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Yoga

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Zoë Slatoff

Yoga represents both a philosophy and a practice, with the goal of liberation. Although ascetic practices existed previously, and the word *yoga* appears in the Vedas, the first definition is in the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, where it is described as 'the steady restraint of the senses', building on the idea of yoga as yoking, like a horse and carriage. The *Bhagavadgītā*, contained within the epic *Mahābhārata*, describes multiple types of yoga, reframing it as a world-affirming practice, explained as 'skilfulness in action'. The first codification of yoga appears in Patañjali's c. 400 CE *Yogasūtra*, which defines it as 'the stilling of the fluctuations of the mind', attained through practice and detachment, with the aim of isolation (*kaivalya*) of the self from material nature, like the philosophy of Sāṃkhya. The well-known eight-part (*aṣṭāṅga*) path also originates in this text, culminating in meditative absorption (*samādhi*).

Beginning in the twelfth century – although most well-known from the fifteenth-century compilation, the *Haṭhapradīpikā* – a new kind of yoga emerged, with roots in Tantra. This *haṭhayoga* placed more emphasis on postures (*āsana*) and breath-control (*prāṇāyāma*), as a counterpart to *rājayoga*, whose aim was the union of the individual and universal self. While a Vedāntic yoga was first brought to the West by Vivekananda, who was dismissive of *haṭhayoga*, later teachers – particularly Krishnamacharya's students – emphasized these physical practices, giving birth to modern yoga, which is now practiced by millions across the world, although often divorced from its roots. The enduring popularity of yoga is largely due to its adaptability through the ages.

Keywords: Philosophy, Spiritual practices, Body and mind, Meditation, Modern yoga, Dualism, Tantra, Yoga, Liberation of the self, Hindu texts

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1 Early yoga

1.1 Introduction and early history

Yoga represents both a philosophy and a practice: it can indicate the goal of spiritual liberation, as well as the method to attain this state. Modern yoga, practiced by millions across the world today, is often considered a tool for mind-body healing, though frequently divorced from its roots. The word *yoga* itself has seventy-eight wide-ranging definitions in V. S. Apte's Sanskrit-English dictionary, including the more common meanings such as yoking, union, and meditative absorption (*samādhi*), as well as a carriage, armour, suitability, trick, incantation, etymological connection, a constellation, and even a spy. The enduring popularity of yoga is largely due to its adaptability through the ages – its meaning has continued to transform in different contexts throughout its evolution.

Some have claimed the existence of an early version of yoga based on artifacts from the Indus Valley Civilization (c. 2500–1500 BCE), particularly the 'Paśupati Seal', which depicts a seated figure thought to be a proto-Shiva (Śiva) in a yoga posture. However, this supposition comes largely from projecting later ideas backwards and there is no archaeological evidence to support it (Sarbacker 2021: 40–42). Most of the knowledge that we do have of yoga comes from textual sources, such as the ones discussed in this encyclopaedia entry, which were originally passed down through oral tradition. This article traces the history of yoga, while acknowledging that dating is often speculative, sources are frequently intertwined, and omissions are inevitable. All translations are the author's own.

The earliest mention of the word yoga is in the *Ṛgveda* (c. fifteenth century BCE), where it is used mainly in the sense of yoking, like horses joined to a plough or chariot, which is also given as an analogy for harnessing the words and offerings of the priests to the fire sacrifice (*yajña*) (Gibbons 2020: 30–31). These hymns refer to yoking various other elements as well, such as the pressing stones for the elixir Soma (10.94.6), the mind and thoughts (5.81.1), and even divine truth (*ṛta*; 3.27.11). The similarity between the words 'yoga' and 'yoke' is not coincidental – Sanskrit and English both descend from a hypothesized proto-Indo-European language, which also gave birth to Latin, Greek, the romance languages, Avestan, and the north Indian vernacular languages such as Hindi, and consequently share many cognate words. Later texts, such as the *Mahābhārata*, build upon these ideas, using the word *yoga* to refer to a war chariot, to which one is 'yoked' or *yukta* (a verbal form derived from the same root *yuj*). This early idea of warriors, as well as gods, on both literal and celestial yoga chariots, journeying through the world and heavens, was later translated into the idea of a more internal quest within the self (White 2012: 3–4).

Although yoga as a distinct discipline did not yet exist in early Brāhmaṇical society, there was a concurrent non-Vedic *śramaṇa* (renunciant or literally 'exerting') culture, which contained many of the ideas that later became part of yoga. These ascetic practices were called *tapas*, derived from the verbal root *tap*, meaning 'to heat'. While *tapas* practices in the Vedas were generally done in relation to the sacrificial fire or Soma ceremony, often with the intention of winning favour from the gods, these *śramaṇas* – who were thought to originate in the Greater Magadha area, and included Buddhists, Jains, and Ājīvikas – aimed to use these practices to escape the suffering inherent in the cycle of rebirth (*saṃsāra*) by eliminating past karma and ultimately attaining liberation. These *śramaṇa* practices were referred to in Brāhmaṇical sources as 'yoga', although the *śramaṇas* did not label them as such, and later influenced the development of Brāhmaṇical tradition (Bronkhorst 2011). Many of the seeds that developed into 'classical yoga' were planted during this time, including various Buddhist and Jain meditative practices, as well as the Jain idea of nonviolence (*ahiṃsā*) and other ethical observances. The similar Buddhist code of morality (*śīla*), together with wisdom (*prajñā*) and concentration (*samādhi*), make up the eightfold path.

1.2 Upaniṣads

The early Upaniṣads (c. seventh–sixth century BCE) speak extensively about the five vital forces (*prāṇa*) – speech, sight, hearing, thinking, and breathing – of which the latter is most important (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 1.5.2). This breath (*prāṇa*) is often equated with life and with the self. It is divided into five types, each with its own function in the body, an idea which gets developed further in the later Upaniṣads and subsequent texts. The *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* is the first text to speak explicitly about the mind being bound to the breath, through an analogy of a bird tied to a string, which flies around in all directions but eventually returns to its support, just like the mind returns to its support of the breath (6.8.2). This idea became the foundation for later developments of breath-control (*prāṇāyāma*) practices. The *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* (c. sixth–fifth century BCE) is the origin of the relatively recent yogic concept of the five sheaths (*pañcamaya kośa*) of the body, although without the word *kośa*, describing increasingly subtle layers of what constitutes the self, beginning with the outermost (or gross) layer of food, then breath, mind, cognition, and ultimately bliss (2.1–5).

The first definition of yoga as a discipline appears in the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* (c. third century BCE), which tells the story of the boy Naciketas' encounter with Yama, the god of death, where yoga is described as 'the steady restraint of the senses' and 'the origin and dissolution' (6.11). Earlier in the text, an analogy with a chariot is used to explain the relationship between the self and the body, mind, and senses. In this comparison, the body is the chariot, the intellect is the charioteer, the mind is the reins, the senses are the horses, and the sense objects are the fields for action. The self is the chariot rider who

is yoked (*yukta*) to the body, senses, and mind (3.3–4). Without discernment, the mind is uncontrolled and one becomes enslaved to the senses which behave like bad horses; however, with discernment, the mind and senses can be controlled like good horses, and one ultimately reaches liberation (3.5–8). The final verse of the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* proclaims that Naciketas has received all the rules of yoga (*yogavidhi*), and thus attained *brahman*, the universal self (6.18). This attainment and realization of the oneness of *ātman* (the individual self) and *brahman* is the essential goal of all the Upaniṣads, but here it is newly linked to yoga.

The *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* (c. first century BCE–sixth century CE) uses a similar analogy of yoking horses to a carriage to explain a technique for controlling the mind, here connecting it explicitly to breath-control:

> Holding the body straight, with the three parts lifted, drawing together the senses with the mind into the heart, a wise person should cross all the fearful rivers, with the raft of *brahman*. Suppressing the breaths here, with movement controlled, one should exhale through a nostril when the breath has waned. A wise person, attentive, should control his mind, like a carriage yoked to bad horses. (*Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* 2.8–9)

The *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* then gives the reason for doing these practices, explaining that when the qualities of yoga have arisen, consisting of the five elements, 'for that person, who has obtained a body made up of the fire of yoga, there will be no disease, no old age, no suffering' (2.12). The first outward manifestations of yoga include lightness, health, and a pleasant smell – and eventually, having seen the true nature of the self (*ātman*), one becomes solitary and free from sorrow. Then, seeing the true nature of *brahman*, one is liberated from all restraints (2.13–15). This description foreshadows many of the later descriptions of yoga practice and its positive effects on the body and mind.

