



## INTRODUCTION

Daniela Bevilacqua and Mark Singleton

This volume is the outcome of a workshop held at SOAS University of London in November 2019, under the auspices of the five-year, ERC-funded Haṭha Yoga Project (HYP).<sup>1</sup> The workshop was organised because of several questions that had been on our minds for some time: considering the centuries-long presence of multiple embodied traditions in India, what was the relationship between the physical practices of yoga and other physical disciplines that bear certain similarities to yoga, at least in appearance? Had there been interchange or even influence across and between different physical disciplines and the practices of yoga? Could such a perspective on the history of yoga help to understand better any of its developments?

Our starting point was that bodily practices such as physically demanding *āsanas* and *mudrās*, which began to appear in material and textual sources around the beginning of the second millennium, did not materialise out of nowhere. New archaeological and art-historical evidence, such as the 13th-century Mahudi Gate in Dabhoi, has shown that some complex postures were in use by at least two centuries before they were described in textual sources. Moreover, postures “carved” on medieval temple pillars suggest that artists worked among different practitioners: not only yogis/fakirs, but also acrobats, wrestlers and dancers. If, as these sculptures suggest, these different practitioners shared temple spaces (especially during religious festivals), it is possible that yogis learned certain postural practices from other practitioners and then introduced them into their repertoire as *yogāsanas* or *mudrās*, either for pragmatic reasons (e.g. to attract the attention of pilgrims) or spiritual ones (e.g. to push their bodies to extreme forms of *tapas*).<sup>2</sup> Similarly, it is not difficult to imagine wandering *sādhus* belonging to militarised

---

<sup>1</sup> The Haṭha Yoga Project was funded by the European Research Council under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (Grant Agreement no. 647963).

<sup>2</sup> Even today, yoga practitioners from different backgrounds or practising different physical practices add

*akhārās*<sup>3</sup> being influenced by martial arts or military training. From these considerations, further questions developed.

Is it possible that, from the 11th to the 19th century, physical practices of yoga drew from a variety of extra- or para-yogic bodily disciplines? Are advanced *āsanas*, bodily *mudrās* and other innovative physical practices the product of bodies of knowledge that are not themselves strictly “yogic”? Conversely, are analogies or borrowings of practices in other yogic and non-yogic traditions evident? For example, did the acrobats’ contortions have soteriological or therapeutic purposes beyond entertainment? Did martial arts such as *kaḷarippayarru* incorporate yogic physical practices in their training, combat or therapeutic aspects? And beyond coincidences of physical shape or questions of direct causal influence, can we point to a shared South Asian environment of “techniques of the body” within which a range of disciplines may have developed? And finally, is it possible that neighbouring cultures were the source of some of these practices?

The one thing we were certain of was that it would be impossible to answer these questions by ourselves within the five years of the HYP. It would have been difficult to dig into different traditions to obtain qualitative material for analysis in such a short time, especially as we were both already working on a number of textual, ethnographic and historical projects as “outputs” for the HYP. Reaching out to other academics specialising in these traditions therefore seemed the most promising approach. That is why we decided to organise a workshop where experts from different backgrounds could come together to share, discuss and eventually write up their answers to our questions.

This volume, therefore, using textual, historical and anthropological analysis, deals with different physical disciplines found on the Indian subcontinent such as *kuṣṭī*, *mallkhāmb*, *kaḷarippayarru*, dance, acrobatics, military training (including Persian/Mughal), *sūryanamaskār*, *vyāyāma*, and so on. We felt it essential to consider neighbouring Tibetan and Chinese embodied traditions in our South Asian exploration, given the clues we already had of their importance in the interchanges between traditions of body disciplines. The volume therefore also examines Tibetan yogic practice and the Chinese *daoyin* tradition in relation to Indian *haṭhayoga*.

---

exercises in their *yogāsana* teaching that come from other physical contexts rather than from a “yogic tradition” (see Singleton 2010).

<sup>3</sup> See below, p. 12–13.

The authors of this volume, whenever possible, took up our challenge and sought to scrutinise the relationship between *haṭhayoga* and their field of expertise. Considering their different disciplines, methodologies, backgrounds and nationalities, we have left them free to express their own linguistic style and way of “designing” the chapter without imposing any particular limitations. This also applies to the length of the chapters, which explains why some are longer than others: we felt in certain cases that the extra length was appropriate given the importance of the material. We hope that the result of this collective effort will satisfy those who, like us, are interested in cross-disciplinary dialogue and the opportunity for continuous learning.

The volume opens with a “Prelude” in which Jason Birch and Jacqueline Hargreaves shed new light on the history of modern yoga, demonstrating the need to broaden the debate on its roots by including lines of transmission from pre-modern, traditional teachings on *āsana* that have so far eluded academic research.

The volume’s contribution to this debate is provided in its three sections. The first section, “Yogis, Acrobats or Dancers?” focuses on medieval India and the ways in which various embodied practices came together as part of the religious life of temple worship. In the second section, “Martial Arts, Pole and Exercise,” the focus is on physical practices that do not have a religious content *per se*, but were or are related to military training. The last section, “Exchanges with China and Tibet,” looks for points of connection with practices from neighbouring cultures, trying to unravel paths and directions of cultural interactions. The volume concludes with an “Afterword” written by Joseph Alter, whose knowledgeable eyes have been able to untangle and grasp multiple common threads that cross the chapters.

### **Haṭhayoga, A Brief Overview and an Introduction to Chapter 1**

Yoga as a form of *sādhana* (spiritual practice) textually appears in Upaniṣadic ascetic contexts as a method of attaining soteriological knowledge capable of leading the *ātman* towards union or identification with the Absolute, the *Brahman*, or a more personal God. In other cases, as in the *Pātañjalayogaśāstra*, the aim of yoga is to isolate the *puruṣa* (spiritual consciousness) from *prakṛti*, (materiality). The practices of yoga that developed were minimally physical and mostly meditative: a proper seated posture and controlled breathing were considered the essential prerequisites to the pursuit of the meditative goal.

In Tantric contexts, yoga thrived on practices that, instead of seeing the body as a secondary tool to be eventually abandoned, looked at it as an instrument for

transformation and alchemical purification to achieve not only soteriological goals but also immortality and powers. The body “visualised” in Tantric traditions became the “yogic body,” acquiring a complexity never seen before, becoming a receptacle for energies and deities.

It is in this context that *haṭhayoga* appears. The groundbreaking work of James Mallinson, Jason Birch and Mark Singleton has been fundamental in reconstructing the development of *haṭhayoga* as a yogic method in which physical practices predominate. This *haṭha* method is worthy of study because “[b]etween the 14th and 18th centuries *haṭhayoga* was gradually assimilated into several mainstream Indian religious traditions” and this versatility allowed it to be “the source of much of the yoga practised around the world today” (Mallinson 2020a).

The term *haṭhayoga* appears for the first time in a Buddhist context,<sup>4</sup> precisely in the 3rd-century CE *Bodhisattvabhūmi* (a Mahāyāna Yogācāra text), where it means “by the application of force” or “with effort.” The term is later found in 8th-century Tantric Buddhist works associated with the mastery of *bodhicitta*, i.e., semen, and thus with sexual rituals, although it is not described (see Mallinson 2020a: 6). Around 1200 CE, the *Yogimanoharā* mentions *haṭhayoga* as a method of breath-restraint, without mentioning semen. *Haṭhayoga* appears as “a method of last resort [...] when the usual methods have failed” to achieve *siddhis* (powers) (ibid.).<sup>5</sup>

One of the first texts to teach in detail some of the practices that were to be classified as *haṭhayoga* is also Buddhist. The *Amṛtasiddhi* (circa 11th century) is a text from a Vajrāyāna milieu that rejects sexual rituals and addresses its teachings to an ascetic, celibate audience, an orientation which “is maintained throughout the subsequent *haṭhayoga* corpus” (Mallinson 2020b). Here, for the first time, a connection between breath, mind and *bindu* (semen) is delineated, the control of which is achieved through practices involving bodily postures and breath control: *mahāmudrā*, *mahābandha* and *mahāvedha*.<sup>6</sup> These three techniques are an innovation of the *Amṛtasiddhi* and they are

---

<sup>4</sup> For comprehensive analyses of Buddhist sources on *haṭhayoga* see Birch 2011 and Mallinson 2020a.

<sup>5</sup> This idea is expressed in earlier Tantras including the *Guhyasamājantra* and *Kālacakrantra*. See Birch 2011.

