

# 1

## HISTORICIZING YOGA: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF LIBERATED SOULS

Nevertheless, there is a definite point where Yoga and shamanism meet. They meet in “emergence from time” and the abolition of history. The shaman’s ecstasy recovers the primordial freedom and bliss of the ages in which, according to the myths, man could ascend to heaven and physically converse with the gods. For its part, Yoga results in the nonconditioned state of *samādhi* or of *sahaja*, in the perfect spontaneity of the *jīvan-mukta*, the man “liberated in this life.” From one point of view, we may say that the *jīvan-mukta* has abolished time and history.

Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* (1990: 339–40)

The Hindu universe is a kind of four-dimensional Möbius strip, finite but unbounded, negatively curved. . . . In all of these [mythological] images we encounter the inversion of time as well as space. . . . The Möbius strip, then, is the shape of time and space in India. . . . If there is a final level, it is the level of the Godhead, *brahman*, the impersonal, transcendent continuum beyond even Rudra. This is the level of the universal soul, the source of all mental images that assume material form.

Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, *Dreams, Illusion, and Other Realities* (1984: 241–43)

### Orientation toward the Subject

IT WOULD be extremely surprising if anyone reading this book had not at least heard of Yoga and developed some basic idea about what it is. On the one hand, it is one of the six main schools of classical South Asian philosophy, most explicitly articulated in Patañjali’s *Yoga Sūtra*.<sup>1</sup> In this regard it is as central to the history of thought in South Asia as is the philosophy of Aristotle to the intellectual history of Europe. On the other hand, Yoga is a modern form of alternative medicine and physical fitness training. This book is concerned with the way Yoga can be these two things at once in modern India, and with the historical

#### 4 CHAPTER 1

transmutation of philosophy into physical education, public health, and institutionalized medical practice.

Emerging out of South Asia, Yoga is a complex and comprehensive philosophy of transcendental consciousness that crystallized into a school of thought sometime between 150 and 500 C.E. (Whichever 1998: 42).<sup>2</sup> In essence Yoga holds that the world, as it is commonly perceived by the mind through self-consciousness, is an illusion based on ignorance. As Eliade puts it: “For Sāṃkhya and Yoga the world is *real* (not illusory—as it is, for example, for Vedānta). Nevertheless, if the world *exists* and *endures*, it is because of the ‘ignorance’ of spirit; the innumerable forms of the cosmos, as well as their processes of manifestation and development, exist only in the measure to which the Self (*puruṣa*) is ignorant of itself and, by reason of this metaphysical ignorance, suffers and is enslaved” (1990: 9). The practice of Yoga is designed to transform illusion into reality by transcending ignorance and training the embodied mind to experience Truth. The experience of Truth is *samādhi*, which can be translated as a transcendent condition of ecstatic union of subject and object.<sup>3</sup> Significantly, *samādhi* is both the technique for realizing this condition and the condition itself. The transcendental Self is *samādhi* as a condition of Ultimate Truth that is beyond time and space. In this regard Yoga can be understood as so profound as to make standard categories of thought such as religion, spirituality, metaphysics, and science—to name but the most standard—singularly imprecise and dubiously qualified to articulate Truth.

Although Yoga is one of the so-called six orthodox schools or *sad darśanas* and is almost two thousand years old, it is important, particularly in the context of this book, to appreciate the fact that there has been a long, if not by any means continuous or systematically developmental, history of Yoga scholarship and textual redaction. In other words, if one can say that Yoga as a school of thought was systematized by Patañjali around the second or third century of this era, ever since then there have been attempts to understand it, and make it understandable, on the basis of various degrees of both engaged practice and intellectual distance. Yoga philosophy has never existed as a fixed, primordial entity, even though the canonical status of a few primary texts gives this impression.

Taking the *Yoga Sūtra* as an object of study, analyses of Yoga in the form of commentaries and elaborations date back to the fifth century with Vyāsa’s *Bhāṣya* (see Misra 1971). Subsequent works by Vācaspati Miśra in the ninth century (see Misra 1971) and by Bhoja Rāja (see Shastri 1930) and Vijñāna Bhikṣu (see Misra 1971) in the eleventh and sixteenth centuries indicate an ongoing tradition of scholarship, study, and practice. Although more research is needed to clarify the nature and extent of intellectual developments in the late classical and medieval pe-

riods, there is clearly a long history of intellectual engagement with Yoga that has produced an extensive primary literature.

Ian Whicher provides a succinct and up-to-date overview of this literature, pointing out that “with some exceptions, the secondary literature on classical Yoga can tend to be dry and repetitive, which underlines the notion that Yoga, in its authentic context, has always been an esoteric discipline taught mainly through oral tradition” (1998: 320–22). This point is of tremendous significance—often noted by a range of scholar practitioners, such as Georg Feuerstein (1989: 176)—and must always be kept in mind. There is, in other words, a history of Yoga that is not circumscribed by the hegemony of “dry” textual redaction. Most importantly this oral tradition, manifest in the practice-based teaching of *gurus* to their disciples, enables an appreciation for the relevance of a history of Yoga that picks up at that moment in time when it is possible to find texts that comment directly on the form and content of this oral tradition, rather than simply—and “dryly”—on other, older texts. As yet it is not possible to fix a date for this shift, since further study of the classical and medieval literature—including, perhaps most significantly, the early Persian sources—may reveal critical commentaries.

By the end of the nineteenth century, however, there seems to have been a paradigmatic shift away from commentary and textual redaction to critical analysis and a search for the most authentic oral tradition manifest in practice.<sup>4</sup> Ironically the valorization of the oral tradition fractures the continuity of history by producing texts that purport to reveal, to us moderns, the most ancient of ancient truths. This is ironic, since, in many ways, the shift is closely associated with modernity, the idea of historical continuity, and an essentialized, primordialist view of Indian civilization. In any event this history, as well as the intellectual tradition of commentary and redaction found in the secondary literature—ranging from the earliest commentaries up to Barbara Stoler Miller’s recent translation (1996)—must be understood as having made Yoga what it is, rather than as having simply revealed yogic truth as a predefined entity. One could argue that, in this era of constructionist and deconstructionist scholarship, this point should go without saying. The problem, however, is that Yoga, even more so than religion and science—respectively its much “older” and much “younger” intellectual siblings—is constructed as both timeless and beyond time. And so it is all the more important to situate it in history as a product of human imagination.

Apart from the key issue of trying to write an oral tradition of practice, a close reading of Yoga’s literary history of commentary and redaction shows how it has been subject to the inevitable process of interpretation, a process that is distinct from the obvious features of intellectual refinement and clarification, if not exclusively so. Whicher points out that the

## 6 CHAPTER 1

*Yoga Bhāṣya* of Vyāsa (see Misra 1971), written in the fifth or sixth century, is the oldest commentary on the *Yoga Sūtra*, and the one upon which almost all subsequent commentaries are based. Following on late classical and early medieval works by Bhoja Rāja (see Shastri 1930) and Mādhavācārya (1882), probably the second most important commentary is by Vijñāna Bhikṣu, who was “a renowned scholar and yogin who interpreted Yoga from a Vedāntic point of view. One of his main contributions is his attempt to establish points of unity between the dualistic perspective of Sāṃkhya and theistic/nondualistic thought in Vedānta” (Whicher 1998: 321). Bhikṣu’s disciples, Bhāvāgaṇeśa and Nāgojī Bhaṭṭa, provide a further redaction of their *guru*’s Vedāntic perspective on Vyāsa (see Shastri 1930), but another seventeenth- or eighteenth-century work by Nārāyaṇ Tīrtha (see Bhatta 1911), which is devotional in orientation, is based directly on Patañjali’s *Yoga Sūtra* independent of either Vyāsa’s or Bhikṣu’s works. Although it would be fascinating to study the literature in the late pre-Mogul and Mogul period so as to gain an understanding of when and how the first critical studies of Yoga developed—as more or less distinct from direct commentaries, which continued to be written up to twentieth century—it seems clear that it was not until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that a well-defined “tertiary” and synthetic literature came into being. Here, again, however, early Persian sources such as al-Biruni’s translation of a now lost version of the *Yoga Sūtra* (Pines and Gelblum 1966; Ritter 1956) warrant close examination based on the assumption that the authors of these works were engaged in both literary and “cross-cultural” translation. In any case, Sadāśivendra Sarasvati’s eighteenth-century *Yoga-Sudhā-Ākara* (see Shastri 1930) and Ananta-deva Pandit’s nineteenth-century *Padacandrikā* (see Shastri 1930) are, arguably, the last articulations of a kind of scholarship reflecting *tīkā* glosses and commentaries as well as the *vṛtti* style of nonargumentative redaction that was characteristic of the preceding centuries.

