

Selling Yoga

*From Counterculture
to Pop Culture*

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2

From Counterculture to Counterculture

To the average uninstructed man or woman, there is no apparent relation between the honeymoon and that philosophy which I prefer to call "yoga." And yet, if yoga were properly understood and practiced in the marital embrace by every newly married couple, their sex life would be, from the start, so holy, so healthy, so happy, that they would never care to descend to the methods commonly practiced among married people today.

—IDA C. CRADDOCK, *The Wedding Night* (1900: 213)

THE HISTORY OF modern yoga is a history of divergence, debate, exclusion, and controversy, as well as assimilation, inclusion, and collectivity. As noted in Chapter One, the systematic construction and practice of premodern yoga in South Asia, dating back to around two thousand years ago, were also complex. Yoga was a tradition made up of heterogeneous systems of thought and practice in which individuals sought to destabilize normal consciousness and ways of experiencing or manipulating the world. Sometimes, yoga techniques were believed to cultivate mystical states of consciousness characterized by knowledge of ultimate reality, and for the most advanced adepts, to eventually result in salvation from suffering existence. Other times, yoga techniques were believed to cultivate supernatural powers or to facilitate the pursuit of mundane objectives. For much of its premodern history, yoga was culturally pervasive throughout South Asia and did not belong to any single religious tradition, such as the Hindu, Buddhist, or

Jain traditions. So in premodern South Asia, rather than identify it with one particular tradition, it is more accurate to identify it as characteristic of the doctrinally and practically diverse South Asian religious culture.

Beginning in the nineteenth century, however, yoga was deconstructed and reconstructed both within and beyond South Asia, leading to the emergence of a new transnational tradition. That tradition is modern yoga, which is made up of heterogeneous systems that developed as a consequence of encounters between Indian yoga reformers engaged with modern thought, Europeans and Americans interested in topics ranging from metaphysics to fitness, and modern sociopolitical phenomena. Although, in the popular imagination, yoga's global diffusion beyond India is associated with the counterculture of the 1960s and especially the Beatles, well before the 1960s yogis across the globe participated in countercultural movements in which they practiced and disseminated their innovative renditions of modern yoga.

The subject of this chapter is the early history of modern yoga from the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century. Understanding the early history of modern yoga is key to understanding how the late twentieth century serves as a new phase of development in the history of yoga and, more specifically, postural yoga. Unsurprisingly, as globalization and transnational cultural products emerged in the nineteenth century, primarily as a consequence of the dominant socioeconomic forces of market capitalism, colonial and industrial endeavors, and the concomitant rapid cultural changes among both colonizing and colonized populations, yoga became subject to processes of translation and accommodation as its proponents actively modernized it. I will demonstrate that, with all of the divergences that make up this early history of modern yoga, the data reinforce a collective historical pattern: Modern yoga, until the second half of the twentieth century, was made up of controversial, elite, or countercultural movements opposed to prevailing religious orthodoxies. Thus modern yoga went global but did not yet represent a pop culture product, something embraced by the general populace. By demonstrating that the history of modern yoga is not so simplistic as a linear trajectory of increasing global popularization, this chapter will establish an important premise to my argument in proceeding chapters that certain social changes in the middle of the twentieth century enabled the shift of modern yoga from counterculture to pop culture.

Controversy and Censorship

I begin with the most tragic controversy in the history of modern yoga as it developed around the figure of Ida C. Craddock (1857–1902).¹ I begin with Craddock because the life of this American yogi serves as a model for identifying recurrent themes in the early history of modern yoga, especially the extent to which modern yoga was either feared and loathed by or perceived as foreign to mainstream populations across the globe.

To understand why Craddock was feared and loathed, one must understand her social and historical context. This was a period of religious questioning in the United States in light of emergent modern historical and scientific analyses that challenged the dominant Christian orthodox ideas about the way the world was and why it was that way. Perhaps the most palpable example of modern challenges to religious orthodoxy was Darwin's theory of evolution, which put into question orthodox Christian doctrine on creation and history. Whereas some responded to such modern challenges to orthodoxy by constructing new religions that assimilated aspects of various worldviews, including Asian and modern scientific ones, others responded with religious fundamentalism.² Of particular significance to the history of modern yoga is Evangelical Protestant Christianity, which functioned as the cultural and legal standard in the United States at the turn of the century.³ Many socially and politically influential individuals and organizations used that standard to actively suppress what were deemed intolerable religious ideas and practices, including those of early modern yogis.

In the United States, there were various attempts to legally enforce fundamentalist interpretations of what it meant to be a "Christian nation." Most notable were those of United States Postal Inspector Anthony Comstock (1844–1915). Comstock founded the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice and used his position in the postal service to censor whatever he deemed a threat to the fundamentalist Protestant Christian morals he identified as American. Comstock worked with law enforcement, the media, and the Christian clergy to harass and often bring legal cases against those he deemed a moral threat to American society, including Craddock.⁴ His attacks on all things deemed threatening included a condemnation of yoga, especially its body practices. His normative religious standard was characterized by a subordination of the body to the soul, and it especially denounced sexual pleasure, which it considered an obstacle to spiritual development.

Craddock was the antithesis to that standard. Having refuted the prevailing mainstream argument that women should not participate in scholarship, she established herself as an independent scholar of "Phallic Worship" in the history of religions. It was in the context of her scholarship that she encountered the esoteric tantric components of hatha yoga.⁵ Craddock accessed *The Esoteric Science and Philosophy of the Tantras, Shiva Samhita*, an English translation of one of the earliest and best-known texts of hatha yoga, the *Shiva Samhita* (fifteenth century). In that text, Craddock found the idea that sexual union could facilitate divine realization and key techniques, most notably the *vajroli mudra*. In Hindu tantra, the *vajroli mudra* or "urethral suction" required the male partner in sexual intercourse to exercise control over ejaculation and functioned as a hydraulic technique through which male and female sexual fluids were transformed within the male body in order to bring about "an immortal yet concrete *diamond body* that transcends the laws of nature" (White 1996: 72). Craddock reconstructed those components of tantra into a system of techniques, most importantly delayed ejaculation, for enhancing sexual pleasures within the boundaries of marriage and simultaneously advancing the state of the soul in relation to God. Though the secrets revealed in the *Shiva Samhita* were initially intended for a small audience, Craddock had no interest in such secrecy. According to Leigh Schmidt:

The mysterious veiling commanded in *The Esoteric Science and Philosophy of the Tantras* was lost on Craddock. If these teachings were "hidden and kept secret in all the TANTRAS," that was not a confidence she was at all interested in preserving. Such tight-lipped rules were utterly contrary to the frankness of speech and freedom of expression for which American marriage reformers were fighting. (Schmidt 2010: 129–130)

Inspired by the mystico-erotic techniques of tantra, she prescribed seminal retention during heterosexual intercourse in order to enhance the pleasures experienced by women and men.⁶ And in a creative redefinition of tantra's sacralization of sexual union, Craddock constructed a new vision of sexual intercourse between married women and men that considered God to be a third partner in what amounted to a sacred *ménage à trois*.

In addition to yoga's significance to Craddock's mystico-erotic religion, it was also at the center of her public persona from the time she established

the Church of Yoga in 1899. She increasingly incited rage among those who opposed her socioreligious and sexual reform agenda. Consequently, there were tensions between Craddock and government officials who sought to enforce legal standards that would qualify her radical agenda as illegally obscene and blasphemous. In 1902, after being convicted in a New York trial for such charges, Craddock spent three torturous months in prison. After her release, an upcoming federal trial threatened additional prison time. Craddock responded by taking her own life in order to die a free woman.

So in what ways does the life of this radical American yogi-sexologist reveal important themes in the early history of modern yoga? The first has to do with the role of the human body in modern yoga. Even though Craddock's sacralization of sexual intercourse is not radical by today's popular American standards and, in Leigh Schmidt's words, may even seem "mundane" to the contemporary reader, for the mainstream turn-of-the-century American, it was antisocial heterodoxy (Schmidt 2010: 273). This demonstrates that not only was the sacralization of the body present in this early system of modern yoga, but it was also so significant to that system that martyrdom occurred on its behalf. In many articulations of modern yoga, some of which will be discussed below, body practices were censored for the same reasons Craddock had to sacrifice her life for them.

Which brings us to the second theme. Craddock's story reveals the extent to which turn-of-the-century mainstream populations feared modern yoga, especially when it emphasized various body practices. Modern yoga was not generally welcomed by mainstream populations, but instead was often deemed a threat to prevailing religious and social orthodoxies. And although there was never a stark bifurcation between the physical techniques and the meditative techniques of yoga prior to the modern period, since the turn of the century such a bifurcation has permeated transnational discourse on yoga. Although, as we will see below, many countercultural movements that embraced the psychological and intellectual components of yoga or what was often termed *raja yoga* were also disliked by much of the mainstream populations from India to the United States, those who were interested in and engaged in physical techniques faced the harshest criticisms.⁷

Third, Craddock's construction of yoga is consistent with the history of modern yoga's saturation with processes of adaptation, assimilation, and syncretism. Craddock identified as a Unitarian but also as the pastor of

the Church of Yoga. The fact that a woman could be so polymorphously religious reflects the realities of modernity and its pluralizing processes, but it also reflects yoga's malleability. In other words, yoga at the turn of the century was something that certain countercultural individuals deemed capable of adaptation, assimilation, and syncretism.

Pierre Bernard (1876–1955) was another famously adaptive, assimilative, and syncretic figure in the early history of modern yoga.⁸ Like Craddock, he was a turn-of-the-century American social radical and tantric yogi. But unlike Craddock, his fate was not so grim. Whereas those who feared Craddock thwarted her dissemination of yoga, Bernard succeeded in training a number of American disciples who continued to practice and teach yoga throughout the country well into the second half of the twentieth century.⁹

Bernard discovered yoga in his boyhood when he met an Indian yogi by the name of Sylvais Hamati (dates unknown) in Lincoln, