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Taking Yoga Beyond the Purely Postural

Words: Daniel Simpson

What exactly is yoga and what is it for? If you ask a random stranger in the street, they'll almost certainly talk about postures and well-being. A lot of teachers of yoga might even agree, but these are both relatively recent phenomena.

Although yoga classes based on sequenced asanas are found in cities all over the world, from San Francisco to Shanghai, the earliest recorded example dates from 1918 (led by Shri Yogendra on the beach near Mumbai). Before that, most Indian yogis were full-time renunciators, not busy suburbanites. Their aim was to avoid being reborn, and their methods were primarily sedentary – no ancient text teaches sequences of postures.

Instead, they offer many different options, and few apply to modern life without a bit of reinterpreting. Teachers often do that without even realising, then source their new ideas to Patanjali – the influential author of the *Yoga Sutra* – creating confusion.

One striking example is the ethical principle of *brahmacharya*, which is described in the original commentary accompanying the *sutras* (traditionally attributed to Vyasa) as “restraint of the genitals”. Few modern practitioners aspire to be celibate, so they adapt the concept to reflect how they live. Yoga has always evolved by updating ideas to stay relevant, but it's important to understand that what Patanjali actually says might differ from how teachers present it today.



Photo: Close up from an image at the British Museum

Aligning yoga to modern-day priorities

Taking things out of context seems particularly significant given current concerns about cultural appropriation. One way to address that is to get clearer about where ideas come from. To do that, we need to explore traditional sources in their original context, while also examining how they relate to contemporary priorities.

A lot of what I teach is really history – exploring what's practised and why, and how things change over time. Yoga was originally a meditative state,

not a technique – except in the sense of maintaining that state. Hence this observation in the commentary on *Yoga Sutra* 3.6: “Yoga is to be known through yoga. Yoga arises from yoga. One who is vigilant by means of yoga delights in yoga for a long time.”

The simplest way of doing this involved sitting still and turning inwards. Or as the *Katha Upanishad* puts it (6.11): “When the senses are firmly reined in, that is yoga”. This removes the distraction of seeking gratification through sensory pleasures. Instead, one enjoys the contentment of not needing anything.

From the outside, this might look alarming. Someone “engaged in yoga”, says the *Mahabharata* (12.294.14-17), is “motionless like a stone” and “neither hears nor smells nor tastes nor sees; he notices no touch, nor does [his] mind form conceptions. Like a piece of wood, he does not desire anything.”

Descriptions like this remain remarkably consistent over the centuries – 1,500 years later, the *Hatha Pradipika* (4.107-9) says: “The yogi who is completely released from all states and free of all thoughts remains as if dead” and “knows neither smell, nor taste, nor form, nor touch, nor sound, nor himself, nor others.”

Of course, there’s no obligation to go all the way like an Iron Age ascetic, or his later descendants. But their focus on renouncing the world is clearly quite different to modern ideas about health and wellness – even though texts from the early Upanishads to the *Hatha Pradipika* also identify physical benefits to yoga practices.

Such distinctions are not always obvious, because of the assumption that what we do today is basically unchanged from the earliest teachings, which blurs the distinctions between different systems. However, there has never been any such thing as “One True Yoga”, just a range of approaches that change over time, with major variations in both methods and objectives.

Common misconceptions

To sum up three in a sentence, teachers today may say, “Yoga means union, it comes from Patanjali, and it’s all about *chakras*.” This merges ideas from a wide range of sources that contradict each other.

Patanjali’s yoga involves concentration, stilling the mind to rest in consciousness. This is separate from everything else, so attaining the goal requires disengagement from the mind and the body, as well as the world. To quote *Yoga*

Sutra 2.17: “conjunction between the seer and that which is seen is the cause [of suffering].”

For Patanjali, union is therefore the problem not the solution. He calls it *samyoga* – a condition of bondage in which people misidentify themselves with their bodies and the contents of their minds. “By the removal of ignorance, conjunction is removed,” explains *Yoga Sutra 2.25*. “This is the absolute freedom of the seer.” So Patanjali’s aim is to reveal the distinction between thought and consciousness.

This is easily missed due to modern fixation on his eight-part framework (*ashtanga-yoga*), whose components are ethics (*yama* and *niyama*), degrees of concentration (*dharana*, *dhyana* and *samadhi*) and helpful preliminaries – inward focus (*pratyahara*), control of the breath (*pranayama*) and a comfortable seat (*asana*).

At the time when Patanjali was writing, approximately 1,600 years ago, the word *asana* simply meant “sitting”. The original commentary on the *Yoga Sutra* lists a dozen ways to sit, and non-seated postures aren’t taught in texts until 1,000 years ago. Before that, the only other options were ascetic austerities, such as standing on one leg for a very long time.



Photo: Beth McDougall

Patanjali’s eightfold scheme may have drawn inspiration from earlier examples in the *Mahabharata*, as well as the Buddha’s own eightfold path and the Ayurvedic teachings of the *Charaka Samhita* (the foundational treatise of traditional Indian medicine). In some cases, the Sanskrit word *ashtanga* was even a synonym for medical knowledge – as in the title of another text on Ayurveda, the *Ashtanga Hridaya*.

This focus on alleviating suffering is one of the threads that connects modern yoga to earlier versions despite



Photo: Beth McDougall

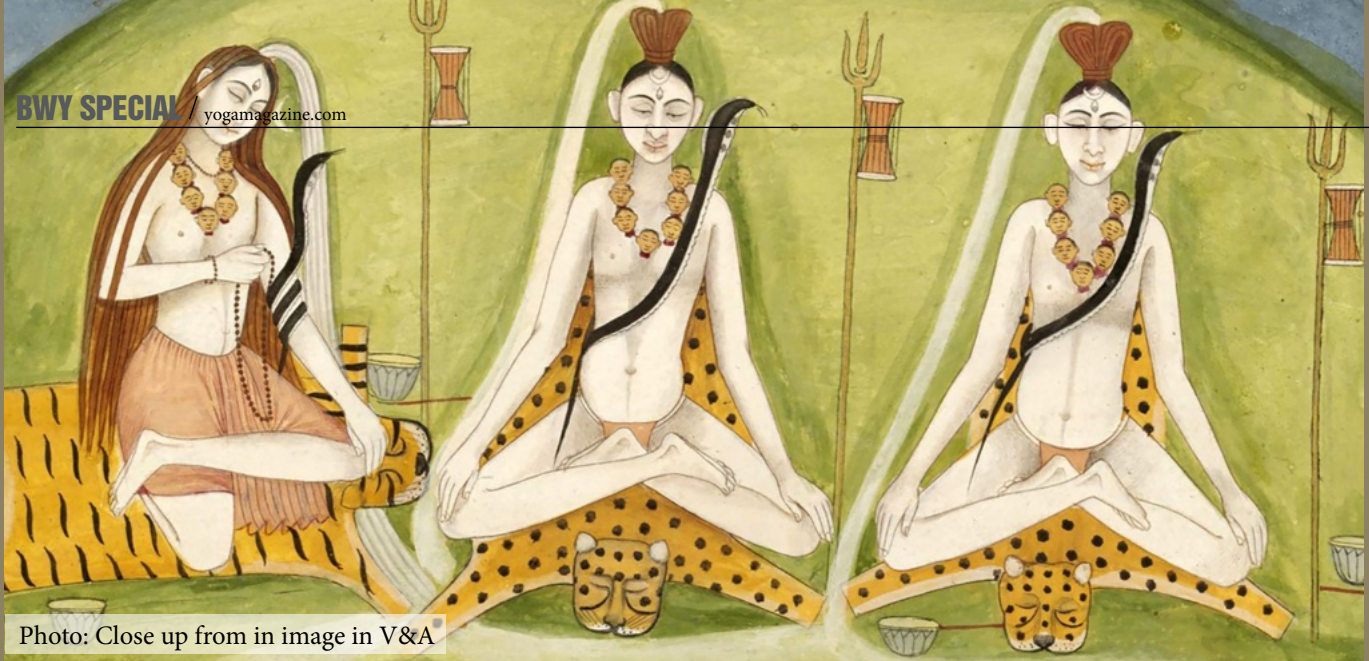


Photo: Close up from in image in V&A

changing contexts. Rather than escaping from the cycle of births, the goal has been framed as holistic health since the early twentieth century, when pioneering Indian teachers developed new methods that focused on postures.

Even medieval teachings on physical practice say non-seated postures are basically warm-ups for subtler techniques. Once a yogi is able to sit for longer periods, says the fifteenth-century *Hatha Pradipika*, they should cleanse inner channels to raise vital energy and empty the mind.

Put simply, physical practice is a way to use the body to steady the mind. But it is not a prerequisite – yogic texts describe other paths to stillness, from chanting *mantras* to visualising deities. Both of these are part of tantric rituals that use subtle elements, such as the energy centres called *chakras*, to reconstruct the body and make it divine.

Without the influence of Tantra, which flourished after Patanjali, physical yoga might not have developed. Most early texts – the *Yoga Sutra* included – saw the body as an obstacle that had to be transcended. The suggestion that it might be transformed by manipulating energy modified earlier ascetic techniques.

However, *chakras* aren't always a feature of *hatha* yoga, and tantric descriptions bear little resemblance to modern ideas. One big difference is the rainbow

colours that are used to depict them (which come from Western traditions), along with the notion they need to be harmonised, balanced or cleansed. This would make them inherently physical, whereas Tantras say they have to be visualised into existence.

The *Hatha Pradipika* barely mentions *chakras*. It just says they are split open by propelling vital energy up the spine's central channel, dissolving the mind in awakened consciousness. So *hatha* yoga develops new ways to attain the timeless outcome of spiritual freedom.

But where does that leave us today?

There are many different views about what liberation means, both in yogic texts and among today's practitioners. There is no obligation to pick one

tradition and attempt to embody its words to the letter. This is in any case almost impossible, since we're bound to adapt their ideas to contemporary realities.

Yet it is also important to be wary of abandoning traditions completely. Unless there are connections between them and what we call yoga, then why use that name? Authenticity requires us to be honest about adaptations, and at the same time to find ways to ground them in earlier teachings.

It therefore helps to reflect on our objectives before we engage with traditional texts. We can then become more mindful of how we reframe them, instead of just pinning it all on Patanjali.

New Light on Yoga With Daniel Simpson

January 27, 2024 (1:00 – 4:00 pm)
Llanfoist Village Hall

It's often said that yoga is timeless, but methods and objectives have changed a great deal since the earliest descriptions. This talk will dispel misconceptions, with plenty of time to ask questions about any topic.

<https://portal.bwy.org.uk/user/events/611>

Daniel Simpson is the author of *'The Truth of Yoga'*. He teaches courses on yoga history and philosophy at SOAS (University of London) and the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies. His next workshop for the British Wheel of Yoga is near Abergavenny on January 27 (see box for details). He's also running an online training on yoga philosophy, which starts in February – find out more at <https://bit.ly/shala-course>.