<sup>6</sup> *Mahāmudrā* consists of pressing the perineum with the left heel, extending the right foot and holding it in place with the hands; raising the hips on a seat, resting the chin on the chest, while filling the abdomen with air and performing the breathing. *Mahābandha* teaches the perineum-lock and the throat-lock. *Mahāvedha* involves raising the buttocks and dropping them on the ground to make the breath rise up the central channel. See Mallinson and Szántó 2022.



taught in nearly all later *haṭhayoga* texts, sometimes under different names. The purpose of these techniques was to make the breath converge in the central channel, so that the mind “having taken hold of all the elements, is everywhere” (8.20). This would lead to knowledge, meditation, perfection and, ultimately, immortality (8.21). Therefore, in this yoga, the union of the breaths is a source of liberation (6.13), and from holding the *bindu*, preventing it from being burnt by fire, one gains immortality and supernatural powers (7.25).<sup>7</sup>

The *Amaraughaprabodha*,<sup>8</sup> a 12th-century Nāth text, has several verses in common with the *Amṛtasiddhi* and describes *haṭhayoga* as one of the yogas in a fourfold system, the others being *mantra*, *laya* and *rāja*. The *Vivekamārtaṇḍa* (circa 12th-13th centuries) does not mention *haṭhayoga* but teaches a yoga with six auxiliaries and contains “one of the earliest accounts of Hāṭhayogic *mudrās*, including the three *bandhas*, namely, *mūlabandha*, *uḍḍiyānabandha*, *jālandharabandha*, *mahāmudrā*, *khecarī*, and *viparīta-karaṇa*” (Birch 2020a).

From the 13th century, *aṣṭāṅgayoga*<sup>9</sup> was combined with *haṭhayoga* (Birch 2020b: 210). The 13th-century Vaiṣṇava *Dattātreya yogaśāstra* teaches the fourfold system of the *Amaraughaprabodha* but goes into much more detail about *haṭhayoga*. This method can be practised following the *aṣṭāṅgayoga* “known by Yājñavalkya and others” (likely Patañjali’s yoga) or by following the doctrine of “[a]depts such as Kapila,”<sup>10</sup> which is based on nine techniques: *mahāmudrā*, *mahābandha* and *mahāvedha*, *khecarī* and *vajrolī mudrās* (this latter consisting also of *amarolī* and *sahajolī*), *jālandhara*, *uḍḍiyāna* and *mūla bandhas*, and *viparītakaraṇī*.<sup>11</sup> These practices aim to manipulate vital energies, but mostly prevent the downward flow of *bindu*, allowing the practitioner to free himself from the world.

---

<sup>7</sup> See the critical edition of the *Amṛtasiddhi*, Mallinson and Szántó 2022.

<sup>8</sup> See Birch 2019.

<sup>9</sup> *Aṣṭāṅgayoga*, “the yoga with eight auxiliaries,” is first taught in the *Pātañjalayogaśāstra* and consists of the following: *yama* (abstinences), *niyama* (observances), *āsana* (postures), *prāṇāyāma* (breath control), *pratyāhāra* (senses withdrawal), *dhāraṇā* (concentration), *dhyāna* (meditation), *samādhi* (absorption).

<sup>10</sup> Bronkhorst makes an interesting connection between Kapila and non-Vedic asceticism. Kapila is best known for having created the Sāṃkhya philosophical system, but while in some texts (such as the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* or the *Mahābhārata*) he is described as a supreme seer (*paramarṣi*), others (like the *Bauddhāyana Dharma Sūtra*) describe Kapila as an *asura*, i.e., a demon, an enemy of the Vedic gods. This may indicate that he practised a form of religion different from the orthodox one (1998: 57–59).

<sup>11</sup> See Mallinson 2013.

It is with the *Haṭhapradīpikā* (circa 15th century) that we have the theoretical systematisation of *haṭhayoga* that is dominant to this day. Its author, Svātmārāma, presents a lineage of twenty-nine great *siddhas*, beginning with Ādinātha, followed later by Matsyendra and Gorakṣa, important masters of the Nāth *sampradāya*. It describes fifteen *āsanas* (seven of which are non-seated), but focuses mostly on *prāṇāyāmas* consisting of eight complex practices (*kumbhakas*) culminating in total breath retention (*kevala kumbhaka*) and ten *mudrās* (which also include the *bandhas*) whose main aim is to enhance the rising of *kuṇḍalinī* up the central channel of the body, in order to unite with Śiva in the head. To note, six acts of self-cleansing (*ṣaṭkarma*) are described for the first time here. These practices aim at purifying the body and healing physical imbalances. They operate on a body constituted of a system of *nāḍīs*, *cakras*, vitalised by energies such as *vāyus* and *kuṇḍalinī* that shall be controlled. By identifying *samādhi* as *rāja yoga* and *haṭha yoga* as the path leading to it, Svātmārāma succeeded in reconciling the two traditions into an independent soteriological system (see Birch 2020a: 455).

Between the 15th and 18th centuries, *haṭhayoga* techniques, theories, and systems of praxis proliferated and found their way into an increasing number of texts. While the early literature consisted of short texts with a few theoretical details and a simple “outline” of practices, later texts were more elaborate, both linguistically and in terms of content. Birch has extensively described and analysed the flourishing of *haṭhayoga* in his 2020a article. There he divides the texts produced between the 17th and 19th centuries into two main categories: “extended works” (such as the *Haṭharatnāvalī*, *Haṭhayogasamhitā*, *Haṭhabhyāsapaddhati*, etc. from the 17th and 18th centuries), and “compendia” that borrow from *haṭha* and *rājayoga* texts (such as Śivānandasarasvatī’s *Yogacintāmaṇi* and Sundaradeva’s *Haṭhasaṅketacandrikā*).

Birch notes that in the extended works the number of *āsanas* increases significantly as does the number of *ṣaṭkarmas*, thus suggesting a new focus on physical practices, documented “on an unprecedented scale” (ibid.: 460). New and original techniques also find their way into monographic works. Thus, while some works were the result “of scholarly efforts to synthesise and elaborate on material from earlier works,” others (such as the *Haṭhābhyāsapaddhati*)<sup>12</sup> manifested a more “praxis-oriented” attitude (ibid.: 461).

In Chapter 1, Jason Birch and Jacqueline Hargreaves continue this investigation and consider three distinct collections of complex *āsanas* (referred to as Collection A, B, C) composed in the 18th and 19th centuries and located in different geographical regions

---

<sup>12</sup> See also Birch and Singleton 2019 on the *Haṭhābhyāsapaddhati*.

of India. Examining them with material sources such as the wall paintings of the Mahāmandir and the Udaimandir of Jodhpur, they show that this corpus of premodern praxis manuals probably documents postures used by practitioners of the time, transcending sectarian (Jain, Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva) and linguistic divides (using Gujarati, Brajbhasha, and Hindi vernacular sources). According to Birch and Hargreaves, Collection A may have developed among Rāmānandī ascetics and circulated in other ascetic circles in northern India. The postures had various goals, from purification and healing the body to the raising of *kuṇḍalinī* or the induction of *samādhi*. Collection B may also have developed in an ascetic context deriving from a tradition of *tapasyā* or having absorbed some “tapasic” postures. Collection C stemmed from a *haṭhayoga* tradition that was prominent in the Mysore Palace in the 19th century and was likely influenced by other Indian traditions of physical culture.

The authors identify two of these collections as sources for several gurus who popularised yoga in the early 20th century—such as Swami Sivananda of Rishikesh, Buddha Bose and Bishnu Gosh of Calcutta, and T. Krishnamacharya of Mysore.

## Yogis, Performers and Dancers: Contextualising Postures in the Past

Yoga as a soteriological method probably developed in ascetic and religious contexts. As Tamara Sears claims (2013: 47):

In the past, yoga [...] was a highly exclusive ritual activity that could lead either toward liberation or to the acquisition of powerful magical abilities, otherwise known as *siddhis*. [...] Because knowledge of yoga gave the practitioner the potential to transcend the realm of human existence and enter a state akin to becoming divine, it was restricted to highly accomplished gurus and their most dedicated pupils.

