction to a narrow group of

¹ The Hatha Yoga Project, ERC research grant agreement number 616393. Retrieved from: hyp.soas.ac.uk.



canonical texts (e.g., the Upaniṣads, *Bhagavad Gītā*, and *Pātāñjalayogaśāstra*) and transregional postural systems, they view their work as addressing a lack of awareness about yoga's varied historical contexts in South Asia. By bringing lesser-known works (often produced by obscure groups detailing esoteric practices) into engagement with more celebrated texts, the translators aim to provide access to a wider range of textual material and thus present the history of yoga with more breadth and nuance. Having already collaborated with curators and art historians to produce a volume on yoga's visual history,² Mallinson and Singleton know well that texts do not tell the whole story. Yet they ardently defend their chosen materials and methods: "[T]exts remain a unique and dependable source of knowledge about yoga in particular moments in history..." (x) Absent from this introduction, however, is any substantive reflection on power and patronage in the production of such textual discourses, on the translators' own standpoint as Western scholars in relation to South Asian texts, and on their roles as public intellectuals in constructing yoga for a new generation of scholars and practitioners. Addressing these issues up front would have placed *Roots of Yoga* on firmer critical ground. The rest of the introduction highlights key features of the book's contents, including an overview of the vital yoga scholarship that underlies the book, the importance of recent advances in tantric studies for understanding yoga, and the significance of working in languages beyond Sanskrit (including Persian, Tibetan, and Arabic, as well as vernacular Indian languages like Tamil and Old Marathi).

The book is thematically arranged in eleven chapters, with each one treating a major aspect of yoga's multifarious history, from breath-control to posture to special powers. Each begins with an essay summarizing the theme at hand, an overview of the chapter contents (which seems redundant given that the same information is available in the translations), and the translated passages themselves, which are organised diachronically. This organization allows the reader to compare and contrast a given theme across texts from different regions and time periods, while at the same time making it possible to trace the genealogies of certain practices and worldviews. Thus, for instance, "Mantra" (Chapter Seven) reveals the breadth and diversity of chanting in yoga traditions while at the same time making plain the central importance of the *Vedas* in establishing the ideology of Indian sacred sound. "Yoga" (Chapter One), which provides definitions of the term *yoga*, interpretations of the concept from various perspectives (Brahmanical, Buddhist, tantric, haṭhayogic), and typologies of yoga systems (based on the "limbs," *anṅgas*, they share), is especially pivotal to the book's argumentation. Under the heading of "yoga as practice, yoga as goal," this chapter

² Diamond, D. et al. 2013. *Yoga: The Art of Transformation*. Washington, D.C.: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.

shows that the construction of yoga has often entailed two divergent emphases: on practical methods and on soteriological outcomes. The chapter also previews an argument made throughout the work, namely, that practices associated with yoga are to a large extent portable—that is, separable from doctrine, sect, and ideology. Systems that differ in theological terms, for example, broadly agree in prescribing breath-control, posture, mantra, meditation, and allied practices. Such insights illuminate the final chapter of the work (“Liberation”), where Mallinson and Singleton rebut the syncretistic presentation of yoga as “many paths, one goal,” pointing out that the differing conceptions of liberation (*nirvāṇa*, *mokṣa*, *jivānmukti*, and so on), when combined with the emerging uniformity and hegemony of postural yoga in the early modern period, suggest a counter-narrative “in which one path leads to many goals” (396).

The structure of the chapters is a boon to researchers. To understand competing systemizations of the subtle energy centers (*cakras*, in “The Yogic Body,” Chapter Five), for instance, or to get a handle on the heterogeneous concept of yogic seals (*mudrās*, Chapter Six), one has only to turn to the relevant pages to find a summary of the topic, elegant translations of key passages, and copious annotations. (In terms of supporting documentation, *Roots of Yoga* includes a timeline of important texts, a pronunciation guide, endnotes, bibliographies of primary and secondary literature, a glossary, and a useful index.) The book’s structure is similarly appealing for the classroom: Mallinson and Singleton’s presentation of passages is invaluable for undergraduate courses, provided that the instructor can give supplementary guidance. I have learned this from experience: students in my history of yoga course at Brown University benefited from reading individual chapters from one week to the next, but sometimes despaired of being able to retain so many names, titles, and terms without additional context. A teaching guide to accompany *Roots of Yoga* would be a welcome ancillary publication.

While *Roots of Yoga* represents the hard work and perseverance of two highly accomplished scholars and translators, it also stands as a testament to yoga scholarship as a collaborative enterprise. The book had its genesis on social media, with the initial research crowd-funded with \$50,000 of seed money.³ More importantly, the book is the flowering of intellectual collaboration, as the frequent and generous acknowledgements of previous scholarship—ancient and modern, Indian and Western—make clear. In this respect, *Roots of Yoga* is a summation of many overlapping strands in humanity’s long journey to understand itself and the cosmos through yoga. In the opening of her

³ Kickstarter for ‘The Roots of Yoga, A Sourcebook from the Indian Traditions.’ Retrieved from: <http://tinyurl.com/rootsofyoga>.



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seminal 2004 book on modern yoga, Elizabeth De Michelis asks: “What is this yoga?”⁴ More than a decade on, *Roots of Yoga* offers up an extensive array of materials for exploring the historical dimensions of this question.

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⁴ De Michelis, E. 2004. *A History of Modern Yoga: Patañjali and Western Esotericism*. London: Continuum.



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