Orientalist studies of Yoga as philosophy, as distinct from indigenous commentaries on Yoga as Truth, are exemplified in the scholarship of Richard Garbe (1894, 1917), J. Ghose (1930), N. C. Paul (1851, 1888), Paul Deussen (1920), A. B. Keith (1925), and Sir John Woodroffe (1927) among numerous others. In this context Surendranath Dasgupta’s scholarship (1920, 1924, 1930) is seminal. In many ways his intellectual influence on Mircea Eliade defines a critical nexus in the development of Yoga research and analysis. As a leading Bengali intellectual directly involved in a complex process of modernization, whereby “Eastern and Western” traditions were, to various degrees and on various levels, being creatively synthesized, Dasgupta became Eliade’s teacher and *guru*. This produced a critical link between “modernity and tradition,” East and West.<sup>5</sup> As a

European scholar, Eliade was able to extend this link and, with obvious intellectual insights of his own, translate the ferment of modern ideas in Bengal and other parts of India—most notably Rishikesh (Strauss 1997, 2000: 172)—into a tome of classic significance in the genre of Western comparative religious studies. His *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* (1990) is a work of definitive, late-Orientalist scholarship.<sup>6</sup>

In many respects the well-known Orientalist literature on Yoga—in particular Eliade's study, which extends beyond the *Yoga Sūtra*, and Sir John Woodroffe's *The Serpent Power* (1931; see also 1927)—provides a critical backdrop against which this book is written, and in relation to which it must be read. In part this is because the Orientalist literature tends to ignore the way in which modern history in India has defined the intellectual context and climate within which “ancient” Yoga is understood. Eliade studied with Dasgupta at the University of Calcutta from 1928 to 1931, and resided in an *āśram* in Rishikesh for six months. The book he wrote based on these experiences makes no reference to colonialism and the profound changes that were taking place in the practice of Yoga at this time. It is precisely with these changes that this book is directly concerned.

But there is also a specific reason for “writing against” the legacy of Orientalism. Even though yogic literature is concerned with the body, it is clear that Orientalist scholars were almost exclusively concerned with philosophy, mysticism, magic, religion, and metaphysics. They were not particularly concerned with the mundane physics of physical fitness and physiology. There is a great deal of rich detail about the body and yogic physiology in Eliade's book, but fundamentally it is about the mind, the limits of consciousness, and the freedom of transcendence. Similarly Woodroffe's book is full of detail concerning the physiology of Yoga, but in his analysis what is important is not the body as such but its mystical, esoteric, and inherently symbolic value as a good medium through which to think, and—with apologies to Lévi-Strauss—to get beyond thinking. Metaphysics and a preoccupation with the occult prevented almost all Orientalist scholars from trying to understand the value of the body in terms of what might be called elemental yogic materialism.

During the heyday of early-twentieth-century Orientalist scholarship there were a number of people—mostly if not exclusively men living in northern and western India—who sought to revive Yoga in practice, dissociate it from magic and arcane mysticism, and focus attention directly on the body. As we shall see, however, they focused on the physical aspects of Yoga with some ambivalence about the implications of what they were doing. In any event, these men were not nearly as well known as the key players in the Yoga renaissance, namely Sri Aurobindo and Vivekananda. The approach that the “antimystics” took to the body was

## 8 CHAPTER 1

in terms of physical fitness, applied medical research, and pragmatic populism rather than arcane philosophy and spiritualism. Although somewhat in the shadow of Vivekananda and Aurobindo—both then and now—these men have, in fact, had a profound effect on the history of Yoga. Even casual awareness of what is going on in the global marketplace of alternative medicine and self-help therapy shows that over the past century the body has become ever more central to the practice of Yoga. The fact that it has can be traced directly back to events in western central India in the years just before 1920.

In the context of modern practice since then, the body has come to be understood in ever more pragmatic, rational, and empirical terms, just as the final goal of Yoga—*samādhi*—has come to be understood as more and more abstract. In conjunction with this, it is important to note that, in contrast to the profound intellectualism of Orientalist scholarship, the main trajectory of Yoga’s modern development is populist and plebeian. Anyone can publish a book describing how to reach enlightenment, and anyone anywhere can open a school to teach *āsanas*, breathing exercises, and self-realization. Many, many people have, in India and elsewhere. So many people have, in fact, that it would be impossible to do justice to the global scope of modern practice in a single publication. Therefore this book is, somewhat narrowly, a book about Yoga in India. And to put it that way—narrowly in India!—provides a clear appreciation of the ironic discontinuity between discourses of origin and the brute fact of transnationalism, each of which defines “narrowness” in a radically different way. As signs, pamphlets, and bookshops in countless small towns, bus stops, and railway stations attest, Yoga, a profoundly antisocial form of self-discipline, one that is structured in opposition to human nature—if Eliade is right—occupies an important place, and defines an explicitly public space, in the modern world of medicine, self-help therapy, and public health.

Using the insights and methods of historical anthropology, this book is an intellectual history of modern Yoga’s embodied practice. It is a modest effort to force Yoga out of classical texts and locate its history in the body of practice, as the body of practice is a fact of everyday life, rather than as a means to achieve transcendental consciousness. It is a critical analysis—and critique—of the legacy of Orientalism and the myths of continuity, intellectualism, and High Culture that all scholarship, even scholarship on culture with a small “c,” produces and reproduces. In this respect it is guided not so much by theories of cultural critique and deconstruction, as by a kind of neo-sociology that directs attention away from agency, meaning, and culture as such so as to provide analytical focus on the contingent history of social facts, in this case the social facticity of Yoga. This social facticity is not at all the same as, and not directly de-

pendent on, either Yoga's goal of final liberation or on claims made about its use, value, and significance by those who engage in its practice.

First brought to the “consciousness” of the American reading public by Henry David Thoreau, who was inspired to think about meditation in an Oriental mode (De Michelis n.d.: 2), and then brought to the United States and Europe by an array of *gurus* in the early 1900s (see Narayan 1993), some elements of Yoga are now taught in the physical education curriculum of many American universities. Other elements are used in weight-loss programs, to reform and relax incarcerated prisoners, to energize executives, and to help rehabilitate drug addicts. As Gerald Larson blithely points out, the “ecumenical possibilities” of Yoga are almost endless, including everything from Patañjali to the YMCA (1978; quoted in Whicher 1998: 6). Invoking a shudder of dismay—or perhaps a sigh of relief—I. K. Taimni, a chemistry professor at Allahabad University who produced one of the first “popular” commentaries on the *Yoga Sūtra*, puts it this way: “There is no subject which is so much wrapped up in mystery and on which one can write whatever one likes without any risk of being proved wrong” (1961: v).

In the world today, one can “learn” Yoga by taking lessons from an established school, or teach it to oneself by reading one of approximately ten thousand popular books on the subject. Alternatively one can study it by logging on to one of the numerous websites on the Internet. Dick’s Sporting Goods, a U.S.-based athletics equipment retailer, now markets a line of Yoga workout clothing and exercise equipment, and both the Discovery Store and Whole Foods carry a line of Yoga self-help videos as well as various accessories for practice, such as mats and “bricks” to enhance the effectiveness of specific *āsanas* or postures.<sup>7</sup> But lest one be seduced by the ultra-modernity of the Discovery Store display of mass-produced videos and mats, it should be pointed out that outlets in India have, for many years, produced and sold hundred-count packets of waxed-cord catheters for *sūtra neti* (sinus cleansing), as well as copper and plastic *jal neti* pots for “nasal purification.” As early as 1930, Swami Kuvalayananda was “mass producing” Yoga instructors so as to transform the physical education curriculum of public education in India.

Over the course of the past century not only has Yoga been radically transformed; the very radical nature of this transformation has influenced the way in which “classical” Yoga is understood. In turn this understanding has directly influenced the way in which Indian culture is thought to be linked—at least in the popular imagination—almost exclusively to the transcendental nature of “classical” Yoga, whereas “modernized” physical Yoga is thought to be a product of Western “misunderstanding.” In other words, the very idea of Indian spirituality and contemplative mysticism—its Orientalist albatross, one might say—is, in some sense, a derivative of

## 10 CHAPTER 1

the way in which Yoga as “physical culture” is thought to be the product of Western “perversion” and misunderstanding. In fact, as this book is designed to show, things are much more complicated and interesting than this.