Relying on Brahmanic sources,<sup>13</sup> we usually imagine ascetics dwelling in caves or huts, in remote areas or in the jungle, completely removed from society, developing their practices in solitude. Similarly, the image of the yogi is often that of an isolated individual withdrawing into meditation. This image, however, does not always correspond to today’s reality and probably did not in the past. While it is true that ascetics could decide to retire from society to follow certain practices and undergo

---

<sup>13</sup> See Olivelle 2011.

specific training,<sup>14</sup> this was not—and is not—always the case. Ascetics could lead a sedentary life in the *āśramas* or monasteries (*maṭhas*) of their religious groups, or wander from one pilgrimage site to another with a group of brethren for religious or pragmatic reasons.

Temples were often the destination of these peregrinations because, as several scholars (Michell 1988; Stein 1960) have shown, from the Gupta period (circa 4th-6th centuries CE) onwards, Hindu temples became the centre not only of religious but also of social life, fulfilling economic, artistic and intellectual functions in ancient and medieval India, and were architectural embodiments of divine and royal powers. Equipped with several pillared halls or pavilions (*maṇḍapa*) used for public rituals, religious dances and music, temples accommodated devotees and a wide range of professionals, especially during religious festivals. Among them, there is also evidence of the presence of several types of ascetics. Therefore, since ascetics shared the temple space with professionals from other fields of knowledge and performers of various physical disciplines, it is not impossible to imagine that they interacted with and adapted and adopted their practices. This supposition becomes immediately plausible when one considers the findings of the chapters in this section.

Seth Powell's chapter analyses a wide range of sculptures of yogis from various temple sites in the 15th- and 16th-century Deccan, arguing that their pervasive sculptural presence is a "testament to the physical presence of lived yogis" (p. 85). The author explains that they also demonstrate the inherent limitations of using textual sources as primary evidence for understanding and reconstructing the historical development of physical practices. Indeed, in many cases, sculptures of particular *āsanas* precede and anticipate textual sources, providing useful insight from grounded yoga traditions. Reading Powell's remarks on this subject, and considering the attitude of contemporary ascetics towards non-seated *āsanas*,<sup>15</sup> we can assume that postures were probably not deemed as important for soteriological goals as other practices described in textual sources or that, being very practical, they needed to be transmitted orally. But, it is also possible that they played different roles at that time: perhaps they were regarded as a

---

<sup>14</sup> For example, contemporary *sādhus* take *anuṣṭhān*, i.e. a vow during which they usually live in an isolated place where they follow a specific ascetic practice and focus on their *sādhana*, but once they have completed their *anuṣṭhān* they go back to their daily ascetic life in an institution (see Lamb 2006).

<sup>15</sup> See Bevilacqua 2018.

form of *tapasyā* (rather than *āsanas*) as *per* Strabo's description,<sup>16</sup> or as performative practices through which to attract the attention of devotees and patrons, especially royal patrons.

This leads to another important point emphasised by Powell, namely that the boundaries between yogic practices, dance and acrobatics are not immediately obvious, raising important interpretive and categorical challenges. Indeed, how can one distinguish yogic practices from other physical practices, e.g. a dance posture from an *āsana* or a practice of austerity (*tapasyā*) from an *āsana*? How, then, can one distinguish a *yogī* from a *tapasvī*, an acrobat, or a dancer? Observing the various identities carved in the sculptures, it is clear that different groups of performers, as well as different groups of ascetics, coexisted and shared the precinct of temples, especially during annual festivals, and shared a similar physical performative culture.

This dynamic is also evident when reading Saran Suebsantiwongse's chapter. He takes us to the Vijayanagara empire, during the celebration of *Navarātri*, focusing on Chapter 107 of the *Sāmrājyalakṣmīpīṭhikā* (circa 1501–1539 CE), a largely understudied text with a strong Tantric background. This chapter testifies to the presence of various ascetics at court,<sup>17</sup> but also describes the various amusements the king is supposed to attend on the night of *Mahānavamī*: dance performances, wrestling combats, acrobatic shows, magic and presumably yogic practices (*paṭalas* 101, 102) are some of the exhibitions on the list to entertain the king.<sup>18</sup> Suebsantiwongse tells us that in the *Sāmrājyalakṣmī-*

---

<sup>16</sup> Strabo describes the encounter of members of Alexander the Great's entourage with the gymnosophists in the 4th century BCE. There were: "[...] fifteen men standing in different postures, sitting or lying down naked, who continued in these positions until the evening and then returned to the city. The most difficult thing to endure was the heat of the sun, which was so powerful that no one else could endure without pain to walk on the ground at mid-day with bare feet" (Mallinson and Singleton 2017).

<sup>17</sup> During the period of the Vijayanagara empire, groups of *Vīraśaivas*, *Lakulīśas*, *Pāśupatas*, *Kaulas*, *Kāpālikas*, *Kālāmukhas*, i.e., Śaiva worshippers and mostly ascetics, all had their *maṭhas* (monasteries) in Vijayanagara.

<sup>18</sup> This use seems still present among contemporary ascetics during religious festivals. It is not uncommon, indeed, to see *sādhus'* camps during religious festivals with boards describing their specific physical skills or practices, among which are complex *āsanas*. Usually, the *āsanas* performed are the most spectacular that can capture the attention of pilgrims or curious people. Some ascetics admit that *āsanas* can be like a *nāṭak*, a theatrical act, and that they are for the public. Therefore, *āsanas* can be compared, according to some *sādhus*, to a *kalā*, a form of art to show a crowd, to give them *ānand* (delight). Sometimes they also build up a "temporary show"—for example by pulling a truck with a rope tied to their penis—to gather an audience (see Bevilacqua 2024). Similarly, Krishnamacarya used to organise *āsanas* exhibitions to impress and entertain the *rāja* of Mysore (see Singleton 2010: 192).

*pīṭhikā* it is not clear who the practitioners of some performances were, but visual sources may help us recognise them.

Powell's chapter can be useful for this purpose. His Figure 34, in fact, clearly shows an ascetic surrounded by fire, balancing on a T-shaped rod. Is this a representation of *agnistambhana*, which is present in the *Sāmrājyalakṣmīpīṭhikā*, hence a way to display "yogic" skills? A painting from Mysore (circa 19th century CE) can also contribute to this debate (Fig. 1). There, the Trimūrti (Viṣṇu, Śiva, Brahmā with their consorts) occupy the centre of the painting, framed by ascetics performing various practices and austerities. Are these ascetics simply an artistic motif or are they represented there to please and entertain the deities? Can we, therefore, suppose that in the past, some forms of *tapasyā*, or acrobatic postures were used to impress kings?

One should also ask whether the yogis mentioned in the *Sāmrājyalakṣmīpīṭhikā* are ascetics or householders, since still today there are householder castes of yogis connected with magic tricks, snakes, enchantment, etc.<sup>19</sup> So, are practices such as *agnistambhana* magic tricks or method for demonstrating yogic skills/*siddhis*?<sup>20</sup> Another question that we should ask is: were these ascetic practitioners expecting any spiritual reward from their practice?

That a performance can have a soteriological goal is a central theme of Elisa Ganser's chapter, which focuses on dance movements and practices encoded in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. Ganser pays particular attention to two dance elements in order to highlight the presence in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* of ideas of mental cultivation, ritual, and devotion: *karaṇas*, complex dance movements requiring great balance and flexibility, and *piṇḍibandhas*, "a set of movements of difficult interpretation" (p. 137), which are in the *pūrvaraṅga*, the preliminary rite that precedes the performance of a play. Considering temple sculptures dating back to the 11th–16th centuries, the author shows that these are "frozen" images of dance movements, because *karaṇas* function as a flow whereby the dancer moves from one point to another without holding the posture, which is why they should not be considered as *āsana*. The author also makes an important observation in stating that the overlap between dance and yoga-related concepts and practices was not present at that time.

---

<sup>19</sup> See Gold 1999.

<sup>20</sup> Goudriaan 1979 provides a detailed description of the magician's six acts, among which is immobilisation. On the use of magic tricks in Indian history, see Zubrzycki 2018.





**Figure 1:** Ascetics/Yogis and Trimūrti. Pigment on paper. South India, probably Mysore (circa 19th century). 29 x 34 cm “à vue.” © Alexis Renard and © Photograph: François Mallet.