The *Maitrāyaṇīya* or *Maitrī Upaniṣad* (exact dating is unclear, although the yoga sections may postdate the *Yogasūtra*) borrows from the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* and continues to emphasize the relationship of the breath to the mind, taking this a step further to explain that control of the breath can equate to knowledge of the self (Barois 2020: 22–25). The *Maitrī Upaniṣad* elaborates a *ṣaḍaṅga* (six-part) yoga system, consisting of breath-control, sensory-withdrawal, meditation, concentration, reflection, and meditative absorption (6.18), which seems related to Tantric Śaiva systems (Vasudeva 2004: 376, note 18). It explains that the breath should be joined with the syllable *Oṃ*, defining yoga as 'the oneness of the breath and mind, and the abandoning of all inclinations of the senses' (*Maitrī Upaniṣad* 6.25).

1.3 The *Mahābhārata*, including the *Bhagavadgītā*

The epic *Mahābhārata* (c. third century BCE–third century CE) is about ten times the length of the Iliad and the Odyssey combined. It consists of eighteen books, written mostly in verse form. The text tells the story of the five Pāṇḍava brothers and their complex conflict with their cousins, the Kauravas. It contains numerous references to yoga, which is often linked together with *tapas*, attempting to reframe yoga as a world-affirming Brāhmaṇical practice without attachment to results, rather than an ascetic tradition. The word yoga is used with many different meanings, including one that echoes the Vedic idea of a yogic carriage, here referring to one on which dying warriors can journey to the sun and ultimately to liberation (White 2009: 73). The *Mahābhārata* lays out an eightfold path of *dharma*, consisting of sacrifice, study, charity, austerity, truthfulness, patience, restraint, and absence of greed (3.2.71). It then elaborates a second eightfold path, which echoes the Buddhist version, including right intention, right restraint of the senses, right specific vows, right honouring of the teacher, right control of food, right study, right renunciation of ritual, and right stilling of the mind (3.2.73cd–75). It explains that 'practicing complete tranquillity, through austerity (*tapas*), one should seek success and success in yoga' (3.2.77).

The well-known *Bhagavadgītā*, contained within the sixth book of the *Mahābhārata*, takes place on the field of *dharma* (justice), as its first words tell us, narrating the story of the despondent Pāṇḍava warrior Arjuna seeking advice from his divine charioteer, Krishna (Kṛṣṇa). Through Arjuna's external conflict of whether to fight his cousins in battle, his internal struggle is revealed. Krishna responds by teaching him various types of yoga, both as a means to journey inward to discover ultimate truth, and as a way of learning to act and fulfil one's *dharma* (duty) in the world. The *Bhagavadgītā* defines yoga variously as 'equanimity', 'skilfulness in action', and 'disjunction from union with suffering' (2.48; 2.50; 6.23). It equates yoga with dualistic Sāṃkhya, as well as with non-dualistic absorption in *brahman*, as in the Upaniṣads. The *Bhagavadgītā* is thought to be the origin of the threefold categorization of yoga, which offers varying methods for different practitioners, into the yoga of action (*karmayoga*), the yoga of knowledge (*jñānayoga*), and the yoga of devotion (*bhaktiyoga*). It also gives explicit instruction for practice, including

> the establishment of a steady seat, not too high or low, in a clean place, with a covering of cloth, antelope skin, and *kuśa* grass. Here, one should make the mind one-pointed, with activity of mind and senses controlled, holding the body, head and neck straight, unmoving and steady, gazing at the tip of one's nose, and not looking in any direction, for purification of the self. (*Bhagavadgītā* 6.11–13)

It teaches a middle way, counselling that 'yoga is not for one who eats or sleeps too much or too little' (6.16). The *Bhagavadgītā* (6.35) explains that the mind is to be restrained

through practice (*abhyāsa*) and detachment (*vairāgya*) – a concept which is echoed in the *Yogasūtra*, where it becomes fundamental.

The twelfth book of the *Mahābhārata* – the *Śāntiparvan* or 'The Book of Peace' – contains specific teachings on yoga. These are taught by Bhīṣma to Yudhiṣṭhira, the oldest Pāṇḍava brother, in a section at the end called the *Mokṣadharmaparvan*, considered to contain the oldest systemization of yoga. Bhīṣma explains the fourfold yoga of meditation (12.188.1), which involves making the mind one-pointed, controlling the senses, and sitting like a log of wood (12.188.5). Eventually when the afflictions (*kleśas*) and other impediments are gone, increasingly subtle states of meditation arise (*vicāra*, *vitarka*, *viveka*; 12.188.14–15), until finally the yogi (*yogī*) reaches a state of liberation (*nirvāṇa*; 12.188.22). The text explains that having completely eradicated the five obstacles to yoga – desire, anger, greed, fear, and sleep – one should cultivate meditation, study, charity, truth, modesty, honesty, patience, pure diet, and restraint of the senses to increase energy and remove sin (12.232.4.10–11). The sage should practice yoga at sunrise, noon, and sunset, on a mountain peak, sanctuary, or in the treetops; restraining the senses, the sage should always contemplate with one-pointed attention and should not disturb their mind from yoga (12.232.23–24). The *Mokṣadharmaparvan* explains that the most powerful type of yoga is meditation, which is twofold: one-pointedness of the mind and breath-control. The latter is with quality, since it depends on the breath, while the former is without (12.294.7–8). It says that the wise know that one is yoked (*yukta*) in yoga, when untrembling, like a pillar, and motionless, like a mountain (12.295.15). It declares that 'there is no knowledge equal to Sāṃkhya and no strength equal to Yoga' (12.304.2ab). The terms *sāṃkhya* and *yoga* are both used frequently in the *Mahābhārata*, which sometimes refers to them as separate systems, sometimes equates them, and sometimes simply uses them with the meaning of theory and practice (Brockington 2003).

2 'Classical' yoga

2.1 Patañjali's *Yogasūtra* and its commentaries

The first codification of yoga appears in Patañjali's *Yogasūtra* (c. 400 CE) which defines it in *sūtra* 1.2 as 'the stilling of the fluctuating states of the mind', attained through practice and detachment (1.12). The ultimate aim is the isolation (*kaivalya*) of the self (*puruṣa*) from material nature (*prakṛti*), in alignment with the philosophy of Sāṃkhya. The *Yogasūtra* derives its definition of yoga from a different verbal root *yuj* (as noted in Bhoja's *Rājamārtaṇḍa*), here used in the sense of *samādhi* (meditative absorption). The first commentary (*bhāṣya*) on this text, attributed to Vyāsa, is now thought by many scholars to be an autocommentary (that is, a commentary by the author on their own work); when joined together with the *Yogasūtra*, the combined *sūtra* text and commentary is entitled the *Pātañjalayogaśāstra* (Maas 2013). The *Pātañjalayogaśāstra* explicitly says that *Yogasūtra* is an explanation of Sāṃkhya, although the terminology used in the

Yogasūtra often differs from that used in the contemporaneous *Sāṃkhyakārikā*. Although written for Brahmins, the *Yogasūtra* emerged in a particular milieu of dialogue and debate between Brāhmaṇism and the non-Vedic traditions, particularly amongst Yoga, Sāṃkhya, Buddhism, and Jainism. These ideas influenced and informed each other, as evidenced by the strong preponderance of Buddhist terminology in the *Yogasūtra*, which will be discussed in greater detail below.

The text consists of 195 or 196 terse aphorisms, divided into four chapters (*pādas*) – on absorption (*samādhi*), practice (*sādhana*), supernatural powers (*vibhūti*), and isolation (*kaivalya*). The first chapter discusses the five mental fluctuations (*cittavṛttis*) which the seer or *puruṣa* mistakenly identifies with rather than its true nature, gives various methods for attaining clarity of mind, and elaborates the different levels of *samādhi*. Surrender to God (*īśvara*), who is described as a special *puruṣa*, is mentioned as an option for realization through repetition and contemplation of Oṃ, contrasting with the complete non-theism of Sāṃkhya (1.23–29). Another method of note is the cultivation of the four *brahmavihāras* (divine abodes) also noted in Buddhist texts – friendliness, compassion, joy, and equanimity (1.33).