Yoga in all of its manifestations is directly linked to Indian modernity. It was in India that Yoga was modernized, medicalized, and transformed into a system of physical culture. Significantly this happened in tandem with, and is closely linked to, the modern development of Yoga philosophy as a so-called science of higher consciousness distinct from embodied forms of experience and practice. It is extremely difficult—and wrong headed—to make a clear and unambiguous distinction between so-called physical and so-called contemplative Yoga, and yet the history of Yoga is characterized by the seductively modern and simplistic allure of this problematic distinction. In this light the medicalization and “gross embodiment” of Yoga provides an interesting perspective on postcolonialism and global modernity insofar as the power/knowledge configuration involved cannot be neatly assimilated into the standard binarism of modernity/tradition, East/West, colonizer/colonized, or science/religion, any more than it can be assimilated into the distinction between gross and subtle domains of experience.

### Objective: The Object as Such

In and of itself the word “Yoga” means union. Technically it is the union of the individual self with the universal, cosmic Self and the transcendence of all things, although obviously it is not as simple as that. Recognizing the full range of possible meaning, and explicitly concerned with placing it in “its proper historical and philosophical context,” Whicher defines Yoga as “South Asian Indian paths of spiritual emancipation, or self-transcendence, that bring about a transmutation of consciousness culminating in liberation from the confines of egoic identity or worldly existence” (1998: 6). Quite apart from its inherent metaphysical complexity—discussed and analyzed by Dasgupta (1924) and more recently by Whicher (1998)—Yoga has come to be regarded by many as so mystically profound as to defy comprehension. Comprehension, by virtue of being rooted in the senses and located in the intellect, is precisely that which Yoga seeks to transcend. Many adepts have said that Yoga cannot be understood. It can only be experienced as such. What it is only becomes clear from a perspective wherein self and cosmic Self are one. Thus it cannot be understood until true understanding is achieved. This is a situation in which the tautology of gnosis confounds the logic of knowledge.

In fact Yoga is the full range of practices that lead to this paradoxical end, including intellectual training, meditation, strict standards of moral and ethical behavior, along with rigorous physical training. In any case, it is in the enormous gaps between experience, knowledge, and embodied practice, as well as in the multiplicity of forms that Yoga can take—as a profound aphorism on the one hand or a more grounded but somewhat less profound quest for weight loss or sexual potency on the other (Neelam 1993; Sharma and Sharma 1991)—that one must confront the meaning of Yoga as nontranscendental and both derived from and relevant to the world of grounded human experience.

In this comprehensive light, *Bhargava's Standard Illustrated Dictionary: Hindi-English* defines Yoga as follows.

Yoga: *n. mas.* One of the six schools of Hindu philosophy, a union with the Universal Soul by means of contemplation, means of salvation, the 27th part of a circle, a sum (*arith*), total, profound meditation to earn and enhance wealth, unity, conjunction, union, combination, mixture, contact, fitness, property, an auspicious moment, plan, device, opportunity, recipe, connection, love, trick, deception, as a suffix used in the sense of “capable, fit for.”

Idiosyncrasies in punctuation notwithstanding, it is important to keep the full—polysemic, ambiguous, and ironic—spectrum of meanings in mind: Yoga as a world-class philosophical system, no question; Yoga as profound meditation, to be sure. But how is this reconciled with the connotations of “trick” and “deception”? And “Yoga as profound meditation to earn and enhance wealth?” What? Impossible! Is *this* a trick? A deception? Wealth and the accumulation of wealth are the antithesis of Yoga, are they not? How are these levels of meaning—if that is what they are—to be explained? Is there one Truth or many truths? Dictionaries are designed to reflect the objective truth, but they do this inclusively, not exclusively. They are not prescriptive. They are not analytic. They are not speculative. They are concerned with the direct connection between words and the objects those words signify. In this regard they can be, as Samuel Johnson knew before Bhargava, blithely cynical and critically tuned to the vagaries of cultural pretense and a whole range of attempts to control and regulate meaning.

What I take to be Bhargava’s blithe cynicism and skeptical sarcasm directed against the modern industry of Yoga—by giving a much too literal and late-capitalist interpretation to the magical reference in *Yoga Sūtra* II, 37, where “all jewels come to him” who masters the discipline of *asteya* (not-stealing)—reflects an important analytical perspective taken in this book. As an anthropologist trained to understand difference, and to apply

## 12 CHAPTER 1

the rigorous principles of cultural relativism in order to understand difference on its own terms, I would be expected to employ sympathetic appreciation and empathy rather than “wield the sword” of sarcasm. After all, is it not the golden rule of anthropology to gain an insider’s perspective and to analytically represent culture, no matter how fluid and multivocal, as a system of meaning that justifies people’s belief, even their belief in the fact that they are so categorically right and others so categorically wrong as to “justify” violence against them? To a degree, yes. But Yoga, like other cultural categories of human experience—religion, “free trade,” nationalism, democracy, the state—has become so reified as a thing unto itself as to mask, distort, and ultimately undervalue the human creativity that went into its production. Beyond this there is also the more serious problem of conscious human creativity being reified in the ideathing of culture. On these terms culture has increasingly come to stand in as a proxy category for social facts, even though social facts are epiphenomenal to meaning as such.

Anthropology is not alone in confusing things made—including, most certainly, cognitive things—with the makers of things. But the tendency in anthropology to suspend belief and take an insider’s view of the world plays directly into the hand of human self-deception—the idea, to employ a cliché, that God created Man rather than the other way around. By dealing with texts and representations, rather than with people, philosophers, historians, literary critics, and religious studies scholars are able to maintain, if they wish, a degree of distance from the moral, ethical, and methodological problems this creates. By virtue of the first-person pronominal methodology that defines the discipline of anthropology, as well as a tendency to identify research expertise with “a people”—however loose, open, and global that identification has become—ethnography must confront the intractability with which real people, in making sense of themselves, forget their complicity in the production and reproduction of culture, and then vehemently defend their absolute cultural right to do so. On some level, as anthropology, this study must be a study of those people who practice Yoga, and it is precisely the ambiguous relationship among Yoga as a thing, the cultural construction of Yoga, and the claims made about Yoga as a thing by practitioners that create a profound analytical problem.

In part the problem emerges from the very concept of culture. No matter how “constructed” it is imagined to be, the act of constructing culture constantly displaces agency. Cultural production is thought to be meaningful, thereby enabling people to produce quintessentially meaningful things—which then take on a life of their own. Recall Taimni’s comment about Yoga quoted above: “There is no subject which is so much wrapped up in mystery and on which one can write whatever one likes without

any risk of being proved wrong" (1961: v). This neatly captures the reification of *both* culture *and* cultural construction in relation to Yoga as an essentialized category of experience. One can say anything about Yoga, and yet, somehow, it does not matter what one says because Yoga will never change. This logical slippage from the agency of practice to the displaced attribution of agency to things—which is not restricted to the domain of Yoga—has directed anthropological attention to culture and cultural construction and, ironically, away from the condition of being human. We have made both Yoga as such and the possibility that it can be anything—and thereby that it is, as such, nothing—and it is this possibility that is obscured by the construction of culture and by the concept of culture as a term that denotes human experience within the limited context of meaning. A focus on the condition of being human beyond what is contextually meaningful certainly runs the risk of unconsciously universalizing particular experience and prioritizing specific values. But this risk is worth taking if it can unmask the pretense of magnanimous things, dislocate firmly located cultural beliefs, and do all of this while maintaining a sense of value in the infinitely multiplex sociality that constitutes being human through time, as against the divisiveness of difference and the study of difference as a time-bound thing unto itself. To think globally about difference in analytically useful terms is to act historically.

The invocation of religion to help define the problem of reification manifest in the concept of culture is not accidental. Yoga is a metaphysical philosophy of transcendence that is distinct from, but clearly linked to, a range of teachings which find expression in Sāṃkhya philosophy and in Vedic, post-Vedic, and preclassical religious texts, most notably the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Technically, however, Yoga is not a religious system. It does entail a kind of provisional, strategic faith in God, but God as "created," not as creator. Thus in a very important sense, Yoga is a step beyond religion in terms of soteriological conceptualization. Although the past century has witnessed the dramatic "secularization" of Yoga on the one hand and its articulation as a kind of universalist, nonsectarian "spirituality" on the other, in many ways Yoga has become the functional equivalent of a distinct religion. Practitioners of Yoga will, of course, argue this point. But in doing so they underscore the nature and complexity of the problem. Yoga has become something you believe in. But, unlike religion, the Truth of Yoga is thought to be transcendent and beyond belief. It entails rigorous practice and self-discipline, but does not require either faith or ritual. The scholarly and analytical problem, then, is that, unlike religion—of which there are many and apart from which there must be belief in atheism—a critique of the cultural form of Yoga cannot even begin from a clearly defined point of sacrilegious disbelief and iconoclastic

## 14 CHAPTER 1

faithlessness. Not only is there no ontological basis for knowing anything about Yoga apart from Yoga, there is no way to develop a critique of it in modern practice, since there is nothing external to it, such as God in religion and Natural Law in physics.

