



BOOK REVIEW

Yoga in Transformation: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives. Edited by Karl Baier, Philipp A. Maas, and Karin Preisendanz. Vienna: Vienna University Press, 2018. 630 pages; 55 figures.

The *Yoga in Transformation* volume pulls together extended research papers from an eponymous conference held at the University of Vienna in 2013. Featuring sixteen peer-reviewed chapters from world-leading scholars, the volume is a valuable resource for academic yoga studies—probably more at graduate than undergraduate level, given its original research content. The collection is divided into two sections. The first, titled “Yoga in South Asia and Tibet,” features mostly studies on texts, while the second, titled “Globalised Yoga,” focuses on developments in the twentieth century and is more interdisciplinary, including textual research, anthropology, sociology, affect theory, and art history.

The collection opens with two highly topical studies on the *Pātañjalayogaśāstra* by Wujastyk and Maas, respectively examining the Buddhist context of specific *sūtras* in the text and the role of *āsana* in Pātañjala yoga. Both of these chapters are excellent, but beyond these more familiar “classical” contexts, the section moves on to research areas that are less known in yoga studies. For example, Maas and Verdon investigate the *Kitāb Pātanḡal*, a work by Perso-Muslim polymath Al-Bīrūnī. This eleventh-century Arabic text is a “free and creative” (329) translation or a “simplified revision” (301) of the *Pātañjalayogaśāstra*, rendered during the Golden Age of the Islamic world (289). It is characterised by formal innovations, including a dialogic frame between “Pātanḡal” and “the ascetic who roamed in the deserts and jungles” (287)—the latter a familiar figure in medieval Islamic religious literature. The work also reflects selective omission of certain passages and definitions (including definitions of yoga itself), and so the *Kitāb Pātanḡal* represents Patañjali’s work for Muslim audiences who were not “acquainted with the Brahmanical culture of the time” (321). Maas and Verdon’s chapter offers a



robust refutation of Pines and Gelbum’s theory that Al-Bīrūnī based his rendering on an unknown commentary (rather than on the commentarial part of the *Pātañjalayogaśāstra* itself). It is also refreshing in considering Patañjali’s work first and foremost as a *śāstra* (treatise) and situating it in the specific yet understudied context of early Muslim cultural reception. The chapter also includes a detailed discussion of the cosmography of the *Pātañjalayogaśāstra* and a sharp theoretical analysis of the translational strategies used by Al-Bīrūnī in order to “bridge cultural gaps” (325).

Rastelli’s chapter provides a fascinating account of the yoga practices in the Pāñcarātra communities dedicated to ritual worship of Viṣṇu. Within a daily, fivefold ritual sequence, yoga occupies the fifth stage as a purificatory practice assigned to the last part of the day. Yoga begins at bedtime with theistic reflection as one falls asleep, and it is conducted in earnest by waking up in the middle of the night as part of a segmented sleep pattern (227–30). Midnight yogic practices include purification rites and meditation practices such as visualizing God, dissolution and recreation of the elementary constituents (*tattvas*), and mentally installing mantras in one’s body. Sleep itself can be a yogic technique, and its effects are prolonged by rising around three hours before sunrise, at the time designated as the *brāhma muhūrta* (233–35). Addressing a later Vaiṣṇava setting, Kiehnle’s chapter, “The Transformation of Yoga in Medieval Maharashtra,” surveys the themes of yoga in Jñāndev’s *Jñāneśvarī*, a thirteenth-to-fourteenth-century Marathi commentary on the *Bhagavadgītā* presented as a collection of devotional songs. Kiehnle’s study is an important reminder of the shifting contexts of key technical terms such as the Sāṃkhya dualist concept of *kaivalya* (isolation), which Jñāndev adjusts to the *advaita* (non-dual, or non-diverse) meanings of Nāth practice and philosophy (264). Another chapter of note is Baker’s richly illustrated account of the development of Haṭhayoga-related yoga and somatic practices in Tibetan Buddhism, focused in particular on little-known applications within Dzogchen.

The collection also contains two major outputs, by Birch and Mallinson, of the Hatha Yoga Project funded by the European Research Council, which ran from 2015–2020 at SOAS and has contributed a great deal to redefining the current landscape of academic yoga studies. Birch’s chapter, “The Proliferation of *Āsana*-s in Late-Medieval Yoga Texts” describes the extensive lists of *āsana*-s that appear in *haṭhayoga* texts after the sixteenth century, concentrating on three hitherto unexamined manuscripts that contain numbers of postures exceeding the traditional figure of eighty-four. Together, these three manuscripts “corroborate the chronological increase in the number of *āsana*-s seen in published texts” (109) in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Ujjain

manuscript of the *Yogacintāmaṇi*, by the śaiva advaitavedāntin Śivānandasarasvatī, “demonstrates the willingness of yogis to combine yoga techniques from Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava traditions” (121). It also shares close parallels with the illustrated Persian manuscript the *Baḥr al-Ḥayāt*, which was a support for Birch in interpreting obscure descriptions of āsana in the *Yogacintāmaṇi*. The *Haṭhapradīpikā-Siddhāntamuktāvalī* is an extended version of the *Haṭhapradīpikā*, which increases the standard count of fifteen āsanās to some ninety-five. The *Haṭhābhyāsapaddhati* is the first known text to describe repetitive sequences of postures, numbering one hundred and twelve, and may have formed the basis for some of the dynamic practices in the modern Krishnamacharya lineage. The chapter also contains many useful charts as well as three appendices: a diplomatic transcription of the āsana section in the *Yogacintāmaṇi*, a translation and transcription of the *Haṭhābhyāsapaddhati*, and a chart that compares medieval and modern āsanās.