The first *sūtra* of the second chapter of the *Yogasūtra* sets forth the path of *kriyāyoga*, the yoga of action, which consists of discipline (*tapas*), self-study (*svādhyāya*), and surrender to God (*īśvarapraṇidhāna*), for the purpose of bringing about *samādhi* and weakening the afflictions (*kleśa*) – ignorance, egoism, attraction, aversion, and fear of death. Like in both Sāṃkhya and Buddhism, it is explained that the root of everything is suffering (*duḥkha*), caused by the conjunction of the seer and the seen – *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*. Echoing Sāṃkhya, *prakṛti* is characterized by the three qualities (*guṇas*) of activity (*rajas*), inertia (*tamas*), and clarity (*sattva*), consists of the elements and the senses, and is for the purpose of experience and liberation. In a circular way, while the cause of the conjunction of the seer and the seen is ignorance (*avidyā*), it is this very conjunction that is the cause of liberation, ultimately in the form of the isolation (*kaivalya*) of the seer (2.15–25).

The well-known eight-part path (*aṣṭāṅga*) of yoga is also given in the second chapter as the means to the destruction of the impurities, which creates the discernment that leads to this liberation. These components are restraints (*yama*), observances (*niyama*), posture (*āsana*), breath-control (*prāṇāyāma*), sensory withdrawal (*pratyāhāra*), concentration (*dhāraṇā*), meditation (*dhyāna*), and absorption (*samādhi*; 2.26–29). The restraints, derived through the process of cultivating a counter-state (*pratipakṣabhāvana*), which is also seen in Buddhist texts, are subdivided into nonviolence (*ahiṃsā*), truthfulness, not stealing, chastity, and not grasping; the observances consist of cleanliness, contentment, discipline, self-study, and surrender to God (2.30–2.45). Posture is only briefly described in three *sūtras*; however, the *Pātañjalayogaśāstra* lists thirteen possible seated postures,

followed by ‘et cetera’ (*ādi*), implying there were other possibilities, although all intended to aid breath control and meditation (2.46–48).

The third chapter describes the powerful combination of the last three components – concentration, meditation, and absorption – into a state called *saṃyama*, which becomes the basis for the many supernatural powers that are then described, depending on the object of this practice. It is explained that while these mystical powers are attainments for the mind, they are hindrances to absorption (3.37). The fourth chapter describes *kaivalya* (isolation) in more detail and is thought to be heavily influenced by Buddhism. In the final stages, one stops creating new mental impressions (*saṃskāras*) and ultimately is no longer affected by karma and the afflictions (of ignorance, egoism, attraction, aversion, and fear of death). Finally, the three *guṇas* (qualities) dissolve back into *prakṛti*, because their purpose has been fulfilled, and the *puruṣa* is established in its own intrinsic form (4.34).

Other commentaries on the *Yogasūtra* have played an important role in its interpretation as well. The first of these is the *Yogasūtrabhāṣyavivaraṇa* (c. eighth century), attributed to the great Advaita Vedāntin Śaṅkarācārya, although this has been debated widely by scholars (see Leggett 1990 and Rukmani 1993 for arguments for and against his authorship respectively). The *Vivaraṇa* defines yoga as both the goal and the means to the ultimate discriminative discernment (1.1). It also gives descriptions of the seated postures listed in the *Pātañjalayogaśāstra*. These postures, as well as other ideas, are expanded upon in the well-known *Tattvavaiśāradī* (c. ninth century), written by Vācaspati Miśra, a prolific scholar from what is today Bihar, who wrote on Sāṃkhya, Vedānta, Mīmāṃsā, and Nyāya, as well as Yoga. Also of note is King Bhoja’s eleventh-century *Rājamārtaṇḍa*. Its introductory verses are the origin of the popular myth that a singular Patañjali authored a text on Āyurveda and a commentary on Pāṇini’s grammar, as well as the *Yogasūtra*, thus in his collective works removing the impurities of body, speech, and mind. Around the same time, Persian scholar al-Bīrūnī translated a version of the *Yogasūtra* into Arabic.

An important later commentary is the sixteenth-century *Yogavārttika* by Vijñānabhikṣu, who understood the goal of his Bhedābheda (‘difference and non-difference’) Vedānta, Sāṃkhya, and Yoga to be the same. He argues in his *Yogasārasaṃgraha* that Patañjali’s aim of *kaivalya* does not actually mean complete ‘isolation’ or ‘aloneness’. In his understanding, when the *puruṣa* (self) is no longer enmeshed in the web of *prakṛti* (material nature), the *guṇas* (activity, inertia, and clarity) dissolve and there is the cessation of suffering, and then the liberated *puruṣa* takes it one step further by realizing *brahman*, the ultimate state of non-duality (Nicholson 2010: 122).

2.2 Buddhism, Jainism, and other influences

Simultaneously with the *Yogasūtra*, yoga was being developed by the more ascetic *śramaṇa* traditions. There is an undeniable intertextuality between Brāhmaṇism and

Buddhism, as has become increasingly clear through shared terminology, concepts, and metaphors. A growing body of scholarship brings attention to interesting parallels between the *Yogasūtra* and contemporaneous works, such as the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* and the *Yogācārabhumiśāstra* (O'Brien-Kop 2022). For example, Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* contains a list of causes for the supernatural attainments (*siddhi*) that is very similar to those in *Yogasūtra* 4.1: birth, herbs, invocations, asceticism, and meditation (Wujastyk 2018: 26–27). The Abhidharma school of Buddhism was concerned with enumerating the constituent parts of reality which it called *dharmas*, in a similar way to Sāṃkhya's categorization of things into *tattvas* (true principles). Despite the differing terminology, the sharing of ideas is undeniable.

Perhaps even slightly predating the *Yogasūtra*, Asaṅga's *Yogācārabhumiśāstra* systematized the Yogācāra 'practice of yoga' Buddhist tradition, which included ascetic disciplines and meditation techniques, such as mental cultivation (*bhāvanā*) – divided into tranquillity (*śamatha*) and insight (*vipaśyanā*) – to eliminate the afflictions, with the ultimate purpose of liberation (O'Brien-Kop 2023: 16). The stages of *samādhi* listed in the first chapter of the *Yogasūtra* echo the Buddhist four meditations (*dhyānas*), beginning with *vitarka* and *vicāra*, later termed *samāpatti* (immersion) in both Buddhist sources and the *Yogasūtra*. The *Śrāvakabhūmi*, the tenth chapter of the *Yogācārabhūmiśāstra*, says there are four types of yoga: faith, will, vigour, and means (2.152). The *Yogasūtra* combines this faith and vigour with the other Buddhist terms mindfulness (*smṛti*), absorption (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*prajñā*) as precursors to supportless *samādhi* (1.20). The word *smṛti* (Pāli: *sati*), which the Brāhmaṇical tradition uses with the meaning of 'memory' or 'recollection', is the foundation of the modern concept of 'mindfulness' practice and is used here with this meaning (Wujastyk 2018: 28–32; Maharaj 2013). Relatedly, the encyclopaedic treatise on traditional Āyurvedic medicine, the earlier *Carakasaṃhitā* (c. 100 BC–200 CE), contains a short section on yoga, which includes an eightfold path to cultivating this *smṛti*, that leads to supernatural powers and ultimately liberation (Wujastyk 2012).

The earliest surviving Jain text, the *Ācārāṅgasūtra* (c. fourth century BCE), emphasizes important yogic elements – particularly non-violence – as well as the four other restraints included by Patañjali. Its goal is *kevala*, a state of complete liberation from karma, similar to Patañjali's *kaivalya*. Early Jainism also incorporates an extreme version of asceticism (*tapas*) that includes extended fasting, self-mortification, uncomfortable postures (*āsana*), and vows of silence, as well as more inwardly focused practices of meditation. At this time, the word *yoga* was used to indicate the way in which actions (*karma*) bind themselves to the soul (*jīva*). The first Jain text written in Sanskrit, the *Tattvārthasūtra* (c. fifth century CE) by Umāsvati, defines yoga as the action or activity of body, speech, and mind (6.1). Thus, the goal was actually *ayoga* – its opposite – which is a state beyond action.