Added to this is the extent to which Yoga and the practice of transcendence is thought to be embodied. Transcendence of the self notwithstanding, embodiment makes the practice of Yoga a very personal and personally meaningful endeavor. To deconstruct Yoga is not simply to challenge the ontology of belief, but to deconstruct the body of those who practice it. The reaction to this can be a kind of visceral fundamentalism. If this fundamentalism is confronted and radically questioned—in the manner of an atheist questioning the logic of the Holy Trinity—what you are left with, in terms of culture, is not very much at all. At least an atheist does not have to question the ontology of culture upon which religious faith is based. But that is exactly what is involved in the critique of Yoga—it is all or nothing: either a transcendental critique of culture as such, or the recognition that our organic humanity is the beginning and end of what counts as real. As a consequence of this kind of “positive negativism” about the form, structure, and meaning of embodied culture, one is able to gain—in the spirit, if not in the mode, of both Durkheim and Weber—a much clearer perspective on the sociological basis of being human than is afforded by a demystification of religion as social fact and of religious beliefs as such. To hold this view one must, of course, believe not so much in humanism as in both the limits and possibilities of life itself: that everything in human experience is a human construction and that there is no experience—nothing real—beyond the limits of sensory experience. I take this to be the basis of both knowledge and experience. Since the concept of culture and cultural construction intrude into consciousness as what might be called proxy bases for knowledge and experience, and bring with them figments and fragments of reality that are not really real, they get in the way of understanding. In any event, this book is bound to alienate both those who embody Yoga and those who embody a faith in culture, as the two are intimately intertwined.

### Themes

There is probably no tradition that has been construed as more timeless, more intrinsically authentic, more inherently Indian than Yoga. It has become a kind of pristine cultural icon linking together, in a seemingly unbroken line, the past glory of the Indus civilization with the present and future possibility of modern, postcolonial India. My purpose in this book is to question some of the most fundamental assumptions about Yoga

and, by extension, to question assumptions about civilization, modernity, and nationalism. I start with the simple assumption that Yoga, in all its profound complexity, is fundamentally an ingenious human construct. Like everything else it is incidentally social and cultural, not transcendental. But, precisely because it is constructed as both meaningful and transcendental, a critique of Yoga also provides a way of thinking about the limits of culture as an analytic framework. This perspective is taken not in order to challenge Yoga's legitimacy, but to unravel its mystique, and, by extension, to unravel the mystique of culture that has played a strong hand in the construction of Yoga. My purpose is not to uncover the truth behind Yoga—much less experience Truth. Nor is it my purpose to delineate what is good Yoga from what is bad, what is authentic and what is not. My purpose is to illustrate the genius of transnational imaginations, grounded in India, making and remaking the body, society, and the world. But my purpose is also to define the limits of genius, as those limits are defined not by human potential—collective or individual—but by the historical configuration of social relations that are not configured logically or bounded by time and space. Hence this book is not so much about the cultural heritage of India as it is about the convergence of human ideas and practices in colonial and postcolonial India. The perspective taken may seem, at times, overly skeptical and sarcastic—in the non-Barthian sense—with regard to the practice and beliefs of specific groups and individuals. However, it is a perspective that must take this risk in order to relocate the foundational sociality of human nature in a body of practice, a body of practice that, by conflating person, self, and cosmic soul, seems to have extended itself beyond the limits of a Nietzschean critique of God and humanism, a Durkheimian critique of religion, and a Marxist critique of ideology. To critique Yoga along these lines and in these terms—though not simply in the same way—is, in some sense, to do what is fundamental in all social analyses: to gain an understanding of human experience without letting any particular human experience define what counts as understanding.

An example. In the late 1990s the organization built around the cult of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi had an all-day broadcast on Indian television called Veda Vision, designed to disseminate the teachings of the master. In 1999 I was in Lucknow trying to make contact with various Yoga hospitals and was flipping through the channels on the hotel television when I suddenly stopped, mesmerized. On the screen was a group of about fifteen men and women, all dressed in white, sitting in *padmāsana*, one of the most common *āsanas* for yogic meditation. But they were not just sitting; they were doing something called “yogic flying,” derived, I think, from the long-held belief that adept practitioners of Yoga can levitate and fly through the air.<sup>8</sup> The group was in a smallish room, on the floor of

## 16 CHAPTER 1

which was a soft, rubberized gymnastic-type mat. In unison they were “flying” from one end to the other, taking short hops of about two feet at a time.<sup>9</sup> I was fascinated because this intensely physical, dramatically modern kind of Yoga, sandwiched in between World Cup Cricket on ESPN and Ricky Martin belting out “Living a Vida Loca” on MTV, was precisely what I had been studying for the previous five years.

In and of itself this vision of “yogic flying” was phenomenal, but the voice-over, with occasional shots of the suited Dutch commentator surrounded by charts and graphs, was truly amazing in light of the fact that I had also been studying the way in which Yoga and science—social, political, biological, and medical science—had converged over the course of the past century and a half. For almost half an hour the commentator described, graphically illustrated, and “statistically proved” how the “Maharishi Effect,” produced directly through “yogic flying,” could, essentially and without equivocation, save the world. This was not a religious appeal per se. Nor was it ideological, in the sense that the commentator was not trying to convince viewers that they should change their beliefs. The appeal was, simply, a mechanical instruction: get down into a *padmāsana* and “fly” to resolve all social, moral, physical, and political problems in the world. For example, the commentator said—and here I am quoting from field notes I had never expected to be writing, since I had been in search of some light entertainment—that if 1 percent or even “the square root of 1 percent” of the population practiced yogic flying, it would reduce crime, reduce “national strife,” and resolve international and global conflict. And there it was, charted out on a bar graph: crime decreasing steadily as the percentage of “flyers” increased. He also said that if enough people in India practiced “yogic flying” the Maharishi Effect would produce a “Rashtriya Kavac,” a National Shield, that would protect the country from aggression. To this end he advocated the establishment of a “preventative wing of yogic flyers” to stop international warfare before it started.<sup>10</sup>

Soon after the events of September 11, 2001, when two planes were crashed into the World Trade Towers and a third into the Pentagon, there was a full-page advertisement published in the *New York Times* calling for the establishment of immediate and comprehensive world peace through the practice of yogic flying. I can think of nothing that so clearly reflects the absolute absurdity of cultural belief. But also nothing that provides such a visionary glimpse of being human, wherein “being” subjunctively extends beyond the limits of located, meaningful, cultural experience. In point of fact yogic flying could bring about world peace. Not by means of the embodiment of magical power and transcendental consciousness, but as a somewhat inadvertent consequence of the profound sociality of collective human action. The square root of 1 percent of the population

notwithstanding, if everyone in the world collectively sat in *padmāsana* and bounced through time and space, it would produce a global culture that could inhibit many things, including, perhaps, violence.

It would be easy to say, from the vantage point of a “true adept,” or from the perspective of one seeking the Truth, that yogic flying is either the answer to everything or the most ridiculous thing ever imagined. In other words, those who do not believe what the Maharishi teaches can say that yogic flying is an absurd perversion of true Yoga. But the question then is what is “true Yoga” and where do you draw the line. Do you draw it above or below the Yoga of B.K.S. Iyengar, probably the world’s most famous teacher, who learned from Krishnamacharya, a turn-of-the-century Yoga teacher who invented a new kind of Yoga based on a synthesis of *āsanas* with Western gymnastics (Sjoman 1996)? Do you draw it above or below Ramananda Maharishi, locked up in an air-tight box, being studied by scientists (Anand, Chhina, and Singh 1961)? Do you draw it above or below the practice of members of the Bharatiya Yoga Sansthan, assembled at their annual convention, collectively performing *śavāsana*, the corpse pose, to relieve their own and the country’s “nervous tension” (Alter 1997)? Do you draw it above or below the Yoga of Swami Sivananda, a medical doctor turned spiritual *guru* who founded the Divine Life Society?<sup>11</sup> Above or below the Yoga of Swami Kuvalayananda, a research scientist, who, in 1924, measured the “Madhavdas Vacuum” by inserting a pressure gauge into the rectum of an adept performing *nauli* (abdominal rotation)? Do you draw it above or below the performance of “Bharatiyam,” mass-drill Yoga *āsanas* performed by schoolchildren on Republic Day and at international events such as the Asian Games? And does Dr. K. N. Udupa’s research on the neurological effect of Yoga on rats count, since the rats were forced into test tubes and inverted into the Yoga posture *śirsāsana*? Or, as probably most people would want to have it, is the only real Yoga performed and taught by some unknown sage lost to the world in the high Himalayas? That, everyone would probably agree, is where the truth about Truth ultimately lies, at least in the confined, contained, and contingent realm of sensory, worldly consciousness.

The sage lost to the world in the Himalayas is an extremely powerful reference point in the search for authentic Yoga, and it is a reference point that has played an important role in the development of modern Yoga (see Brunton 1939; Carpenter 1911; Haanel 1937).<sup>12</sup> This is not because the sage-lost-to-the-world has been found, but because men like Swami Rama (1978), Shri Yogendra (Rodrigues 1982), Swami Sivananda, Swami Yogeshwaranand, and Theos Bernard (1939, 1944), among countless others, have all gone in search of the sage.<sup>13</sup> Most significantly, they have returned, and through religious reform movements, research centers,

clinics, and retreats such as the Divine Life Society, the Himalayan Institute, Yoga Niketan Trust, and the Yoga Institute, they have defined modern Yoga. Along similar but scaled down lines, whenever I spoke with a modern practitioner of Yoga—such as the research officer at the Central Institute for Yoga Research in New Delhi, the Yoga research officer at the Yoga Center at Banaras Hindu University, and a middle-aged woman who teaches Yoga classes in her living room in Pune—I was told that he or she had a “real guru” who was a “true adept” and that if I wanted to know anything about Yoga I should talk to a person of that caliber and stature.

The perspective taken in this study is that there are no real *gurus* and no true adepts. You can find a sage in the Himalayas, but what he is doing is no different from what anyone else is doing—seeking knowledge, searching for a master, and looking for something to call Truth. In this sense Yoga is, as many people claim, a science. It is based on direct experience rather than on revelation or the interpretation of inspired teaching. It is also primarily epistemological rather than ontological, in the sense that Yoga is defined by procedural methods for realizing Truth that can otherwise only be inferred. In the case of Yoga, however, there is an even greater problem than in science concerning the way in which its philosophical assumptions, theoretical principles, and methodology define Truth and Reality in terms that are exclusive. No matter how spiritualized or scientized, Yoga is fundamentally more Sāṃkhyan than Cartesian. In any case, all forms of Yoga must be considered alike—at least as a point of analytical departure—insofar as they are linked together by a common history of development and practice. In terms of culture, and the culture of practice, Dr. Udupa’s headstanding rats, Swami Rama’s “New Age” psychology, and Swami Sivananda’s Divine Life Society may seem to belong to different worlds altogether, but they are simply variations on a common theme. What all practitioners of Yoga are trying to do is move beyond the world of direct, particulated experience and thereby improve themselves and others in various ways—through the stimulation of the autonomic nervous system, through the Maharishi Effect, through “toning up” the liver and spleen, through simple relaxation, or through its profound corollary, the realization of the *ātman* (individual, self, or soul) in the *paramātman* (universal, transcendent self, or soul) and the attainment of *jīvanmukti* (embodied transcendence, the living sage lost-to-the-world) or *mokṣa* (final liberation).

One might well ask, however, whether or not the classical texts dealing with Yoga provide a “gold standard” that can be used to measure the relative authenticity of various kinds of practice. As pointed out above with reference to the *Yoga Sūtra*, this is certainly the assumption in all Orientalist scholarship, and is the logical rationale for a great deal of ongoing research. Looking beyond the *Yoga Sūtra*, however, the question is this:

What else counts as an authoritative text, and on what basis are different texts ranked in terms of relative importance? How are they to be compared one with another if your point of reference is not the corpus itself but modern practice? The most obvious answer to these questions is to be somewhat restrictive and judiciously limit the scope to what are regarded as the primary texts—the *Yoga Sūtra*, the *Yoga Upaniṣads* (see Ayyangar 1952), the *Bhagavad Gītā* (see van Buitenen 1981), and the three main Hṝṭha Yoga texts of more recent, medieval antiquity, the *Hṝṭhayoga-pradīpikā* (see Sinh 1997), the *Śivasamhitā* (see Vasu 1996a), and the *Gheraṇḍasamhitā* (see Vasu 1996b). But this presents problems, since in these texts Yoga blurs into Sāṃkhya, Tantra, and the “cult of Kṛṣṇa” among other forms of practice, systems of religious thought, and philosophical reasoning. Quite apart from the problematic convergence of ignorance and faith in God that occurs when reading the *Gītā* in light of the *Yoga Sūtra* there is, throughout the canon, the whole question of the body and its subtle physiology in relation to knowledge, consciousness, and many other conceptual and relatively—but by no means ontologically—immaterial things.

As Paul Deussen noted as early as 1906, it is possible to trace references to *āsana*, *prāṇāyāma*, *pratyāhāra*, and *dhyāna* through the middle-period *Upaniṣads* (1906: 387–95). Sāṃkhya philosophy—the oldest of the orthodox schools of thought—provides a theory of perpetual elemental “creation” for Yoga’s systematically experimental and step-by-step “regressive” concern with single-pointed concentration and liberation.<sup>14</sup> This is based on the relationship between knowledge, ignorance, and suffering common to both Sāṃkhya and Yoga. As Eliade points out, however, although the same in most other ways, Sāṃkhya and Yoga differ significantly in terms of methodology and, therefore, in terms of how the body is involved in practice:

Sāṃkhya seeks to obtain liberation solely by *gnosis*, whereas for Yoga an *ascesis* and a *technique of meditation* are indispensable. In both *darśanas* human suffering is rooted in illusion, for man believes that his psychomental life—activity of the senses, feelings, thoughts and volitions—is identical with Spirit, with the Self. He thus confuses two wholly autonomous and opposed realities, between which there is no real connection but only an illusory relation, for psychomental experience does not belong to Spirit, it belongs to nature (*prakṛti*); states of consciousness are the refined products of the same substance that is at the base of the physical world and the world of life. (1990: 14–15)

*Samādhi*, the ultimate experience that is beyond experience in Yoga, is, in some respects, the embodiment of pure, pre-elemental, timeless consciousness reflected in the principle of *puruṣa* that is expounded in Sāṃkhya.

## 20 CHAPTER 1

In many respects tantric literature, which chronologically follows closely on the “classical” literature and predates almost all of the commentaries on the *Yoga Sūtra*, provides a theory of *nādī* physiology upon which yogic *prāṇāyāma* is based. As Eliade points out,

the human body acquires an importance it had never before attained in the spiritual history of India. To be sure, health and strength, interest in physiology homologizable with the cosmos and implicitly sanctified, are Vedic, if not pre-Vedic, values. But tantra carries to its furthest consequences the conception that sanctity can be realized in a “divine body.” . . . And since liberation can be gained even in this life, the body must be preserved as long as possible, and in perfect condition, precisely as an aid to meditation. (1990: 227)

Both the primary and the secondary literatures on Sāṃkhya and Tantra are vast in scale and scope. When trying to discern the relevance of texts to contemporary practice—if not also unto themselves—it is necessary to make a somewhat arbitrary distinction about what can be counted as a textual commentary on themes of yogic significance from within this corpus. Since many aspects of Tantra and Sāṃkhya are relevant to Yoga practice, any analysis of modern Yoga that also seeks to be historically contextual can easily spiral outward in any number of different directions until it is no longer an analysis of Yoga as such.

But the problem of the body is magnified even in the context of the Yoga literature strictly defined. What appears to be most cerebral—*citta*, consciousness or mind—in the *Yoga Sūtra* is, by virtue of being sensory, a quasi-material embodied thing, making control of the mind a physiological problem in much the same way as is control of breathing and control of the autonomic nervous system. In yogic terms knowledge and cognition—and by extension the whole world of ideas—fall into the inclusive domain of transmutable materialism. This is a critical point to keep in mind, since it signals a key question about the relationship between philosophy and physiology that will be taken up in the chapters that follow.