As Ganser observes, dance too can have transcendental purposes, demonstrating the connection between physical practices, rituals and religion in South Asia. This connection is particularly evident in the case of the *piṇḍibandhas*, “that present ideological affinities with practices described in early religious sources, especially, but not exclusively, those of Śaiva affiliation” (p. 137). As Ganser argues, and this is very useful as far as the question of entertainment is concerned, “[t]he crucial thing here is that *piṇḍibandhas* are used to worship the deities, since they reproduce and represent something of the gods, and as such, they produce delight in them and are means of satisfying them. This function of dancing in the *pūrvaraṅga* combines aspects of both the ritual offering and *imitatio dei* seen in other religious sources” (p. 165). These performances, hence, produce a religious reward not in the audience, but in the performer herself/himself. To some extent, it is likely that the *Nāṭyaśāstra*<sup>21</sup> reflects

<sup>21</sup> During the 2019 workshop, Thomas Kintaert presented a paper on “The *Nāṭyaśāstra* as a primary source for the historical study of (South) Asian martial arts,” demonstrating that the *Nāṭyaśāstra* contains data on combative physical training and warfare, since the theatrical art of imitation or recreation includes human fights and combats. Accordingly, the treatise provides information on the theatrical representation (*abhinaya*) of combative actions and their results. This information is supplemented by a series of passages that deepen the knowledge of the fight and its protagonists. In addition to general preparatory instructions, including dietary rules, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* provides descriptions of individual body movements,



shared beliefs about embodied practice, in which especially bodily and musical performances are conceived as embodied spirituality. In the case of dance, the body can become a useful tool through which to create a connection with the deity and reach Śiva's abode.

It thus seems that physical practices could overcome their physicality and be experienced as a form of *sādhana* for those practitioners who performed them for religious goals. Given their possible religious connotations, it was probably not inconvenient for ascetics to adopt some of the dancers' practices. Dance was used by ascetic groups such as the Pāśupatas,<sup>22</sup> although their dance was not codified and was not a ritual offering as in the case of dancers. Moreover, the dancers' dance was not ecstatic: they were in full control of their bodies, and their bodies, thanks to the practice of the *piṇḍibandhas*, were closely related to attributes of deities. A final point that is important to emphasise here is the fact that the *Nāṭyaśāstra* also aims to rehabilitate and give prestige to dancers and actors despite their being of low caste origin, giving them the opportunity to achieve *mokṣa* through performance. The social role of textual sources in constructing acceptance through a religious framework is also found in relation to wrestlers, who represent an important category in the next section.

## Martial Arts, Pole and Exercise

Fighting ascetics are represented in the Rajputana chronicles, described as naked ascetics devoted to the god Bhairava (Farquhar 1925: 436–437). We can assume that ascetics belonging to heterodox Śaiva groups or lineages began to be hired as soldiers and later to travel in bands, influencing other religious orders to organise their own warrior groups. These ascetics were, in general, labelled as *yogīs* (see Pinch 2006: 60). The landscape of warrior ascetics developed further due to the emergence of more “actors” and political instability, so that from the 16th century onwards, ascetic soldiers were employed as part of the infantry and cavalry by various rulers, accumulating power and wealth. Different *sampradāyas*, therefore, had their own “army,” organised in sections called *akhārās*, a word which refers to the wrestling ground, indicating the physical training that these ascetic warriors probably followed.

---

sequences of movement and postures that are explicitly recommended in (the representation of) combat (*yuddha* and *niyuddha*) and martial arts training (*vyāyāma*).

<sup>22</sup> Pāśupatas were the earliest of sectarian Śaiva groups and are now extinct. Direct references to Pāśupatas began to appear only in the 4th century CE, in texts and in inscriptions. See Acharya 2018.

The label *yogī* began to be used as an adjective to define all those ascetics characterised by nakedness, matted hair and ashes to cover the body, characteristics of the “naked,” *nāgā* warrior ascetics who were also identified by labels such as *gosāins* or *sannyāsīs* (to label the Śaiva warriors), *bairāgīs/vairāgīs* (for Vaiṣṇava warriors), but also *fakīr* (for Sufi warriors).<sup>23</sup> Given the participation of ascetic groups in military campaigns, including those of Muslim emperors and sovereigns, we wondered whether the proliferation of *āsanas* could be related to the military practices of *sādhus* belonging to *akhārās* under the influence of professional fighters or of “foreign” military techniques.

The issue of “foreign” military techniques has been considered in this volume by Philippe Rochard and Oliver Bast who, through a detailed historical reconstruction, responded negatively to our question, clarifying that the knowledge brought from Persia was more about warfare, elephants, gun power, etc. than physical training. Furthermore, they emphasised that Sufis were actually those who were influenced by yogic techniques, such as breathing exercises and meditation. However, the two authors present a very important comparison between the legitimisation strategies implemented by Turco-Persian wrestlers from the *zurkhāneh* (lit. “house of strength”) and the Indian *jyeṣṭhī-malla* wrestlers from Gujarat, to enhance their social and religious recognition. The chapter develops its argument in three distinct parts. In the first, it presents an analytical comparison between the physical exercises of the Muslim Turco-Persian *zurkhāneh* and those practised in Indian *akhārās* by Gujarati *jyeṣṭhī-mallas*. In the second part, it discusses how the bodily exercises and wrestling traditions that flourished in the Persian/Central Asian context were socially legitimised through associations with the figure of the saint Puryā-ye Vali and, later, through his absorption in the Sufi Naqshbandiya order. The third part demonstrates the strikingly similar legitimisation processes present in the 16th-century *Mallapurāṇa*, a textual source that supports Indian wrestlers’ demand for Brahmanic status.

The legitimisation of a physical practice through a textual source was not new in the Indian context, as Ganser’s chapter has demonstrated: just as low-caste actors and dancers saw their status enhanced through the association of their practices with religious achievements, so the wrestlers adopted a similar path through the *Mallapurāṇa*. Their attempt was successful, according to Rochard and Bast, thanks to the administrative practices created by Muslim rulers. The new Muslim ruling elites established the socio-legal context for specific legitimisation processes that allowed classes of wrestlers to gain religious support for social ascendancy.

---

<sup>23</sup> On warrior ascetics see the work of Farquhar 1925, Orr 1940, Cohn 1964, Lorenzen 1978, Bouillier 1993, Clark 2006, Pinch 2006 and Horstmann forthcoming.

The social and religious recognition that wrestlers—whether Muslim or “Hindu”—gained from the 16th century onwards may have contributed to: a) certain practices being adopted in religious circles; or b) certain physical exercises (not related to wrestling) that had long existed but had not been considered appropriate, finding a place in *hathayoga* textual sources and thereby being indirectly legitimised. That wrestling practices may have entered the ascetic world and then been legitimised in textual sources would not be impossible, since there are several subsections of the ascetic world in which *sādhus* were considered *pahlavān*, wrestlers. Even today, Rāmānandī *nāgā sādhus* are called *pahlavān* and engage in wrestling practices in their *āśramas*,<sup>24</sup> just as there are Nāth *sādhus* who claim to have been trained in both *āsanas* and *kuṣṭī* until full initiation.<sup>25</sup> Considering the presence of warrior sections in ascetic society, we can imagine that these ascetics may have been influenced by professional wrestlers.

The Indian subcontinent has, indeed, a rich tradition of wrestling and fighting, and some practices, such as *mallkhāmb* (“wrestling pole”), are strictly “Indian.” The latter, which seems to have been used as preliminary training for wrestlers, is the subject of Patrick McCartney’s chapter. Starting with more contemporary developments (“Pole Yoga”), through rich textual and visual material McCartney attempts to reconstruct the history—or rather the prehistory—of the practice and the social context from which it probably originated. Using the *Mallapurāṇa* and the *Mānasollāsa* as primary sources, McCartney conducts a dual investigation of both *mallkhāmb* and wrestling, highlighting important links between these two practices. The chapter is divided into three main sections. In the first section, he focuses on the birth of modern *mallkhāmb*, analysing the main hagiographic narratives of the alleged founder of *mallkhāmb*, Deodhar, and the role of *mallkhāmb* in the Maratha court during the late 18th century. In the second section, the author focuses on the wrestling practices mentioned in the *Mānasollāsa*, introduces the antecedents of pole dancing and the professional troupes of “street performers” that existed a millennium before the *Mānasollāsa*, and provides a socio-historical perspective on the *Mallapurāṇa*’s wrestlers. According to McCartney, in order to correctly understand the link between *mallkhāmb*, wrestling and yoga, it is crucial to keep in mind the influences and ties that nomadic dancer-acrobat-wrestlers had, not

---

<sup>24</sup> It would perhaps be productive to conduct ethnographic research on the specific physical training of *nāgā sādhus* in places traditionally renowned for their ascetic *pahlavān*, such as Hanumān Gaṛhī, the fort of the Rāmānandī *nāgās* in Ayodhya (Uttar Pradesh).