2.3 Further developments

Increasingly, during the second half of the first millennium CE, different schools of thought were synthesized together. Haribhadra Virahāṅka's *Yogabindu* (c. sixth century) engaged with Buddhist ideas, considering yoga as a spiritual practice, while Haribhadra Yākinīputra's *Yogadṛṣṭisamuccaya* (c. eighth century) engaged with Tantra, integrating Jain ideas into an *aṣṭāṅga* path, resembling that of Patañjali (Chapple 2016). The *Yogaśāstra* (c. twelfth century) by Hemacandra elaborates an eightfold system of yoga, explaining that 'liberation is the foremost of the four aims, and yoga is the cause of that. That [yoga] is the three jewels, whose form is knowledge, faith, and conduct' (1.15). It also contains non-seated postures, such as *utkaṭikāsana*, a squatting position in which the great Jain saint Mahāvīra was said to have attained enlightenment, and its autocommentary mentions a form of headstand as an example of other postures (Mallinson and Singleton 2017: 100).

The text now widely known as the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* – whose title may originate only from sixteenth-century Persian adaptations – is derived from the more coherent *Mokṣopāya*, composed by an anonymous author in Kashmir in the tenth century (Slaje 2020: 169). The *Yogavāsiṣṭha*, attributed to the sage Vālmīki and dated broadly by scholars between the sixth to thirteenth century CE, is a more extensive narrative text consisting of six books. It builds upon the story of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, in the form of spiritual instruction given by the sage Vasiṣṭha to prince Rāma, during his journey towards enlightenment. It interweaves a variety of teachings, including Vedānta, Jainism, Sāṃkhya, Mahāyāna Buddhism, and Śaivism, emphasizing the mind-only doctrine of the Yogācāra school of Buddhism, which understands all 'reality' to be a creation of the mind (Chapple 2015: xii). The *Yogavāsiṣṭha* teaches a seven-fold yoga, which begins with turning away from worldly acts (*nivṛtti*). This precipitates reflection and meditation that then allow one to attain a state of nonattachment, which leads to the recognition of the world as a dream (Chapple 2012: 122). While the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* ultimately negates the reality of the world, with the final goal of *nirvāṇa* (literally 'extinction') at the time of death, it emphasizes the Vedāntic aim of liberation-while-living (*jīvanmukti*) as an intermediate aim – the sixth stage – and, like the *Bhagavadgītā*, suggests a path of living in the world, rather than complete renunciation, through fulfilling one's duties without attachment.

Another major genre of texts during that period were the Purāṇas, literally 'ancient tales of the past'. These narrative texts relate stories about gods, kings, and sages, integrating ascetic physical practices with a theistic orientation, and are often focused on Vishnu (Viṣṇu) or Shiva (Śiva). The *Vāyupurāṇa* teaches five yoga practices – breath-control, meditation, sensory withdrawal, concentration, and remembering (10.76). The *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* (c. 900 CE) gives instructions on breath-control, chakras (*cakras*; energy centres or 'wheels'), and the attainment of supernatural powers, as well as emphasizing the importance of *bhaktiyoga* (the yoga of devotion). Many of the Purāṇas use the *aṣṭāṅgayoga* framework but interpret it within a theistic context, which helped to

make these teachings relevant for a wider audience of people engaged in living in the world, rather than just renunciants (Sarbacker 2021: 116–121).

3 Haṭha yoga

3.1 Tantric roots

Around this time, Tantra was developing its own ideas of yoga, defining it as union of the self with Shiva, rather than considering it as synonymous with absorption (*samādhi*). This was first seen in Kauṇḍinya's *Pañcārthabhāṣya* (c. fifth–sixth century CE), a commentary on the *Pāśupatasūtra* (c. second century CE), the earliest work of initiatory Śaivism (Mallinson and Singleton 2017: 674–675). Kauṇḍinya even criticized Patañjali's yoga, saying that 'those who have won supposed release through Samkhya-Yoga, indeed all creatures from the god Brahmā down to the animals, are considered "beasts"' (Nicholson 2013: 494). The c. eighth-century Pāśupata text, the *Īśvaragītā*, however, introduces two types of yoga. The first is Patañjali's dualistic discernment and disjunction (*viyoga*) between *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* (the self and material nature, respectively; see section 2.1), which is considered as preparatory for the second method, the great yoga (*mahāyoga*) of the supreme lord (11.6–8). These two are then combined in the text's definition of yoga: after listing the eight components of Patañjali, the *Īśvaragītā* explains that from the stilling of other mental states, yoga is the one-pointed state of the mind on God (11.12ab). Unlike the *Pātañjalayogaśāstra*, these texts derive the meaning of yoga not from the root *yuj*, meaning 'to be yoked or absorbed in', but from the other root *yuj*, meaning 'to unite'. This is seen in the Śaiva Tantras, such as the *Mālinīvijayottaratantra*, which defines yoga as 'the oneness of one thing with another thing' (4.4) and is even explicitly detailed in the *Mṛgendratantravṛtti*, which explains that yoga in the sense of *samādhi* is simply one method leading toward this joining (Vasudeva 2004: 235–236). This becomes the common understanding by the time of the *Vimānārcanākalpa* (c. tenth century), which defines yoga in an Advaitic way as 'the union of the individual self and the supreme self' (Mallinson and Singleton 2017: 130).

Beginning in the twelfth century, a new kind of yoga emerged, with roots in Tantra. This *haṭhayoga* placed more emphasis on physical practices, expanding and repurposing them as a means to perfecting the body as a step towards a greater goal. The term *haṭhayoga*, literally translated as 'yoga by force', refers to practices for forcefully making the *kuṇḍalinī* ('coiled') serpent energy rise in the body, by bringing the *prāṇa* into the central channel (*suṣumnānāḍī*). However, the term is first seen not in Tantric Śaivism but in Vajrayāna (tantric Buddhist) texts, specifically in the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* (c. third century) – a section of the *Yogācārabhūmiśāstra* – where it is used somewhat ambiguously in contrast to one's 'natural excellence', by which one can become a *bodhisattva*, but 'not by *haṭhayoga*' (Mallinson 2020: 178–179). The eighth-century *Guhyasamājatantra* suggests *haṭhayoga* as a last resort to attain awakening and the perfection of knowledge but does

not elaborate on it. It is the eleventh-century *Vimalaprabhā* – a commentary on the tenth- to eleventh-century *Kālacakratantra* – that first defines *haṭhayoga*, explaining that having made the *prāṇa* flow in the central channel, one should practice *nāda* (internal sound) in order to stop the *bindu* (sexual fluid) from dissipating (Birch 2011: 535–536). The *Kālacakratantra* describes physical postures as well as breathing practices, detailing the health benefits that these provide. During this period between the eighth to twelfth century CE, seventeen Vajrayāna texts that mention *haṭhayoga* have been found to date, where it is mainly used to denote 'an unspecified method of preventing ejaculation during sexual ritual', which is then combined with breath control in some texts (Mallinson 2021: 2).

Although this method was considered a last resort in this context, the Vajrayāna idea of *haṭhayoga* became the foundation for the use of the term in non-Buddhist texts. Beginning in the twelfth century, *haṭhayoga* was increasingly used to refer to the growing repertoire of physical yoga practices. However, while the term *haṭhayoga* itself derived from Vajrayāna sources, this contrast already existed in other traditions as well. In older Śaiva texts, the term *kaṣṭa* (painful) yoga was used to describe a similar method, associated with *mudrās* (bodily seals), *prāṇāyāma*, meditation, and other practices, and generally rejected in favour of simpler, less painful methods (Mallinson 2020: 186).

3.2 Early *haṭhayoga* texts

The first non-Buddhist text to use the word *haṭhayoga* was the Nāth Śaiva *Amaraughaprabodha* (c. thirteenth century), which appears to be inspired by the Vajrayāna *Amṛtasiddhi* (c. eleventh century), although this earlier text does not actually use the term *haṭhayoga* (Birch 2020: 452). Both texts describe the three main *mudrās* (*mahāmudrā*, *mahābandha*, *mahāvedha*) and other practices involving internal sound (*nāda*) and sexual fluid (*bindu*). These become fundamentally important in *haṭhayoga*, which ultimately connects them to the ideal of liberation-while-living (*jīvanmukti*). While the *Amṛtasiddhi* involved the raising of *bindu* and commitment to celibacy – which was fitting in a Buddhist monastic setting – this emphasis is not apparent in the *Amaraughaprabodha* and other early Śaiva *haṭhayoga* texts (Birch 2024: 21–23). In the *Amaraughaprabodha*, these physical practices of *haṭhayoga* were used to forcefully activate the *kuṇḍalinī* energy. In contrast, *rājayoga* is defined in Patañjali's terms as 'being free from the fluctuating states of the mind' (3d). Patañjali's definition of yoga was in common currency at this point, and often, like the term *rājayoga*, was simply used as a synonym for *samādhi* (Birch 2013: 411). The *Amaraughaprabodha* was the origin of a system of four yogas, including *mantrayoga* (involving the recitation of sacred syllables) and *layayoga* (the yoga of dissolution) alongside *haṭhayoga*, while always emphasizing *rājayoga* as superior.