While this perspective on reality as a kind of materialist illusion, or sensory misidentification, links the most philosophical with the most physiological yogic texts—and the most mystical with the most magical ones—on the level of practice there is a significant degree of disarticulation between mind and body. On the one hand, the *Yoga Sūtra* has very little to say about *āsanas* and, on the other, the *Hathayogapradipikā* is about *āsanas* and *prāṇāyāma* and very little else. The late medieval period, between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, is very important to understanding modern Yoga in general and the ambiguous disarticula-

tion of mind and body in particular. It is at this time that one can begin to link up the development of Yoga with various concrete aspects of political, economic, and social history, albeit tenuously (Briggs 1938; M. Singh 1937; D. White 1996). Any meaningful commentary on this period is well beyond the scope of this book, but it is important to note that the Nātha Yogis who refined, expanded, and perfected Hatha Yoga also engaged directly with the intellectual problem of representing the truth of embodied practice. In many respects a further analysis of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century documents could provide the earliest example of embodied Yoga's struggle with textual reification on the one hand and the mystification of both text and body on the other.<sup>15</sup>

At the other end of the historical spectrum, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are interesting in that one is able to find texts that emerge directly out of documented practice. This is precisely the period to which Sjoman (1996) directs his critical attention.<sup>16</sup> Almost all turn-of-the-century texts claim to be authentic and authoritative. In and of themselves of course they are. But all of the ones I have collected claim to be based on the teaching of “true adepts” or derived from the “classical literature.” And yet each of these texts explicitly or implicitly combines, in various ways and to various degrees, gymnastics, physical training, and hygiene with *āsana*, *kriyā*, and *prāṇāyāma*. In point of fact this is not altogether different from what the Nātha Yogis were doing in the ninth century by combining aspects of Tantra, Siddha alchemy, and yogic purification in their quest for immortality and embodied perfection as a “total experience of life.” Granted the “global influences” at this earlier time may have been from what is now China, but the Nātha Yogis strategically “confused” materialism and magic in a way that anticipates the New Age. In any case, when studying the numerous examples of conscious and unconscious modern mimesis, it is necessary to read Eliade’s famous dictum about bodily perfection across the plane of its singular Orientalist meaning: “Perfection is always the goal [of Yoga], and, as we shall soon see, it is neither athletic nor hygienic perfection. Hatha Yoga cannot and must not be confused with gymnastics” (1990: 228).<sup>17</sup> Prescriptive injunctions aside, it is precisely this “confusion”—extending from the ninth through the twentieth centuries—that has made Yoga what it is.

In many respects the literature on Hatha Yoga—the *Hathayogapradipikā* (1350 C.E.) and two significantly later but very similar texts, the *Gherāndasamhitā* (1650 C.E.) and the *Śivasamhitā* (1750 C.E.)—can be regarded as most directly relevant for this study. Each of these texts describes *āsana* procedures, *prāṇāyāma*, and techniques of purification, though cryptically and without much commentary. Beyond this, however,

## 22 CHAPTER 1

the Hāṭha Yoga literature emerges out of a context of practice where the central problem was not physical fitness, at least in any simple, physiological sense. Rather, what concerned the Nātha Yogis was the embodiment of immortality and the materialization of magic. As Eliade points out:

One of the essential points of this new “revelation” [the integration and synthesis of Sahajīyā tantra, Nāgārjuna and Carpaṭi’s alchemy and Gorkhnāth’s Hāṭha Yoga, among others] was that it finally completed the synthesis among the elements of Vajrayāna and Sivaist tantra, magic and alchemy and Hāṭha Yoga. In a way, it was a continuation of the tantric synthesis. But a number of the Nāthas and Siddhas put more emphasis than their predecessors had done upon the value of magic and Yoga as inestimable means for a conquest of freedom and immortality. (1990: 304–5)

It is both the emphasis on embodied, materialized magic and what appears to be the “populist appeal” of Hāṭha Yoga in the medieval period—Eliade situates his discussion within the context of “aboriginal” India and folklore—that seem to anticipate many aspects of modern practice. Significantly, however, it is important to note that modern Yoga in practice does not, in any sense, emerge directly from these texts, but rather from an elaborate oral tradition. Apart from this, even though the three texts are intensely physical, in their focus on magical power and conquering death they are, in many ways, more abstract, mystical, and explicitly oriented toward the occult than the *Yoga Sūtra*. This is not surprising. But from the perspective of modern Yoga—which is radically antimystical and self-consciously rational and pragmatic—it is difficult to know how to make sense of the relationship articulated in these texts between magic and the physical body. What does it mean—in terms of embodied experience based on precisely defined procedures—to be able to fly, to be clairvoyant and invisible, and to conquer death and destroy sickness? And how—beyond simple analogy—does this meaning relate to more modest claims, such as being healthy and physically fit?

Beyond this, the description of *āsanas* given in the *Hathayogapradīpikā* and the other texts is very imprecise and incomplete, perhaps because the foundational basis of practice in Yoga was not the textual relationship between word and object but the far more primary relationship between *guru* and *celā*, or disciple.<sup>18</sup> In all probability the descriptions are designed as mnemonic aids, although they do not take the highly condensed aphoristic form of *sūtras*. In any case it is clear that these descriptions are not the basis for a tradition in practice, and the texts are not anything like self-help manuals. It is best to conceptualize the texts in a dialectical relationship to practice, since they constantly reiterate the importance of practice. Certainly most of the initial modern publications and translations with commentary (Ayyangar 1893; Brahma-

nanda 1889; Sinh 1997; Vasaka 1877; Vasu 1895) appear to predate the earliest developments of practice-based modern Yoga—at least as documented in modern texts—by about fifteen years. But then, by the late 1920s and early 1930s, various people who were engaged in practice—and the modern textual representation of practice—used the *Hathayoga-pradīpikā*, the *Sivasamhitā*, and the *Gheraṇḍasamhitā* to authenticate a broad spectrum of modern techniques and styles. Thus the texts tend to be used to authenticate the tradition as a whole by virtue of being “ancient” and authored by semi-divine sages—and to connect modern, medieval, and ancient practice into homogenized historical continuity—but their currency as practical reference books is not very great.

Another problem with using the Haṭha Yoga literature as a gold standard is that one would have to discount a significant percentage of what counts for Yoga today, including a common procedure known as *sūrya namaskār* (salutation to the sun), which is not mentioned as a physical exercise in any of the standard texts published or printed earlier than the nineteenth century. What appears to be a headstand is mentioned in the *Yogatattva Upaniṣad* (see Ayyangar 1952) as well as later Haṭha Yoga texts, but it is also mentioned in the *Mallapurāṇa*, a sixteenth-century text, as one of the exercises in the regimen of medieval wrestlers. This presents a further problem as to what counts as Yoga, and whether or not all headstands can or should be counted as the same thing in fact. In other words, the well-recognized problem that Yoga has multiple meanings is magnified considerably when dealing with different elements of practice—where do you draw the line between deep breathing, *prāṇāyāma*, and certain kinds of rhythmic prayer?<sup>19</sup> Here as well there is the problem of what counts as “classical” texts delineating a timeless, coherent tradition, and other texts that bring that tradition into a more delineated but multivectoral historical framework. Does the *Mallapurāṇa* count, for example? As N. E. Sjoman notes, it is possible to trace the history of ideas about Yoga philosophy through time, and possible to follow the development of *prāṇāyāma* from puranic times up to the present, but there is virtually nothing that allows for the construction of a history of *āsana* practice. Clearly this signals the need for ongoing research. Sjoman’s analysis (1996) of the *Śrītattvanidhi* and *Mallapurāṇa* texts in relation to some of the earliest efforts at Yoga revival manifest in the *Vyāyāmdīpikā* (Bhardwaj 1896) and the *Yogamakaranda* (Krishnamachariya 1935) is directly relevant. But the paucity of any clear history of practice in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries should raise a red flag of sorts concerning the putative antiquity of everything that is now counted as Haṭha Yoga.