<sup>25</sup> Nāth *sādhus* go through two initiations. During the second, they have earrings inserted in holes made in the thick, cartilaginous part of the ears. They must not remove or break the earrings, otherwise they risk being expelled from the order.

only around but also within “the royal courts where such entanglements of state-sponsored athletes and entertainers occurred” (p. 235).

In the third and final section, McCartney conducts a philological evaluation by analysing the meaning of words such as *āsana*, *sthāna*, and *śrama* (exercise) in the *Mallapurāṇa*, thus creating a comparison between these words used in wrestling and haṭhayogic contexts. For example, he emphasises that in the *Mallapurāṇa* *āsanas* are an integral practice for defeating a wrestler’s opponent: they are a modulation of the body before and during contact with the opponent in the period of “yoga.” In this case, yoga is the period through which *jita-śrama* (victorious effort) is achieved.

In his reconstruction of the history of *mallkhāmb*, McCartney shows that Deodhar could not have been the inventor of the practice, although he became the founding figure in the revival process of this traditional bodily practice. This revival was within a trend that persisted throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, in which special attention was given to the cultivation of the body, and several areas of the subcontinent—such as Maharashtra and West Bengal—were particularly influenced by this new trend.

After the 18th century, Calcutta was not only a leading centre for intellectual, religious and social reformist movements, but also an important place for the revival of physical culture thanks to the opening in 1866 of the National Gymnasium, the first facility of its kind in India. Jerome Armstrong’s chapter focuses on this geographical area and this renewed attention to bodily practices, and specifically on the practice of *vyāyāma* (“exercise”) as an important source for modern yoga. This chapter, therefore, could be seen as complementary to that by Birch and Hargreaves: to the two premodern collections of *āsanas* that were likely sources for modern postural yoga, Armstrong adds an indigenous tradition of athletic and gymnastic exercises.

To consolidate his theory (already suggested by Sjoman 1999), Armstrong examines the contents of four exercise texts: *Gymnastics Part One* (1874); *Gymnastics Part Two*, *Vyāyāma Śikṣak* (1875); *Vyāyāma Dīpikā* (1896); and *Vyāyāma Śikṣak* (1904). He focuses on the historical presence of *vyāyāma* traditions in the Indian classical and medieval periods, exploring the cross-currents of *vyāyāma* in *haṭhayoga* and modern yoga. The author then highlights the possible space that *vyāyāma* occupied in South Asian history: that of an important physical tool for bodily health. *Vyāyāma* were exercises recommended to householders for therapy and, with this meaning, the word is first mentioned in *Ayurveda* (1st millennium CE). These exercises are then mentioned in Indian wrestling and martial arts traditions, probably as a preparatory practice. Armstrong points out, however, that while the *Ayurvedic* texts *Suśrutasaṃhitā* and *Carakasamhitā*, and the

*Mallapurāṇa* lack adequate descriptions to know whether they share the same exercises, the revivalist 19th-century exercise tradition produced several works on indigenous exercise under the title of *vyāyāma*. According to Armstrong, “Understanding *vyāyāma* historically is vital to understanding a significant component of how dynamic exercise systems [...] [were] sourced, developed, and popularised throughout India and after that, the world” (p. 274). Among these systems, the author pay attention to the role of *vyāyāma* exercises such as *daṇḍ*s (for leg training), and *baiṭhaks* (leg exercises to warm-up) in providing a basis for the development of the *sūryanamaskār* which was subsequently introduced by the Rāja of Aundh, Bhawanrao Pant Pratinidhi.

Was the *sūryanamaskār* a codification of *daṇḍ*s and *baiṭhaks*, and thus, in general, a series of *vyāyāmas*? Or should we look to more ancient roots? Stuart Sarbacker expands the topic and takes us back to its theoretical ancestor, the practice of paying homage to the god Sūrya. At the heart of Sarbacker’s chapter is the question whether *sūryanamaskār* is an expression of prostration (i.e. religious devotion) or an expression of bodily potentiation—in short, a form of religious practice or physical culture. The author explores three issues related to *sūryanamaskār*. Firstly, he considers the genealogical and morphological relationships between the exercise of *sūryanamaskār* and Hindu traditions of ritual sun worship. Through a comprehensive textual analysis, the author reconstructs the thread that links Sūrya worship, devotion and asceticism through the *brāhmaṇa*-based religious liturgies found in *vaidika*, *paurāṇika*, and *tāntrika* literature. He emphasises the role of Sūrya as a deity associated with physical health, spiritual purification and by extension with martial arts and yoga. Secondly, he analyses Mujumdar’s thesis presented in the *Encyclopedia of Indian Physical Culture* (1950) that Samarth Rāmdās taught *sūryanamaskār* to the Maharashtrian hero Shivaji (Śivājī), and that the *Dāsboḍh* (17th century CE) is his principal work. The text describes *namaskār* as an easy but complete practice that requires no external accessories, a description that anticipates the framing of *sūryanamaskār* by the 20th-century physical culturist Bhawanrao Pant, who presented it as a complete system of mind-body fitness. This section also introduces Swami Kuvalayananda, who claimed that in Maharashtra the practice of “*namaskāras*” had been in vogue for several centuries as part of the sun-worship of upper class society. We find Kuvalayananda also in the third section, where Sarbacker, reflecting on the “status of the *sūryanamaskār* as a mode of religious prostration or a means to physical potency” (p. 317) demonstrates the problematic nature of this dichotomy, as the two are clearly not mutually exclusive. While some argue for the recognition of the *sūryanamaskār* as a mode of Sun-worship, and thus as an inherently religious practice (as does Kuvalayananda), others emphasise its role as a gymnastic practice with potentially religious features (as does Sri Yogendra).

Juggling past and present, Sarbacker demonstrates that the term “*sūryanamaskār*” has historically been ascribed to different practices and contexts—ritual, devotional, *tapas*, physical—transforming over time because of changing cultural and semantic contexts. Modern *sūryanamaskār* is thus situated in this historical development and can be understood as deeply rooted in Hindu ritualism as well as in Indian nationalism and the emergence of a physical culture in late 19th- and early 20th-century Europe and India.

Another practice that has benefited from the revival atmosphere of the 19th and 20th centuries is *kaḷarippayarru* (also written as *kaḷarippayarr*) a South Indian martial art that is today present in different styles. Since its revival, *kaḷarippayarru* has attracted interest among martial artists, yoga practitioners, and performance artists, particularly dancers and actors, both abroad and locally. In this volume, *kaḷarippayarru* is scrutinised in two chapters, by Laura Silvestri and Lucy Constantini respectively, who use the little historical evidence available to frame their predominantly ethnographic researches. Both give us important insights into the pedagogical part of the practice, one focusing on the role of oral transmission and the other on the production of textual sources. Both question the role of the possible influence of yoga in the practice, especially in the present. Their pedagogical insights are extremely important because there are similar modes of learning among contemporary ascetics and dancers alike. We could therefore imagine the presence of a common pedagogical attitude for those physical practices/traditions in which the body is used as a tool to achieve different goals, both “secular” and “spiritual.”

Silvestri historically frames *kaḷarippayarru* by showing that in the 16th-17th centuries *kaḷaris* were centres of education, warrior training, and ritual activities, but they almost disappeared due to the arrival of European training systems. Their subsequent revival led to new interpretations, such as that by Chirakkal T. Sreedharan Nair (1909–1984), who did not support long apprenticeships, judging that a person in good physical condition would be capable of mastering the fundamentals of the discipline within a few months. He opened the practice to foreigners. Silvestri’s own master adhered to Sreedharan Nair’s approach. He was a Muslim from Northern Kerala and former wrestler, but when he discovered *kaḷarippayarru* in his twenties, he started looking for masters and eventually founded his *kaḷari*. Silvestri discusses the technical aspects underlying the principles of *kaḷarippayarru* and their possible relationship with yoga, considering that the latter is indeed one of the three main strands, together with Siddha medicine and Ayurveda, mentioned by her *kaḷari* master. Silvestri first addresses the changes that her master initially made to his repertoire of exercises in order to build a connection between *kaḷarippayarru* and yoga, made following the suggestion of some foreign disciples (which he later renounces). In the second part, the author



focuses more generally on the principles behind *kaḷarippayarru*, in particular the synergy between wind (vital breath) and fire (heat): in essence, how the rooting of the wind and the channelling of fire lead to obtaining strength, suspension of thoughts and effortless concentration.

As already mentioned, Silvestri's chapter is useful in highlighting the practitioner's pedagogic path. This path is similar to that of ascetics practising physical yoga, insofar as practitioners learn different techniques from different specialised masters, and their own master may suggest that they visit other teachers to develop their practice, stressing a non-exclusive-approach in which exercises are mastered one after the other. Another important point that the author stresses is the role played by verbal commands, *vāyttāris*, in the students' learning process. Silvestri portrays her master's teachings as not only a method of physical education, but also as a set of psycho-physical practices to achieve suppleness and strength, in which the body informs attitudes and behaviours.

Constantini's chapter expands some of the issues presented by Silvestri. She draws on her fieldwork at C. V. N. Kalari Sangham in Thiruvananthapuram, the *kaḷari* of G. Sathyanarayanan Nair. Constantini, too, examines the importance of tradition and transmission, focusing on the relationship between textual instructions and practice. Manuscripts do indeed give authority to the practice, despite their being re-written and updated by each generation in order to keep pace with the practice, thus making the *gurukkal*, the "lineage-holder," i.e. G. Sathyanarayanan Nair, the guardian of both the written and oral/practical transmission. The author presents the "*kaḷari*'s body" as being based on a system of *tattvas*, *ādhāras*, *nāḍis*, etc., demonstrating its strong link with the yogic body. Like yogis, practitioners of *kaḷarippayarru* believe the gross body activates and affects the subtler body with which it is fundamentally interconnected. This knowledge of the body is also inferred from the medical knowledge the *gurukkal* has (*kaḷaricikitsā*), which is considered a branch of Ayurveda with links to Siddha medicine, and which he uses to treat his disciples as well as general patients.

Constantini then presents those techniques that can be related to *yogāsana*. Specifically, she examines how *vaṭiv* (posture) relates to the inner *kaḷari* body and how the *cuvāṭ* (the action of the feet) initiates the circulation of *vāyu*, a subtle inner wind that gives virtuosity in *kaḷarippayarru*. She points out how, from the viewpoint of *kaḷarippayarru*, *yogāsana* is stationary and related to activities occurring in the inner body while *kaḷarippayarru* is vigorously physical. However, the *kaḷari*, the author explains, "is also designed to nurture positive mental attributes of humility, devotion and focus in the practitioner" (p. 354). The *kaḷari* she describes is essentially a temple



with installed deities, wherein the *gurukkaḷ* follows the Tantric Śiva-Śakti rituals. While the masters in both of the *kaḷarippayaṛṛu* chapters show the ethical and behavioural impact that the practice has on the practitioners (which in some respects recalls the role of *yama* and *niyama* in the yoga practice), Sathyan *gurukkaḷ*'s more ritualistic approach towards the *kaḷari* space shows the religious differences between the two. This is also understandable in the approach and the presence of yoga inside *kaḷarippayaṛṛu* practice itself. Constantini stresses how Sathyan *gurukkaḷ* describes *kaḷarippayaṛṛu* as *madhyama*, a middling path, whereas yoga is *uttama*, a higher path of practice, thus considering yoga as a *sādhana* with soteriological goals.

The role of the *gurukkaḷ* also frames *kaḷarippayaṛṛu* socially. As Constantini says, *kaḷaris* function within communities by intertwining martial and medical systems, which makes *kaḷarippayaṛṛu* a suitable practice for householders. It therefore allows practitioners to continue to fulfil their roles within society much the same as *vyāyāma* in Armstrong's chapter.

The history of these revivals bears several similarities to the revival of *āsana* practice by Krishnamacharya who, thanks to the patronage offered by the Mysore court, was able to synthesise modern physical techniques and indigenous traditions. Krishnamacharya could look not only to the tradition of *āsanas* but also to that of *vyāyāmas* (see Birch and Singleton 2019: 47–48, 57–59). As the work of Singleton (2010) has amply demonstrated, influences also came from other directions, especially Western ones. Indian cultures, indeed, have always been very syncretic and ready to adopt and adapt influences other than those of the mainstream. Therefore, considering the development of physical practices and especially *haṭhayogic* practices, which according to Mallinson appeared around a millenium ago in the South Asian landscape, why not look to neighbouring countries as a source of influence?

## Searching for Evidence in China and Tibet

What if *haṭhayoga* practices had an origin that was neither Indian Buddhist nor Śaiva? What if they did not originate in indigenous South Asian traditions but were the result of cultural exchanges with neighbouring areas? And what if, like the goods transferred along the Silk Roads and sea routes, embodied knowledge and culture were transferred too? These are the questions that inform the last section of this volume, which sets out to compare the practices of South Asia *haṭhayoga* with similar ones found in China and Tibet. As Needham (1983: 282–283) argues, between the 4th and 14th centuries CE there was a continuous exchange between China and India, with China contributing a great deal in the areas of alchemy and physiology. Despite being a promising area for further

investigation, Needham's hypothesis has not been fully followed up, and vital questions remain, particularly regarding the exchange of disciplines such as *haṭhayoga*.

Leaving aside recent developments of *qigong* (the so-called "Chinese Yoga"), Dominic Steavu inquiries whether, historically, *daoyin* ("guiding and stretching") was in any way related to Indian disciplines of postural or *āsana*-based self-cultivation, and whether *neidan* ("inner alchemy") may have influenced *haṭhayoga* practices. The chapter is divided into four sections. Initially, the author contextualises *daoyin*: *daoyin* is witnessed in China from the 2nd century BCE and aims at health and longevity. The practices associated with it are: 1) guiding and stretching; 2) circulation of the vital breath; 3) dietetics, which mostly consisted of avoiding cooked, refined or processed foods; 4) sexual practices, referred to as "bedchamber arts" and 5) consumption of medicinal substances, classified under the rubric of "nourishing life" (*yangsheng*), also dating from around 200 BCE.

In the second and third sections, Steavu focuses on two Chinese sources from the 6th or 7th century—*Daolin's Treatise on Maintaining Life and Essential Emergency Prescriptions Worth a Thousand Gold [Pieces]*—and their sets of eighteen postures labelled "Indian massage method" or "Brahmanic callisthenics." These postures bear a striking resemblance to Indian body disciplines which, however, are only described in South Asia in early modern sources from the 18th and 19th centuries. Some questions therefore arise: were these foreign practices "naturalised" and renegotiated as indigenous therapies, or were they Chinese practices packaged as foreign in order to be more fashionable?

The fourth section presents practices revolving around Daoist and yogic self-cultivation from an "alchemical" perspective. Steavu shows that in China, alchemy emerged and developed as a Daoist pursuit with the goal of immortality. Alchemical practices are attested as early as the 1st century BCE to the 1st century CE as part of *yangsheng*, but around the 10th century CE they were included in *neidan*, "inner alchemy." This tradition borrowed its vocabulary from external alchemy, Buddhism, Daoist visualisation and Confucianism, thus applying alchemical concepts to the subtle body, and combining them into an esoteric system of contemplations with the ultimate aim of transmuting the body.

The similarities between *neidan* and *haṭhayoga* are therefore remarkable. Did alchemical theories and alchemy in general come from China, undergoing reinterpretation in South Asian religious contexts? Dolly Yang's chapter does not completely answer this question, but adds further information and makes a comparison between the ideas

present in *daoyin*, *yangsheng* and *neidan* traditions, the *Amṛtasiddhi* (11th century CE), and a few *haṭhayoga* practices. After a section on the state of the art and a reconstruction of the historical development of *daoyin*, Yang focuses on the main features of *neidan* developed around the 6th–7th centuries CE. In general, *neidan* and *haṭhayoga* have much in common: bodily inversion, breath control, specific non-sexual practices and the use of an alchemical language. Of particular importance is the practice of “returning the semen/essence to replenish the brain,” originally a sexual technique to preserve semen, which in *neidan* becomes the basis of the process of circulating one’s essence. Retaining semen and reversing its flow were fundamental practices in the traditions of sexual cultivation in China, dating back to the 5th century BCE. Instead of referring to sexual fluid, however, in *neidan* it becomes a form of vital breath (*qi*), which must be refined by repeatedly moving it up the spine and then down the front of the body. Sexual practices were transformed into an individual meditation technique around the 4th and 5th centuries CE.