The Vaiṣṇava *Dattātreyayogaśāstra* (c. thirteenth century) also taught this fourfold yoga. This text was the first to elaborate a system of *haṭhayoga*, drawing on both Patañjali's

yoga and Tantra, and adding new physical practices (Mallinson and Singleton 2017: 42). In these early texts, there is a strong association of *haṭhayoga* with breath-control (*prāṇāyāma*) practices. The *Dattātreyayogaśāstra* teaches an eightfold system as well as this more *haṭha*-oriented one (130cd–131). The *aṣṭāṅgayoga* mentioned here is ascribed to Yājñavalkya and while its eight components have the same names as in Patañjali's system, they are described somewhat differently. The *Dattātreyayogaśāstra* defines *samādhi* in Vedāntic terms as the state of identity between the individual and supreme self and it includes practitioners of all sects and religions, as long as they have faith and devotion (126ab, 41–42ab).

The *Vasiṣṭhasaṃhitā* (c. thirteenth century) also describes an *aṣṭāṅgayoga*, whose components share names with Patañjali's system; however, they include ten *yamas* and *niyamas* (restraints and observances) and incorporate Vaiṣṇava terms and practices, such as a *dhāraṇā* (concentration) of placing the five elements within the body, together with their corresponding syllable and god. The *Vasiṣṭhasaṃhitā* integrates *kuṇḍalinīyoga* (focused on raising the internal serpent energy) within a Brāhmaṇical and Vaiṣṇava context, following the Bhedābheda Vedānta philosophy rather than Advaita (Mallinson 2014: 235). Although it is not explicitly linked to *rājayoga*, this eight-part yoga is considered the path of knowledge. While each component is given a specific definition with examples, including the first non-seated postures, its goal of *samādhi* is understood in terms of the oneness of *ātman* and *brahman*. The *Yogayājñavalkya* (c. thirteenth–fourteenth century) also teaches an *aṣṭāṅgayoga* path in the form of a dialogue between the sage Yājñavalkya and his wife, Maitreyī. The *Vivekamārtaṇḍa* (c. thirteenth century), attributed to Gorakṣa, combines Śaiva yoga with Vedāntic metaphysics, teaching a sixfold (*ṣaḍaṅga*) yoga, like *aṣṭāṅga*, without the *yamas* and *niyamas*. The *Vivekamārtaṇḍa* says there as many postures as species of living beings – 8,400,000 – all known by Lord Shiva, of which he taught eighty-four (8–10). Other texts of the time reference these numbers; however, only a handful of postures (*āsanas*) are specifically named and described. The *Vivekamārtaṇḍa* also teaches the awakening of *kuṇḍaliṇī*, through *mudrās* and *prāṇāyāma*.

The *Yogabīja* (c. fourteenth century), which combines Śaiva yoga with Vedāntic philosophy, defines yoga as the union of dualities – from the upward and downward breaths to the individual and supreme self – combining the microcosmic, the macrocosmic, and the ultimate (79–80ab). This text is the origin of the definition of *haṭha* as the union of the sun (*ha*) and the moon (*ṭha*; 148–149). The *Yogabīja* (17) also links together yoga and knowledge, saying one cannot exist without the other and that they must be joined to attain liberation.

The *Śivasaṃhitā* (c. fourteenth–fifteenth century), born out of the southern Śrīvidyā tradition, is written in the form of a dialogue between Shiva and Pārvatī. It identifies Shiva with God (*īśvara*) and makes it clear that the ultimate truth is the realization of oneness.

The *Śivasaṃhitā* also lists the four types of yoga, adding that 'the fourth, *rājayoga*, should be free from the state of duality' (5.12). Four different kinds of aspirant are described in detail and are prescribed these different types of yoga respectively, with *haṭha* penultimate to *rājayoga*. For the extraordinary student, *rājayoga*, alone, was sufficient. The final verses of the *Śivasaṃhitā* (5.259–260) speak of the householder path, synthesizing and simplifying these ascetic practices to make them more inclusive and accessible to a broader population, including those who are engaged in the world.

These early Śaiva texts on *haṭhayoga* placed increasing importance on the subtle body in the form of *bandhas* (energy locks), *mudrās*, chakras, and *kuṇḍalinī*, and on the physical practices of *āsana* and *prāṇāyāma*. The most important posture emphasized in these texts was *siddhāsana*, a seated posture, as well as the earlier *padmāsana*, lotus pose. Due to this focus on physical and breathing practices, these *haṭhayoga* texts were able to incorporate elements of various philosophies, particularly Advaita Vedānta, without worrying about the philosophical details. Over time, this led to the blurring of boundaries between Yoga and Vedānta in both directions.

The poetic *Yogatārāvalī*, attributed to Śaṅkarācārya, although more likely composed in the fourteenth century, explains various elements including *nāḍīs* (energy channels), *bandhas*, *kuṇḍalinī*, *prāṇāyāma*, and *nādānusandhāna* (immersion in the internal sound). However, it then defines *rājayoga* as being beyond all the practices of yoga, including gazing points, binding the mind, stopping the breath, concentration, and meditation (14). *Rājayoga* is explained as the result of practicing pure breath retention (*kevalakumbhaka*) and the highest state is described as the dissolution of the mind, in which one has been freed from karma. Most of the *Yogatārāvalī*'s teachings on *rājayoga* seem to come from the *Amanaska* (c. twelfth century), the earliest known text on *rājayoga*. This text is focused on *samādhi*, synonymous here with the no-mind state (*amanaska*), considering all other practices and techniques to be superfluous and even obstacles to liberation (Birch 2015: 5).

3.3 Later *haṭhayoga* texts

Svātmārāma's well-known fifteenth-century *Haṭhapradīpikā* is a compilation of earlier *haṭhayoga* texts, which helped contribute to the synthesis of non-dual Śaivism and Advaita that was already underway, especially in the south (Mallinson 2014: 236). The *Haṭhapradīpikā* gives *samādhi* as a synonym for *rājayoga* as well as *jīvanmukti*, defining it as the oneness of the self and the mind, analogously to the unity of salt and water when mixed (4.5). This state of equilibrium and definition of *samādhi* is then further extended to the oneness of the individual and universal self (4.7). It is also said to be 'the destroyer of death, the means to happiness, and the best creator of the bliss of *brahman*' (4.2). This is followed by a description of a specific practice of breath retention.

It is clearly stated that the purpose of *haṭhayoga* is for attaining *rājayoga*; however, the importance of *haṭhayoga* had grown by this point and according to Svātmārāma, they are seen as mutually dependent (2.76). The fourfold system mentioned earlier was here simplified into a twofold method to attain liberation through the practice of physical yoga and *haṭhayoga* became the only means to reach *rājayoga* (Birch 2020: 455). Since the *Haṭhapradīpikā* was a compilation, its real success was in synthesizing various traditions together into a comprehensive system, validated by the way in which later texts drew upon and elaborated on its method.

The *Haṭhapradīpikā* emphasizes the importance of practice, explaining that anyone can attain success in yoga if they are not lazy, and that this attainment does not come from reading texts, wearing fancy clothes, or discussing it (1.64–66). The text highlights the relationship between the breath and the mind, explaining that one can control the mind through *prāṇāyāma* practice, by controlling the breath. The *Haṭhapradīpikā* also gives dietary prescriptions, saying the yogi should eat food that is nourishing, sweet, oily, from a cow, supportive, desirable, and suitable, while avoiding food that is bitter, sour, spicy, salty, hot, or reheated, or eating too many vegetables (1.58–63). Some texts recommend filling the stomach half with food, one-quarter with water, and one-quarter with air to aid digestion, often including moderate diet (*mitāhāra*) as one of their restraints or observances. It becomes increasingly clear that what one eats affects one's ability to meditate and many of the postures added to the original seated positions in these *haṭhayoga* texts show an increased focus on digestive health. For example, the *Haṭhapradīpikā* says that one who does *mayūrāsana* (peacock pose) can eat poison (1.31). Other important early non-seated postures were *kukkuṭāsana* (rooster pose) and *paścimatānāsana* (seated forward bend), said to increase the digestive fire and create health.