It is also important to keep in mind that—apart from practice—the Haṭha Yoga literature can be, and perhaps should be, read in conjunction

24 CHAPTER 1

with the *Yoga Sūtra* and other classical texts. Certainly there is a strong tendency among some who engage in “physical” Yoga to link it directly and unambiguously to the metaphysics of liberation. In part this is done to counteract the modern tendency to categorically distinguish between mind and body, and to see the body as relatively unimportant as concerns higher consciousness. In other words, the relative antiquity of Haṭha Yoga—and all that is associated with ancient esoteric wisdom—makes it possible to “read” metaphysics into modern practice, and read *Yoga darśana* into the nitty-gritty of medieval *sādhana*, regardless of the extent to which practitioners of that vintage were concerned with the relationship of their practice to Patañjali’s text, or to the texts that were being produced on so-called Rāja Yoga in the fourteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. In any case, given the fact that texts and textual knowledge cross-cut time and space, the emergence of Rāja Yoga as such has meant that Haṭha Yoga can never suffer the fate of gymnastics, sports, and athleticism. These very physical activities were integral to classical philosophy in Greece, and thereby integral to the European Renaissance, but—barring the discovery of a late classical Greek text on wrestling that picks up where Plato left off—they have long since come to be regarded as profoundly anti-intellectual. Whereas it is virtually inconceivable that a modern Greco-Roman wrestler might embody platonistic idealism, even the crudest form of modern Yoga can lay claim—and, in fact, lays claim despite itself—to the idea that time can be escaped and immortality embodied.

Beginning in the 1930s, and then with support and encouragement from Yehudi Menuin in the late 1950s, B.K.S. Iyengar transformed *āsana* and *prāṇāyāma* into what has come to be known, around the world, as a kind of full bodied, prop-assisted, performative Yoga gymnastics.<sup>20</sup> Although very much like other forms of practice dating to the 1920s, Iyengar’s method involves a great deal of effort of the kind more often associated with aerobic physical fitness.<sup>21</sup> Given the etymology of *hatha* as “violent effort,” one might say that Iyengar put the “force” back into “forceful” Yoga, and even that he has reestablished the violence of control as central to practice; in yogic terms, the “violent” union of sun and moon is integral to a perfect mastery of the body (Eliade 1990: 228–29). In any event, Iyengar’s style of Yoga has a fairly short history, and emerges out of a career devoted primarily to the physical dimension of practice rather than to metaphysics, meditation, and liberation (Sjoman 1996). But significantly, the short history of Iyengar’s Yoga is linked not only to the power of physical transubstantiation found in the medieval texts, but also to the ancient history of ultimate liberation and freedom. Iyengar’s translation of and commentary on the *Yoga Sūtra* (1993) is amazingly detailed and precise, and perfectly authentic in its own right. But it is a commentary that has grown out of a kind of yogic practice that

is intensely physical and very unique. *Light on Yoga* (1976), probably the most important and widely read modern text on Yoga, is, in many ways, an elaboration and extended commentary on the Hatha Yoga literature.

As they appear in *Light on Yoga*, the descriptions of how to perform āsanas are incredibly detailed and exact, whereas the descriptions in the *Hathayogapradīpikā* are rather vague and cryptic. With regard to śavāsana (corpse pose) Iyengar gives us almost two pages, with careful anatomical reference and measurements, phenomenal concern with the details of body-plane and ground-plane interface, and a complex calculus of geometric positioning that is virtually poetic. The *Hathayogapradīpikā* hardly says more than “lie flat on your back like a corpse,” the homology with embodied death—and by extension ecstasy—being rather obvious. In Iyengar’s elaboration the homology is refined, and the corpse pose becomes both more physical and more metaphysical. His genius is in making the arcane nature of medieval practice explicit, clear, and unambiguous. In Iyengar Yoga, as in medieval Hatha Yoga, the body becomes the materialization of magic. But whereas Hatha Yoga of the fourteenth century was alchemical—and also purely allegorical and metaphoric since it, too, shifted out of situated practice and into texts—Iyengar Yoga is dependent on the magical transmutation of quantum physics: the real possibility of the impossible. To manipulate the body is not to reflect reality, but to transform it.

Thus in an important way, and with reference to contemporary practice, the classical literature is no more or less authentic and authoritative than the putative sage-lost-to-the-world in the Himalayas. If we are to take Dr. Udupa, Swami Kuvalayananda, and “yogic flying” seriously—and I believe we must if we are to appreciate the genius of transcultural innovation rooted in modern India—then it cannot be otherwise. Unless Yoga itself is recognized as a historical construct that has no meaning as a thing apart from the contingency of human experience, and unless everyone who claims to practice it is taken seriously—including B.K.S. Iyengar and those who teach themselves by reading *Yoga for Dummies* (Feuerstein and Payne 1999)—everyone other than the sage himself ends up looking like a fool, and anything other than the “standard canon” has to be read as pulp fiction.

### Scope and Focus

Although this book is fairly comprehensive, attempting to deal with as much of the Yoga literature as possible and focusing on a broad spectrum of practice, it is oriented to the subject in a particular way and carries with it, therefore, a certain obvious bias. Historically, the time frame is the

## 26 CHAPTER 1

modern era and the focus is on twentieth-century texts and late-twentieth-century practice. However, reference is made to the classical and medieval literature to the extent that this literature is strategically incorporated into modern discourse and practice. Topically, the focus here is on physiology and physical fitness rather than on metaphysics, meditation, and soteriology. There is a whole body of nineteenth-century literature that deals with what was referred to as Yoga's occult or mystical aspect. In this study I deal with that literature only to the extent that many of the first advocates for "Yoga physical education" were explicitly antimystical and critical of the occult tradition. Finally, this study is concerned mainly with the way in which Yoga is conceived of as a science, and the way in which discourses and practices of science have given shape to modern Yoga.

Although historically, topically, and theoretically thus circumscribed, this study seeks to show that Yoga is an example of the extreme degree to which the truth of historically situated social life is obscured by powerful cultural beliefs about the nature of human experience. These beliefs are on a par with but in some ways more powerful than religious beliefs by virtue of being embodied by the self of direct experience. Beyond this, a critical analysis of Yoga's history will show that it is a product of the colonial era, a product of a particular concern with health and morality, and a product of science and scientific practice. At the same time, however, Yoga will be shown to "chip away" at the edifice of the empire, redefine what is meant by health in modern India, and problematize and creatively expand the practice of science.

In delineating the parameters of this study it is necessary to define what follows with reference to the two chief architects of the Yoga renaissance, Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo.<sup>22</sup> At the end of the nineteenth century, Vivekananda, an upper-middle-class Bengali disciple of the mystic sage Ramakrishna, revolutionized Hinduism by advocating a kind of no-nonsense, self-confident, muscular—and, therefore, masculinized—spiritualism. As is well known, he did this, most dramatically, in 1893 on the stage of the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, and thus almost single-handedly both popularized and globalized Hinduism. On the national stage Vivekananda's "clarion call" for the revival of a Hinduism-to-be-proud-of defined a new kind of patriotism at the turn of the century—a kind of patriotism that was religious, but extended easily into other areas of cultural life. Among other things, Vivekananda articulated a kind of spirituality based on Vedānta, but expressed in terms of what he called Rāja Yoga.<sup>23</sup> Most significantly he was critical of asceticism and world renunciation and advocated a kind of "Yoga theology" linked to the world of direct experience.

At about the same time, Aurobindo Ghose, another upper-middle-class Bengali, educated in London, was active in the Indian National Congress and directly involved in the Freedom Movement. Gradually, however, he withdrew from active participation and began to pursue spiritual goals and live the life of an ascetic. Although at first involved in direct teaching, he had his greatest influence through the publication of books on Yoga philosophy, cosmology, and metaphysics. As with Vivekananda, Aurobindo's interpretation of spiritualism was proactive, one of the key features being the idea that through a synthesis of Yoga humankind could evolve to a higher state of what he called supramental consciousness.

Although there are interesting, and very important, physiological features to both Aurobindo's and Vivekananda's teachings—the former has quite a bit to say about physical education and hygiene (Aurobindo n.d., 1949; Bhattacharya 1952, 1968; "The Mother" 1979; Purani 1950) and the latter about football and muscle building—the influence of both men has been almost exclusively on the plane of institutionalized religion, spiritualism, and philosophy. They created a new climate for the critical study of Hinduism and Indian philosophy as well as for a less critical adherence to tradition. Certainly the influence of both men is profound in the intellectual history of modern India.