These ideas bear strong similarity to those found in the *Amṛtasiddhi*, a text written for celibate Buddhists who had rejected Tantric sexual rituals, but which appears centuries after *neidan* had become well established in China. The comparison with the *Amṛtasiddhi* also concerns methods of preserving *bindu* or *amṛta*, identified as “semen,” in order to achieve *jīvanmukti* (“liberation while living”). Yang goes on to analyse several *haṭhayoga* practices that resemble those found in earlier Chinese sources, such as *viparītakaraṇī* (“inverter”), *kumbhaka* (“breath retention”), *mūlabandha* (“root lock”), *khecarīmudrā* (“tongue seal”), as well as two practices described in the *Amṛtasiddhi* as “useless,” *śīlām carvati* (“chewing stone”) and *khaṃ pibati* (“drinking air”). As Yang argues, “the ‘family resemblance’ between *haṭhayoga* and *yangsheng* practices, of which *daoyin* was an important part, begins to come into focus when we start searching for the origins of the *haṭhayoga* traditions.” Therefore a more thorough investigation should be carried out on Chinese textual sources from the 3rd century BCE onwards, in order to seriously take into consideration China as a source of influence for *haṭhayoga* practices.

It seems that, as Samuel (2008: 279) claimed fifteen years ago, similar physical practices manifested as *daoyin* in the Chinese context, as *haṭhayoga* in the Śaiva context, and as *’khrul ’khor* (or “Trulchor”) in the context of the Tibetan Vajrayāna (2008: 279). Ian Baker’s chapter deals with Trulchor, the “Magical Wheel” consisting of physical methods and techniques that manipulate channels, winds, and subtle essences, which are used in various religious practices. The author structures his chapter using the Buddha’s metaphor of the wheel to indicate the different physical methods and teachings, including the Trulchor, which originated in Tibet and are helpful in achieving liberating awareness. Starting from the exercises of the 11th-century Bön

*Mother Tantra* for balancing the five elements of the body and their associated qualities in support of meditative realisation, the author demonstrates that in these textual sources and in Vajrayāna Buddhism, embodied practices are creative dimensions of energy and delight, serving both worldly and otherworldly ends.

Baker then introduces the “Wheel of Time” through an analysis of the *Kālacakra Tantra* showing it as a forerunner to some concepts found in the *Amṛtasiddhi*, described in the section called the “Wheel of Nectar.” He also demonstrates that some of the *Kālacakra*’s physical, “forceful” exercises became the foundation of the Six Yogas of Naropā which activate the “Wheel of Fire.” In the “Wheel of Fire” (Tummo), Trulthor practices are related to the arousal of the “blazing goddess” of Tummo who spreads her heat throughout the body.<sup>26</sup> Providing comprehensive descriptions, ranging from textual sources to explanations and photographs of contemporary practitioners, the author brings Trulthor’s practices to life in their performance and results.

Trulthor imagery and practices were also presented in Tibetan texts and oral sources as preparation for partnered sexual yoga,<sup>27</sup> aiming at the experience of the Great Bliss, i.e. enlightenment. This yoga is described in the sections called “The Wheel of Bliss”

---

<sup>26</sup> During the 2019 workshop, Naomi Worth presented a paper entitled “Vajra Body: Tibetan Tantric Yoga near Mysore,” on the Tsalung Tummo practice taught at Namdroling (Mysore) by the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism during the annual, month-long Tibetan Yoga retreats for monks, nuns, and lay people. The practices, she explained, were based on subtle body theory, particularly concerning channels, winds, and *bindu*. They combine challenging *āsanas* (*’khrul ’khor*), *prāṇāyāma*, visualisations of Tantric deities and one’s own subtle body. The author analyzed five *āsana* sequences presented in textual sources; then what the lamas add in the oral teachings; and finally, ethnographic data collected during a year of fieldwork at Namdroling.

<sup>27</sup> Sexual yoga involving Trulthor is extensively described in a 19th-century Tibetan *kāmasāstra*. The relationship between *haṭhayoga* and *kāma* literature is indeed another fascinating topic which deserves proper investigation. During the 2019 workshop, Shubham Arora presented a paper on “The chronology of ‘position’ in *kāmasāstra*.” This presentation offered a parallel reading of textual sources such as the *Kāmasūtra*, the *Nāgarasarasvasam* and the *Kāmaratna*, focusing on the presence of *āsanas*, *vyāyāma*, *nāḍī*, and *bandha*, etc. Ranging from the earliest extant list, i.e. the twenty-five body positions of the 4th century CE *Kāmasūtra*, to the eighty-four positions (called *caurāsī āsanas*) of a 16th-century CE vernacular *Kokaśāstra*, Arora introduced the socio-cultural shift in the treatment of sex postures that embellished worldly pleasure (*bhog*) with elements of asceticism (*jog*), Tantrism and religion. Arora’s paper was fascinating in several respects: it showed how similar attitudes were shared in completely different contexts; how the same labels were used and reinterpreted; and how sexual practice could be understood as part of a spiritual *sādhana*. Another interesting analogy to point out is the exponential development in the number of sexual positions over the centuries, which is reminiscent of the increasing number of *āsanas* in *haṭhayoga* texts. As Arora demonstrates, the link between yoga practice and sex did not go unnoticed, as the *Nāgarasarasvasam* itself makes a comparison between the *Vasiṣṭhasaṃhitā* (before 1300 CE) and the *Kamasāstra*.

and “The Wheel of Light,” which refer to the practices of Karmamudrā and Dzogchen (Great Perfection) respectively. The last wheel that Baker describes is Yantra Yoga, a tradition of Trulkhör introduced in the 1970s to the Western world by Chögyal Namkhai Norbu, which has, nevertheless, many movements that resemble those of modern postural yoga.

Trulkhör and *haṭhayoga*, therefore, appear in very similar contexts: therapeutic, soteriological and sexual. Hence, this chapter makes a good ending to this section demonstrating, through the case study of Trulkhör, how yoga physical practices continue to evolve adapting to ideas of self-transformation combined with ever-changing physical methods.

## Afterward and Conclusion

The volume concludes with Joseph Alter’s contribution, a dense and rich “Afterword,” which following numerous threads, ties the chapters together by focusing on the meaning assigned to physical practices and the body in various forms of self-development and self-discipline. Indeed, using an analytical perspective based on semiotic theory, Alter examines, on the one hand, the problem of “embodied meaning” and the contingency of meaning, proposing that knowledge itself can be construed as a social construct that provides the framework “for understanding the intellectual significance of both transcendental consciousness and physical fitness” (p. 492). On the other hand, he examines the methodological question of how to compare the various forms of physical practice. By relating these two aspects, he highlights the problems of interpretation that appear when focusing on the generalised symbolic meaning of embodied practices. Another problem he highlights is that of “fetishisation,” the creation of and belief in sacralised things. Alter points out the possibility that, although in different ways, physical practices (and physical yoga must be considered among them) could become popular because of “the fetishisation of the body in relation to the persistence of an ideal” (p. 509), an ideal that can be the isolated yogi, the divine dancer, the saintly wrestler and so on. In the end, Alter explains, an embodied practice “is oriented towards a transformation of consciousness that is intended to altogether transcend signification” (p. 506).

We shall add here some brief reflections on the volume as a whole and some directions for further research. The possibilities for further investigation into the historical relationships between the body disciplines of South Asia (and further afield) are enormous. Among the many proposals that we received for the 2019 SOAS workshop out of which this volume grew, we chose those that we thought to be the most

promising in terms of our search for commonalities between yoga and other body disciplines in and around the Indian subcontinent. But they by no means exhaust the possibilities of inquiry, and significant work remains to be done, both in terms of deepening the investigations of the problems and themes covered in this volume and seeking out other arenas in which bodily disciplines share common ground with yoga.

A striking cross-cultural and cross-linguistic example of this may be the so-called “Brahmanic” postures in Chinese sources (Steavu). Such slippage is also apparent in the categorisation of techniques, such as *mudrā*, *karaṇa*, *āsana* and so on, that may have a very specific meaning in the context of yoga, but another distinct meaning in allied physical disciplines (for example, *mudrās* or *karaṇas* within *haṭhayoga* vs. dance). Such fluidity is also present in the way particular embodied practices examined in this volume often have a clear performative aspect. Indian dance, *mallkhāmb*, wrestling displays, and the performance of yogic feats share not only the purpose of producing a reaction in the audience: they also share many physical postures and movements that are similar or identical in form. This raises vital questions about the boundaries of yogic practice: if an *āsana* is used performatively, to impress an audience or to make money, does it cease to be yoga and become something more like theatre or dance? But what if that same posture is used as a display for recruitment purposes by yoga lineages (such as can sometimes be seen outside the ascetic camps at contemporary Kumbh Melās)? Or what if the postures on display are not intended to be strictly yogic in purpose or appearance, but nevertheless provide a soteriological outcome for the practitioners themselves (as in the case of certain forms of dance)? The borders between the performative and soteriological contexts are porous and blurred, as they are between embodied practices that aim at liberation *from* the body (such as is common in ascetic yoga settings) and those whose purpose is physical fitness, therapy or embodied immortality.

This volume demonstrates, at the very least, the ease with which certain body practices can be transferred from one context into another—or, indeed, one region to another—and assimilated as if they had always been there. If we think of Indian yoga as a more or less unitary tradition that has developed in isolation from other bodily disciplines (like martial arts, dance, or “gymnastics” broadly construed) and from other geographical regions or modern states (like China, Tibet or Iran) then we risk missing key features of its historical development and transformation. Similarly, if we take Indian yogic lineages or religious belonging to have been unique and exclusive throughout their history (as indeed lineages often present themselves) then we are less likely to see the intersecting lines of influence and development between, for example, Iranian Sufism, Chinese Daoism, Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism, and Indian Yoga/Haṭhayoga. In this



respect, cross-cultural, cross-disciplinary historical studies of yoga such as we have undertaken in this volume can be expected to bring to light more historical fluidity and mutability, both in practice and theory, than we might otherwise expect as scholars of a particular discipline (like yoga) and a particular geographical area (like South Asia).

## References

- Acharya, D. 2018. "Pāśupatas." In *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism Online*, edited by Knut J. Jacobsen. Leiden: Brill. Retrieved from: [https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/brill-s-encyclopedia-of-hinduism/pasupatas-COM\\_9000000056](https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/brill-s-encyclopedia-of-hinduism/pasupatas-COM_9000000056). Accessed on: 22 January 2023.
- Bevilacqua, D. Forthcoming. *From Tapas to Modern Yoga: Sādhus' Understanding of Embodied Practices*. Sheffield: Equinox.
- 2018. "Let the Sādhus Talk. Ascetic understanding of Haṭha Yoga and yogāsanas." *Religions of South Asia* 11(2–3): 182–206.
- Birch, J. 2011. "The Meaning of haṭha in Early Haṭhayoga." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 131(4): 527–554.
- 2018. "The Proliferation of Āsana-s in Late-Medieval Yoga Texts." In *Yoga in Transformation*, edited by Karl Baier, Philipp A. Maas, and Karin Preisendanz, 101–180. Göttingen: V&R Unipress. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14220/9783737008624.101>.
- 2019. "The Amaraughaprabodha: New Evidence on the Manuscript Transmission of an Early Work on Haṭha- and Rājayoga." *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 47(5): 947–77. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10781-019-09401-5>.
- 2020a. "Haṭhayoga's Floruit on the Eve of Colonialism. Śaivism and the Tantric Traditions." In *Śaivism and the Tantric Traditions. Essays in Honour of Alexis G. J. S. Sanderson*, edited by Dominic Goodall, Shaman Hatley, Harunaga Isaacson, and Srilata Raman, 451–479. Leiden: Brill.
- 2020b. "The Quest for Liberation-in-Life: A Survey of Early Works on Haṭha- and Rājayoga." In *The Oxford History of Hinduism: Hindu Practice*, edited by Gavin Flood, 200–242. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Birch, J. and M. Singleton. 2019. "The Yoga of the Haṭhābhyāsapaddhati: Haṭhayoga on the Cusp of Modernity." *Journal of Yoga Studies* 2: 3–70.
- Bouillier, V. 1993. "La Violence des Non-Violents ou Les Ascètes au Combat." *Puruṣārtha* 16: 213–243.



- Bronkhorst, J. 1998. *The Two Sources of Indian Asceticism*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Clark, M. 2006. *The Daśanāmī-Saṃnyāsīs: The Integration of Ascetic Lineages into an Order*. Leiden and Boston: E. J. Brill.
- Cohn, B. 1964. "The Role of the Gosains in the Economy of Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Upper India." *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 1(4): 174–182.
- Farquhar, J. N. 1925. "The Fighting Ascetics of India." *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 9(2): 431–452.
- Gold, D. 1999. "Nath Yogis as Established Alternatives: Householders and Ascetics Today." In *Ascetic Culture: Renunciation and Worldly Engagement*, edited by K. Ishwaran, 68–88. Leiden: Brill.
- Goudriaan, T. 1979. "Introduction, history and philosophy." In *Hindu Tantrism*, edited by Gupta Sanjukta, Dirk Jan Hoens and Teun Goudriaan (Handbuch der Orientalistik 2.4.2.), 1–67. Leiden and Koln: E. J. Brill.
- Horstmann, M. Forthcoming. "Power and Status: Ramanandi Warrior Ascetics in 18th Century Jaipur." In *Asceticism and Power in South and Southeast Asia*, edited by Flügel Peter and Houtman Gustaaf. London: Routledge.
- Lamb, R. 2006. "Monastic Vows and the Ramananda Sampradaya." In *Dealing with Deities, The Ritual Vow in South Asia*, edited by Selva J. Raj and Harman P. William, 165–185. Albany: SUNY.
- Lorenzen, D. 1978. "Warrior Ascetics in Indian History." *Journal of American Oriental Society* 98(1): 61–75.
- Mallinson, J. 2013. "Dattātreya's Discourse on Yoga." Retrieved from: [https://www.academia.edu/3773137/Translation\\_of\\_the\\_Dattātreya\\_yogaśāstra\\_the\\_earliest\\_text\\_to\\_teach\\_haṭhayoga](https://www.academia.edu/3773137/Translation_of_the_Dattātreya_yogaśāstra_the_earliest_text_to_teach_haṭhayoga). Accessed on: 23 January 2023.
- 2020a. "Haṭhayoga's Early History: From Vajrayāna Sexual Restraint to Universal Somatic Soteriology." In *The Oxford History of Hinduism: Hindu Practice*, edited by Gavin Flood, 177–199. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 2020b. "The Amṛtasiddhi: Haṭhayoga's Tantric Buddhist Source Text." In *Śaivism and the Tantric Traditions. Essays in Honour of Alexis G. J. S. Sanderson*, edited by Dominic Goodall, Shaman Hatley, Harunaga Isaacson, and Srilata Raman, 409–425. Leiden: Brill.
- 2021. "Yoga: Haṭha." In *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy of Religion*, edited by Stewart Goetz and Charles Taliaferro. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

JOURNAL OF  
YOGA STUDIES

Yoga and the Traditional Physical Practices of South Asia

- Mallinson, J. and P. D. Szántó. 2022. *The Amṛtasiddhi and Amṛtasiddhimūla The Earliest Texts of the Hāṭhayoga Tradition*. Pondichéry: EFEO, Institut Français de Pondichéry.
- Mallinson, J. and M. Singleton. 2017. *Roots of Yoga*. London UK: Penguin Classics.
- Michell, G. 1988. *The Hindu Temple: An Introduction to its Meaning and Forms*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Needham, J. 1983. *Science and Civilisation in China, Vol. 5, Chemistry and Chemical Technology: Part 5: Spagyric Discovery and Invention: Physiological Alchemy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Olivelle, P. 2020. "The Early History of Renunciation." In *The Oxford History of Hinduism: Hindu Practice*, edited by Gavin Flood, 101–121. Oxford: Oxford University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198733508.003.0005>.
- Orr, W.G. 1940. "Armed Religious Ascetics in Northern India." *The Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 24(1): 81–100.
- Pinch, W. R. 2006. *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Samuel, G. 2008. *The Origins of Yoga and Tantra: Indic Religions to the Thirteenth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Singleton, M. 2010. *The Yoga Body*. Oxford University Press.
- Sears, T. I. 2013. "From Guru to God: Yogic Prowess and Places of Practice in Early-Medieval India." In *Yoga: The Art of Transformation*, edited by Debra Diamond, 47–57. Washington, DC: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery.
- Stein, B. 1960. "The Economic Function of a Medieval South Indian Temple." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 19 (2): 163–176. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2943547>.
- Zubrzycki, J. 2018. *Empire of Enchantment: The Story of Indian Magic*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