The eighteenth-century *Gheraṇḍasaṃhitā* is even more focused on the physical practices, describing a sevenfold yoga, consisting of *ṣaṭkarma* (cleansing actions), *āsanas* (postures), *mudrās* (bodily seals), *pratyāhāra* (sensory withdrawal), *prāṇāyāma* (breath-control), *dhyāna* (meditation), and *samādhi* (absorption). The *Gheraṇḍasaṃhitā* appears to be based on the seventeenth-century *Haṭhayogasaṃhitā*, which itself borrows largely from the *Haṭhapradīpikā*, embedding its teachings within the framework of a dialogue between Gheraṇḍa and Caṇḍakāpālin, as well as adding some visualization practices and omitting the more transgressive *vajrolī mudrā* (related to withholding semen; Birch 2020: 458, note 17). The *Gheraṇḍasaṃhitā* calls this 'the yoga of the body (*ghaṭa*)' advocating that 'one should know that everything is *brahman* and see everything in the self' (7.19ef) by means of the various practices described. The realization of oneness is also interwoven with other more tantric ideas, such as sexual union as a way of attaining the supreme self. As in most other *haṭhayoga* texts, *samādhi* is considered both a practice and the final goal.

Other extended works on *haṭhayoga* were composed at this time, such as the *Haṭharatnāvalī* (c. seventeenth century), a scholarly synthesis which borrows heavily from the *Haṭhapradīpikā* and other earlier texts; it combines the fourfold system of *mantra*, *laya*, *haṭha*, and *rāja* yoga with an *aṣṭāṅga* (eight-part) method (Birch 2020: 457–463). The *Haṭharatnāvalī* and the eighteenth-century *Jogapradīpyakā* both name eighty-four postures, and the latter, written in Brajbhāṣā, gives descriptions of each, as well as details of how the yogi should practice (Birch and Hargreaves 2023). Other texts on yoga were written in the vernacular languages – such as Hindi, Marathi, and Bengali – during this premodern period as well.

3.4 Contemporaneous texts

Simultaneously with the *haṭhayoga* texts, works with a more Advaitic viewpoint that incorporated yoga were composed, such as the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*, the *Jīvanmuktiviveka*, the *Aparokṣānubhūti*, and the Yoga Upaniṣads. This synthesis has been termed 'Yogic Advaita' by Andrew Fort, who explains that this 'holds to Śaṅkara's view that knowledge of the nondual self brings liberation, yet adds emphasis to Sāṃkhya concepts and Yoga practices, particularly exerting control of mental states and modifications' (Fort 1998: 86). The dualistic system of Yoga is considered a purificatory practice, which provides the tools to develop the discernment (*viveka*) needed to make one's mind ready for the ultimate Advaitic realization of the oneness of *ātman* and *brahman*. Advaitins attempted to bring the *haṭhayogīs* into their fold by incorporating their practices, despite their often-apparent disdain for them, widening their traditions and philosophical viewpoints in a process which has contributed to the modern (post-1850) intermixing of yoga practices with Vedāntic ideas.

The fourteenth-century *Jīvanmuktiviveka*, written by Vidyāraṇya, in its process of explaining the renunciant path to an Advaitic liberation-while-living, makes its views on the relative merits of *haṭha* versus a gentler (*mṛdu*) yoga, very clear. It correlates this gentle yoga with 'the teaching of equanimity and happiness towards enemies, friends, etc.' (a reference to the *brahmavihāras* mentioned in *Yogasūtra* 1.33), and *haṭhayoga* with 'the personal effort of breath control, sense withdrawal, and so forth'. The *Jīvanmuktiviveka* explains that by the former method 'one might quickly coax [the mind]', but by the latter practices, which it clearly considers inferior, it will happen very slowly (1.3.27). The *Jīvanmuktiviveka* quotes *Bhagavadgītā* 6.34, saying that Arjuna's statement that 'the mind is unsteady and difficult to control like the wind' is related to *haṭhayoga* (3.1.16). It then quotes the *Laghuyogavāsiṣṭha*, which says that the mind must be tamed with the correct methods, 'like a bad elephant in rut with a stick' (*Jīvanmuktiviveka* 3.1.17–18). These references to earlier texts appear to read this distinction between a forceful and

gentle yoga backwards, to make them more relevant to the new categorizations that were becoming standard.

The *Aparokṣānubhūti*, attributed to Śaṅkarācārya, although probably written in the late fifteenth to mid-sixteenth century, incorporates yoga teachings into the Vedāntic system, providing a concise and accessible entry into Advaita philosophy. It includes a fifteen-part system of *rājayoga* leading to *samādhi*, and ultimately to immediate awareness of the self. These fifteen parts include a redefined, *brahman*-centric version of the eight components of the *aṣṭāṅgayoga* of Patañjali, as well as renunciation, silence, place, time, the root-lock (*mūlabandha*), equilibrium of the body, and steadiness of the gaze, also explained in terms of the realization of *brahman*. Although not mentioned until this point, the final verses of the text, which may be a later addition, suggest *haṭhayoga* as a last resort for those whose afflictions have not been fully burnt. The main commentary on the *Aparokṣānubhūti* – the *Dīpikā* – which is attributed to Vidyāraṇya, although probably written a few centuries later, unusually equates this *haṭhayoga* with the yoga of Patañjali (Slatoff 2022). This is reiterated by the eighteenth-century *Haṃsavilāsa*, which clearly looks down upon the methods of Patañjali in relation to its own conception of a more tantric *rājayoga*.

The Yoga Upaniṣads synthesize together various schools of thought, weaving the dualistic tradition of Yoga with the non-dualistic tradition of Advaita, generally with the aim of the oneness of *ātman* and *brahman* (Bouy 1994). These Yoga Upaniṣads invoke the older tradition of Upaniṣads to invest ancient authority into their new ideas, although they are really Advaita Vedānta texts that incorporate yoga practices. While the earlier Northern recensions (composed between the ninth and thirteenth centuries) are mainly short, aphoristic texts focusing on *mantrayoga* and the recitation of *Oṃ*, the later Southern recensions (composed between the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries) expand upon these texts and add to them, resulting in twenty-one Yoga Upaniṣads. These later texts draw on *haṭhayoga* and tantric traditions, particularly from the Nāth Siddhas, although they seem to have arisen within a Brāhmaṇical context. The Yoga Upaniṣads incorporate teachings on *haṭha* and *rājayoga* with Patañjali's yoga and various Brāhmaṇical texts, such as the *Bhagavadgītā* and Purāṇas, without much concern for philosophical differences, integrating verses and whole sections of earlier texts. Unlike the earlier *haṭhayoga* texts, which are like practice manuals written in simplistic and instructional Sanskrit, usually in *anuṣṭubh* meter, these later works are more scholarly and nuanced and bring the Advaita philosophy back into the equation.

Other compendiums were similarly composed within this Brāhmaṇical milieu, with the aim of integrating *haṭhayoga* with Advaita Vedānta and, unlike the Yoga Upaniṣads, even directly cite *haṭhayoga* texts. These works include Godāvarimiśra's sixteenth-century *Yogacintāmaṇi*; a seventeenth-century work of the same name by Śivānanda, who claims a connection to the lineage of Śaṅkara; Bhavadeva's seventeenth-century

Yuktabhavadeva; Yugaladāsa's seventeenth-century *Yogamārgaprakāśikā*; and Sundaradeva's eighteenth-century *Haṭhasaṅketacandrikā* (Birch 2020: 463–471). These compendiums synthesized teachings from various traditions, interweaving Patañjali's yoga together with *haṭha* and *rāja* yoga, as well as ideas from texts such as the *Bhagavadgītā*, Epics, Upaniṣads, Purāṇas, Tantras, and Dharmaśāstras, incorporating rather than disparaging physical practices, and overcoming potential contradictions between dualistic and non-dualistic philosophies, in part through the influence of theism.