It is somewhat surprising, therefore, that there is little, if any, mention made of either Vivekananda or Aurobindo by those men who were responsible for the revival-cum-reinvention of yogic *āsanas*, *kriyās*, and *prāṇāyāma* in the early part of this century. Perhaps this is because their influence was so great as to not require comment. However, the two main characters in the history of modern Yoga as it is linked to health and fitness—Sri Yogendra (1930, 1936, 1991) and Swami Kuvalayananda (1924a)—claim to have been taught and inspired by a relatively unknown, Bengali, ex-civil servant known as Madhavdas, who renounced the world and practiced Yoga in the latter part of the nineteenth century while wandering in the Himalayas. Although Swami Kuvalayananda was also influenced by Aurobindo, who taught for some time in Gujarat, he was much more heavily influenced by Rajratna Manikrao's advocacy for physical fitness, indigenous exercise, and mass-drill physical training. For his part, Sri Yogendra was a wrestler and exercise buff before becoming a practitioner of Yoga.<sup>24</sup>

There can be no doubt that Vivekananda and Aurobindo—and to a lesser degree, and in a much more oblique sense, Mahatma Gandhi<sup>25</sup>—defined the broader intellectual context within which there was a renaissance in the practice of Yoga *āsanas*, *kriyās*, and *prāṇāyāma*. But the history of this renaissance seems to "slip past" these men, since there is a much more direct link between innovative Indian experimentation in the

1920s and transnational ideas about health, strength, and physical fitness all over the world in the mid- to late nineteenth century and early in the twentieth. At the risk of sounding heretical, I think Eugene Sandow, the father of modern body building, has had a greater influence on the form and practice of modern Yoga—and most certainly modern Hatha Yoga—than either Aurobindo or Vivekananda. In fact, given this history it would be possible to undertake a revisionist study of Vivekanand’s “muscular Hinduism.” Perhaps even Aurobindo’s seemingly abstract philosophy of evolved consciousness needs to be rethought on the basis of what he and “The Mother” had to say about the importance of physical fitness and physical education: “Physical culture is the best way of developing the consciousness of the body, and the more the body is conscious, the more it is capable of receiving the divine forces that are at work to transform it and give birth to the new race” (1979: 205). In other words, with regard to the present state of knowledge—which tends to be bound by the narrow framework of institutionalized religion and nationalistic philosophy—Vivekananda and Aurobindo could be considered marginal to the historical development of modern Yoga in India. However iconoclastic it may seem, the history of Yoga slips past spirituality and intellectual philosophy. It is unambiguously linked to rules that apply to nature and the body.

### Science and Yoga: The Merging of Myths

If there is a single word associated with the development of Yoga in the twentieth century it is the English word “science,” as well as that word’s numerous, and exceedingly ambiguous, sanskritic synonyms. Indeed, the English word science is just as ambiguous, and has been used to mean so many different things by different people that, when dealing with translations, and translations of translations, it is almost impossible to know what, exactly, is signified by this slippery, polysemic field of signifiers. With respect to the English word, however—and much of the early-twentieth-century Indian literature on Yoga is in English—it is clear that one of the connotations of science is authority, legitimacy, and power. Moreover, the concept of science seems to have defined a particular perspective on gaining knowledge, a perspective that is meticulous and comprehensive rather than speculative. To an extent, science opens up the body—as well as many other things such as the environment, geography, and population—for both examination and, significantly, translation.

One of the problems in a study like this one is to avoid the reflex tendency—at least it is a reflex tendency of someone born in the Himalayas who went in search of sages in the United States—to regard sci-

ence as a transcultural, atemporal, purely objective system of knowledge. The term as such tends to conjure up images of white-coated teams of lab technicians under the supervision of senior scientists working with precise theories to test and retest hypotheses in order to discover some unknown fact, prove something as true, or invent something new. And the tendency is to regard this image of science as more or less the same regardless of where in the world it is transplanted. In other words, science as a mode of knowledge and a means of producing knowledge is probably one of the most powerful hegemonic forces of this and the previous two centuries, intimately linked to politics and political power, academia and intellectual authority, as well as to economies and the political economies of socialism, communism, and capitalism. In a sociological sense, science is the religion of modernity.

Over the course of the past twenty years, the work of Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar (1979) among many others—including, of course, Thomas Kuhn's earlier revolutionary study (1970)—has both demystified and complicated the meaning and significance of the conceptual basis, practical application, and philosophy of science. Over the years feminism has provided a particularly effective critique of science, and this critique has become increasingly focused on the various ways in which power/knowledge is configured in scientific discourse. All of this has led to increasingly well stated and firmly grounded questions about the legitimacy and limits of science as a distinct way of knowing and way of controlling knowledge.

Although it is not really possible to speak of a crisis in science comparable to the crisis in social science brought on by the so-called interpretive turn, work in quantum physics has clearly blurred the lines between philosophy and science. Most significantly, this “blurring” is not just on the level of theory; it is part of laboratory research. In an important way ontological questions about the nature of time, space, and matter posed in terms of theoretical physics can be seen as posing challenges to the structural basis of science. Obviously science as such cannot be said to have “responded” to sociological and philosophical critiques—the power and beauty of science is in its structural conformity to so-called Natural Laws—but it is interesting to note that changes in the seemingly unchangeable laws of nature have made it possible to extend the sociological critique beyond practice as such to the very theoretical basis of science.

Added to this is the way in which history provides an important perspective on the changing nature of science and, therefore, on the contingency of its claim to represent reality. As research in the history of science continues to show—but also as common sense would suggest—one cannot assume that what is meant by science in the year 2000 is what was meant by science in 1900 or even 1950. In other words, taking into account all

of these critiques, it has become increasingly possible to “chip away” at the hegemonic structure of science by using the tools of deconstruction—critical, “ethnographic” phenomenology on the one hand, and, on the other, critical history. The end result is a scaled-down, fragmented image of science that is much more realistic and true to the world of human experience.

A problem in this, however, is that Swami Kuvalayananda, for all his nominal world renunciation, did not limit himself and his search for Truth to the simple technology described in the *Hathayogapradīpikā* or to what was taught to him by his *guru* Madhavdas. He did not practice Yoga as a yogi. As we shall see, he wore a white lab coat, built a laboratory and clinic, imported X-ray machines and electrocardiographs. To a significant extent he modeled himself and his study of Yoga on the hegemonic image of science, as that hegemonic image—which is just as nominal as world renunciation—was emerging in the early part of the twentieth century. But Kuvalayananda, among many others, did not just co-opt the trappings of science, the *materia scientica* that is, in many ways, the materialization of technocentric modernity. He engaged with science as a way of knowing, as a philosophy of knowledge. In this regard he set about testing specific aspects of Yoga practice. But in this project, Yoga as a theory of psychic function came to hold a status very similar to that of evolutionary theory in biology. Although regarded as a theory, and therefore in principle still subject to questions of proof, for all practical purposes a yogic theory of psychic function functioned more ontologically than epistemologically in the structure and logic of experimental reasoning.

Laboratory experimentation and “field research” on Yoga were meant to provide an increasingly refined, empirical understanding of the material manifestation of a cosmic principle, as this cosmic principle was understood as a “theory” of absolute freedom. In this regard one might say that whereas religion holds science at arm’s length—since faith and reason are fundamentally incompatible—the underlying materialism of Yoga, its *prakṛtic* structure, seductively draws science in. In its own way Yoga is based on a Cosmic Principle that is comparable to the Natural Law of physics. But whereas this makes Yoga and science analogous—and is the basis for a whole history of interaction—Yoga takes control of science, as science is understood as knowledge that must be transcended. It is comparable—but only that—to a physicist whose research on the relationship between time, energy, and matter changes the nature of reality as we know it—but not, of course, reality as such—including the reality of the idea of “proof” as a time-dependent entity.

What is being dealt with in this study is, therefore, the complex intersection of at least two powerful myths—the metaphysics of Yoga, and

yogic physiology in particular, and the methods of science and scientific knowledge. The purpose of this book is not to untangle this intersection so much as to reflect on its implications. To do so will provide a better and more complex understanding of some aspects of Indian intellectual history and a better understanding of the place of the body in the history of India's present. Although this study is built around the work of Swami Kuvalayananda, whose direct and indirect influence on modern Yoga is profound, it is a study that spirals outward from Kuvalayananda's research in Lonavala and moves backward and forward through time and around and about through the space of colonial and postcolonial India. It is a meditation on the nature of social history and an argument for the primacy of the "social" in social science—provided social facts are regarded as thoroughly infused with magic, as the epigraph from Durkheim's classic work would suggest. In this sense this study is engaged with the unreality of culture. It is focused on the historicity of human experience, as this historicity undermines culture and the idea of meaningful continuity upon which the reality of social life is thought to be based. In this sense it is, in essence, yogic—but with an orientation to the present and the past, not the future and any sort of final liberation. As a published work of scholarship it does, however, have a certain immortality and freedom.