Mallinson’s chapter (“Yoga and Sex: What is the Purpose of *Vajrolīmudrā*?”) is not for the squeamish, describing the *haṭhayoga* technique of drawing liquids up into the urethra through an inserted pipe. The chapter includes not only textual and ethnographic data but also experiential insights and anatomical information (185). *Vajrolīmudrā* is first described in the *circa* twelfth-century *Amanaska*, and then named explicitly and further elaborated in the *circa* thirteenth-century *Dattātreya yogaśāstra* (187). These early accounts equate the *vajrolī* technique with *rājayoga* as a way to control semen (to stop it from “falling”) and thereby to retain ascetic celibacy. *Vajrolīmudrā* has been a pivot in academic histories of yoga, since the term also appeared in tantric texts, thereby leading some scholars to assert that *haṭhayoga* emerged from the sexual rites of tantra. However, Mallinson argues that despite the “shared terminology” (197) between *haṭhayoga* and tantra “[w]ords such as *mudrā*, *vedha*, *bindu* and *āsana* have meanings in the Haṭha corpus quite different to those which they have in earlier tantric works” (197). Rather, he argues, *vajrolī* is a much older ascetic practice that was adopted by *haṭhayoga* authors from the eleventh century onwards for new householder audiences (196), and at different times the technique was also appropriated and refashioned by tantric traditions (198; 205). Appendix 2 contains editions and translations of two *circa* eighteenth-century sources discussing *vajrolīmudrā*: the *Bṛhatkhecarīprakāśa* and the *Vajroliyoga*.

The “Globalised Yoga” section of the book contains a range of varied contributions, which, if read together, build up a socially textured and theory-informed picture of twentieth-century developments. Not all contemporary cultural facets of “yoga in transformation” are covered here; however, the overall limitations in scope were





shaped by the structure of the 2013 conference rather than by some of the more recent theoretical advances in yoga studies. Thus, critical issues such as gender, race, and abuse are not addressed. Still, the topics in this section are wide-ranging, from late nineteenth-century Viennese Occultism (Baier), through epistemic conditions that structure a problematic concept of “global yoga” (Hauser), to Christian responses to yoga in the late twentieth century (Amaldass). To alight on a few other chapters in detail: Newcombe’s study examines the public spaces of yoga (551) that throw up contested meanings and reflect wider discussions on religion, secularity, and post-secularity, and cultural appropriation. Public yoga spaces can include not only schools and studios but also stages that host yoga demonstrations and competitions. Drawing on the theories of Lefebvre and Knott, Newcombe identifies how different public locations for yoga reflect “cultural positions” informed by “ideological positions” (560–63) used to determine the “authenticity” of the practice. However, attempts to essentialise a “true” yoga are resisted by interrogating the specific and complex meanings operating in any one particular space. Ideologies of health are the focus of Alter’s “Yoga, Nature Cure and ‘Perfect’ Health,” which charts the incorporation of European techniques of Nature Cure into systems of yoga by figures such as Śivānanda, Gandhi, Kuvalayānanda and Yogendra. Alter shows how German Naturopath Kuhne’s theory on disease and his dietary and hydrotherapeutic techniques were brought into conversation with Indian metaphysics and medicine. It is this conversation that contributed to the institutionalization of naturopathy in Indian healthcare, as evidenced by the coupling of yoga and naturopathy as a joint category in the current Indian Ministry of Ayurveda, Yoga & Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha, and Homeopathy (AYUSH).

The volume ends as it starts, with Pātañjala yoga. Bühnemann’s “Nāga, Siddha and Sage: Visions of Patañjali as an Authority on Yoga” traces the development of Patañjali’s iconography from the c.12th-century sculptures at the Naṭarāja Temple at Cidambaram in Tamil Nadu to installed figures in contemporary global yoga studios in the Kṛṣṇamācārya lineage. The chapter disentangles the knots (and confusions) in the mythic construction of Patañjali as an author on yoga, grammar, and Ayurveda. It also deconstructs the legend of Patañjali as a divine serpent (*nāga*) (581–82) and analyses his depictions as a two-armed and a four-armed figure. An unexpected and delightful feature of this chapter is its gallery of thirty-two colour images.

The editors of this volume and Vienna University Press are to be commended for making this an open-access publication at a time when high prices keep research books out of reach of individuals and a preserve of institutional libraries. The volume contains

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a wealth of primary sources - not only translations and editions packed into essays, footnotes, and appendices but also colour images. What would have enhanced the utility of the book even further is a list of illustrations and an index for the printed hardback edition. Overall, the volume stands as a key companion to teaching and learning in the fast-changing and growing field of yoga studies.

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