Although beyond the scope of this encyclopaedia entry, it is important to be aware of the social and political background against which these developments were taking place, particularly the influence of Islamic rule from the twelfth to eighteenth century and interactions with Sufism (Ernst 2013). Yoga did not evolve in a sociohistorical void, but in response to various cultural contexts. Over time, yogis have been everything from ascetic renunciants to blissful devotees to hedonistic revellers to street-performing magicians, seeking the ultimate truth in various ways, through abstinence, chanting, ritual, or enjoyment, although usually on the margins of society until recent history.

4 Modern yoga

4.1 Precursors to modern yoga

The eighteenth-century *Haṭhābhyāsapaddhati*, written by Kapāla Kuraṇṭaka, widened yoga's reach to anyone afflicted by the pain of cyclic existence, including women and those attached to sense objects, fallen from caste, or who are reckless (Birch 2015: 10). The text includes an extensive list of postures and complex sequences, categorized as supine, prone, stationary, standing, rope, and piercing sun and moon. These are intended to be practiced in a moving, repetitive way that prefigures modern *vinyāsa* practices (Birch 2018). The *Haṭhābhyāsapaddhati* appears to be the basis of the *Śrītattvanidhi*, a nineteenth-century text attributed to the Mahārāja of Mysore, which seems to have been known to Tirumalai Krishnamacharya. Although there was very little new composition after that point, these ideas continued to be woven together through practice and carried on by the living tradition, bringing *haṭhayoga* into the palaces at Mysore and Jodhpur in the nineteenth century, where they became integral to the development of twentieth-century postural yoga practice (Birch 2020: 472).

Modern yoga was born through a complex multi-layered series of interactions between India and the West, largely under the influence of British colonial rule and Indian efforts to overcome this authority and gain independence, which officially happened in 1947. Modern postural yoga draws inspiration from many sources including gymnastics, military exercises, calisthenics, martial arts, and various other forms of physical culture that were integrated during its early development (Singleton 2010). Much of its widespread global success is due to this emphasis on the body, which has allowed it to be assimilated into

various religious and cultural contexts. However, it was the philosophical aspects that set this incorporation in motion.

Rammohan Roy, the early nineteenth-century Bengali reformer and one of the first to popularize and translate Vedāntic texts, simplified Vedānta into two subjects: the goal of realization of the identity of the individual and universal self, and the method of devotional practice (Robertson 1995: 88). As Elizabeth De Michelis observes,

> in this radically simplified view of Vedānta we already have, at this early stage, a kind of preview of what will become the essence of twentieth-century Modern Yoga: a strong focus on 'practice' justified by a theory of 'realization' (whether of 'God' or 'Self'). (De Michelis 2004: 133)

De Michelis considers 'Modern Yoga' to refer to the yoga developed in these interactions between East and West, citing two pivotal moments – Henry David Thoreau's defining himself as a 'yogi' and Swami Vivekananda's publication of *Rāja Yoga* (De Michelis 2004: 2).

Swami Vivekananda, born as Narendranath Datta in Calcutta in 1863, was instrumental in introducing both Vedānta and yoga to the Western world, setting up the Vedanta Society in New York in 1894, with the support of Madame Blavatsky's Theosophical Society. Vivekananda is credited with popularizing a form of Neo-Vedānta, which was elaborated in his book *Rāja Yoga*, published in 1896, that included a translation of the *Yogasūtra* and was the foundation of the identification of the term *rājayoga* with this text. Vivekananda was dismissive of the physical practices of *haṭhayoga*, considering a comfortable, easy posture important only as the basis for *prāṇāyāma* and the increasingly internal aspects that follow. He incorporated tantric ideas such as awakening *kuṇḍalinī* energy as a method leading to *samādhi* (Rambachan 1994: 98). Vivekananda's emphasis on direct experience as fundamental to knowledge helped to pave the way for modern yoga, most well-known through the teachings of the man often considered its father – Krishnamacharya.

4.2 Krishnamacharya and his students

Tirumalai Krishnamacharya was born to a Vaiṣṇava Brahmin family in the state of Karnataka, South India in 1888 and was initiated into yoga at a young age by his father. Much of Krishnamacharya's teaching was based on the *Yogarahasya*, which he claimed was taught to him in a vision by Nāthamuni, the ninth- to tenth-century Vaiṣṇava saint and founder of the Viśiṣṭādvaita school of Vedānta. This school was later elaborated and made famous by Rāmānuja, from whom his family was thought to descend. The *Yogarahasya* emphasizes the importance of Patañjali's *Yogasūtra* and connects the physical practice of yoga to the perfection of health and the removal of disease, understanding *āsana* as

a practice of physical postures, which makes the early attribution of the *Yogarahasya* to Nāthamuni improbable. It speaks of adapting yoga practices for different people, including pregnant women. The text intertwines these practical instructions with Neo-Vedāntic philosophy, emphasizing the ultimate realization of *brahman*, through a devotional focus on God, which for Krishnamacharya was an essential part of the path to liberation, although he encouraged students to find their own representation of divinity. He taught yoga at the Mysore palace and, with the support of the Mahārāja, gave many lectures and demonstrations. Krishnamacharya's inclusive approach was also taught in their own ways by his main students: K. Pattabhi Jois, B. K. S. Iyengar, and Krishnamacharya's son, T. K. V. Desikachar. While Krishnamacharya never travelled to teach, his influence did through the teachings of these disciples, which have been foundational in what is often now called modern postural yoga.

K. Pattabhi Jois began to study yoga with Krishnamacharya at the age of twelve. He grew up in the Smārta Brahmin Advaitic tradition and naturally incorporated this non-dualistic outlook into his understanding of yoga practice. Jois called his system of yoga 'Ashtanga', connecting it to the eight-part path described in Patañjali's *Yogasūtra*, although he placed a strong focus on the third step of *āsana*. Ashtanga yoga is the practice of a set sequence of postures linked together with deep rhythmic breathing and focused attention, with the intention of developing a deep state of concentration. As Jois says in his book *Yoga Mala*:

> If we practice the science of yoga, which is useful to the entire human community and which yields happiness both here and hereafter – if we practice it without fail, we will then attain physical, mental and spiritual happiness, and our minds will flood towards the Self. (Jois 2010: xiii)

B. K. S. Iyengar is best known for his alignment-based practice. In his book *Light on Yoga*, referred to as 'the Bible of modern yoga' and famous for its many illustrations and descriptions of postures, Iyengar explains:

> As a well cut diamond has many facets, each reflecting a different colour of light, so does the word yoga, each facet reflecting a different shade of meaning and revealing different aspects of the entire range of human endeavour to win inner peace and happiness. (Iyengar 1979: 20)

He quotes many yoga texts, seeing no contradiction in combining the yoga of Patañjali with Vedāntic views of the union of *ātman* and *brahman*. Iyengar considers *āsana* not just as a step on the eight-part path, but as a complete practice unto itself, that can become

the deep object of meditation that Patañjali refers to in the *Yogasūtra* if it is done with the correct intention (Bryant 2009: 413–414).

T. K. V. Desikachar collected the principles of yoga that he learned from Krishnamacharya together into a system he called Viniyoga, beginning around 1980. This method represents a personalized approach to yoga, which adapts the techniques (such as postures, breathing practice, and chanting) individually to each practitioner, according to their age, culture, job, and family stage, as well as their physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. This has evolved into the emerging field of yoga therapy, which works with people individually to develop practices with the intention of increased health and wellbeing, integrating principles from Āyurvedic medicine. Desikachar founded the first yoga therapy clinic in Chennai, the Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram (KYM), and then cofounded the Krishnamacharya Healing and Yoga Foundation (KHYF) with his son Kausthub in 2006.

Another important figure is Indra Devi, considered the 'First Lady of yoga', who convinced Krishnamacharya to accept her as a student, even though he was initially dismissive of her as a woman seeking to learn yoga. As Michelle Goldberg explains in her biography: 'It was Indra Devi, more than anyone else, who turned a very male discipline into an uplifting ritual for cosmopolitan, spiritual-but-not-religious women' (Goldberg 2015: 272–273). This shift from a male-dominated tradition to a predominantly female practice is one of the striking characteristics of modern yoga.

Integral to modern postural practice is *sūryanamaskāra*, sun salutations. Although people have undoubtedly always prostrated to the sun, this practice in yoga seems to be relatively recent. In 1928, the Rāja of Aundh published *Surya Namaskars for Health, Efficiency and Longevity*, which gives detailed descriptions of the practice he says he began seriously in 1908. However, it seems to have been known earlier in some form as evidenced by Brahmānanda's nineteenth-century *Jyotsnā* commentary on the *Haṭhapradīpikā*, where he cautions against it, saying that 'One should give up [...] actions that afflict the body, like too many *sūryanamaskāra*, and lifting heavy weights, etc.' (1.61). Another popular modern concept that seems to have originated from Krishnamacharya – although he claimed its presence in the premodern tradition – is *vinyāsa*. Although the term literally just means 'placing', the word *vinyāsa* is now used to designate the combination of breath and movement between postures, as well as the style of yoga based on this principle.

4.3 Other modern incarnations of yoga

Similarly to Vivekananda, Paramahamsa Yogananda came to America to spread the teachings of yoga and encourage an alliance between East and West. He was the author of *Autobiography of a Yogi* (1946), the story of his own spiritual journey, which has been read by millions around the world. Yogananda founded the Yogoda Satsanga Society in India in 1917 and the Self Realization Fellowship (SRF) in the United States in 1920. His

Kriya Yoga is considered a path of meditation, which incorporates exercise, relaxation, *mantra*, *haṭha*, and *bhakti* yoga methods and is still practiced by many people today.

Another important early figure who was instrumental in introducing yoga to the West was Swami Sivananda of Rishikesh. His practice of Sivananda Yoga became widespread through the international success of his Divine Life Society, whose numerous publications emphasized a universal oneness and path to freedom or liberation while living one's normal life (Strauss 2005). Sivananda's book *Yoga Āsanas*, written in 1934, was foundational and appears to have drawn on earlier premodern collections, introducing these postures to a global audience (Birch and Hargreaves 2023).

Yogananda's younger brother, Bishnu Ghosh, together with his student Buddha Bose, designed a system of eighty-four *āsanas*, which seems to have drawn on similar sources to Sivananda. Their method integrated *haṭhayoga* practices with Western physical culture, which they taught all over the world. Ghosh was also the teacher of Bikram Choudhury, founder of Bikram Yoga, a sequence of twenty-six postures and two breathing exercises meant to be practiced in a hot room for ninety minutes. Bikram has been the centre of multiple scandals, which has led to the creation of Hot Yoga to separate the practice from his name.

Swami Satchidananda, the most well-known of Sivananda's students, founded the Integral Yoga Institute (IYI) in New York City in 1966 and Yogaville in Virginia in 1979. His teachings integrated various practices with the intention of a peaceful mind and body, which appealed to the hippie generation, who invited him to speak at the Woodstock Music Festival. He participated in many interfaith dialogues, famous for his motto: 'Truth is one, paths are many' (Goldberg 2010: 198–201). Another student of Sivananda was Swami Vishnudevananda, who founded Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centres and Ashrams throughout the world. His teachings combined *karma*, *jñāna*, and *bhakti* yoga, and his manual on postural practice – *The Complete Illustrated Book of Yoga* (1960) – has sold over a million copies. He was quite possibly the first to create a yoga teacher training programme in the West and was known as 'the Flying Swami' for his missions to promote peace, flying his small plane over troubled countries and dropping flowers and leaflets (Goldberg 2010: 201–203).

Contemporaneously with Krishnamacharya, Swami Kuvalayananda founded Kaivalyadhama in Lonavla in 1924, to study the scientific aspects and effects of yoga. He also started the first journal on yoga – *Yoga Mimamsa* – to document his research. Kuvalayananda divided postures into cultural poses and meditative poses, considering the former to work on the nervous and endocrine systems whereas the latter helped to free the mind from physical disturbances. His work has been foundational in the understanding of yoga as a form of physical and psychological therapy. Another yogi who contributed to

this was Swami Rama, who came to the United States in 1969 and became known for his miraculous physical feats, which were scientifically documented. Rama soon established the Himalayan Institute, which expanded to multiple branches over time.

Another important teacher was Sri Aurobindo, who established an ashram in Pondicherry in 1926. Here he developed his Integral Yoga that envisioned an evolution leading to divine earthly life, inspiring later teachers, such as Sri Chinmoy. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi developed Transcendental Meditation (TM), a method of mantra repetition best known through the musical group, the Beatles. Swami Muktananda, inspired by Tantric Śaivism, called his method Siddha Yoga, which centred around the giving of *śaktipāta*, a direct transmission of energy from teacher to student. He was succeeded by his disciple Gurumayi, who became a renunciate and head of the Siddha Yoga ashrams in Ganeshpuri, India and Fallsburg, New York.

Jiddu Krishnamurti is noteworthy as well – selected by the Theosophists as the 'World Teacher', he soon rejected this designation, becoming famous for his anti-guru, anti-authoritarian teachings, summed up by his saying that 'truth is a pathless land'. Despite this, he spent much of his life teaching his many followers in India and in Ojai, California where he took up residence in 1922, and is well known through his books – such as *The First and Last Freedom* (1954) – and his dialogues with Western thinkers, such as quantum physicist David Bohm.

Also popular is the Sikh Kundalini Yoga, developed by Yogi Bhajan, the founder of 3HO (Happy, Healthy, Holy Organization). Its practices emphasize the realization of unity, through controlling the energy (*prāṇa*) in the body with dynamic movements combining *āsana*, *prāṇāyāma*, *bandhas*, and *mudrās*. The most well-known form of modern Jain yoga meditation, called Prekṣā Dhyāna, was developed by Ācārya Mahāprajña, who incorporated the work of the seventeenth-century Jain scholar Yaśovijaya, who was himself inspired by Hemacandra's eightfold yoga path. Prekṣā Dhyāna incorporates postural and breathing practices, attempting to make them accessible to all as a means to health and wellbeing (Chapple 2016).

Another influential teacher was Osho, or Bhagwan Sree Rajneesh, who built an ashram in Pune and later a ranch in Oregon, spreading what he considered a universal message, drawn from many sources. Amrit Desai developed Kripalu Yoga, founding a Center in the Berkshires which is still quite popular, despite his fall from grace. Around each of these gurus (and there are many others as well), there is a story to be told, often involving complicated dynamics – and sometimes scandals – as East meets West.

Today yoga is taught in schools, gyms, parks, prisons, treatment centres, elderly homes, and more. On 21 June 2015, the first International Day of Yoga, suggested by Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi and approved by the United Nations, was celebrated on

the solstice by yoga practitioners across the world. Modern yoga exists in new incarnations such as Christian yoga, acroyoga, goat yoga, and beer yoga, leading to the question of what actually constitutes yoga. As evidenced above, synthesis has played a large and important role in the evolution of yoga from the beginning, and it has become nearly impossible to separate out the original ideas and practices. With the privileging of mass appeal, many of the philosophical nuances have been lost. Modern yoga also faces new challenges such as questions of lineage and historicity, gurus and authority, sexual scandals, cultural appreciation versus appropriation, globalization, politics, regulation, and commercialization (Jain 2015; Foxen and Kuberry 2021). While beyond the scope of this article, these are questions that are still actively being played out; and, undoubtedly, the practice of yoga will continue to transform through the centuries.

5 Note on texts

For the following texts, see the cited volumes in which they appear:

- *Bhagavadgītā*, see Gokhale 1950.
- *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*; *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*; *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*; *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*; *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, see Olivelle 1998.
- *Dattātreyayogaśāstra*, see Mallinson Forthcoming.
- *Gheraṇḍasaṃhitā*, see Mallinson 2004.
- *Haṭhapradīpikā of Svātmārāma* (with Jyotsnā Brahmānanda), see Iyengar 1972.
- *Īśvaragītā*, see Nicholson 2014.
- *Jīvanmuktiviveka of Vidyāraṇya*, see Sastri and Sastri and Ayyangar 1978.
- *Mahābhārata*, see Sukthankar, Belvalkar and others 1933–1966.
- *Pātañjalayogaśāstra*, see Āgāśe and Āpate 1904.
- *Śivasaṃhitā*, see Mallinson 2007.
- *Vasiṣṭhasaṃhitā* (*Yoga Kāṇḍa*), see Kaivalyadhāma and Philosophico-Literary Research Department 2005.
- *Yogabīja*, see Birch Forthcoming.
- *Yogasūtra*, see Āgāśe and Āpate 1904.
- *Yogatārāvalī*, see Birch Forthcoming.

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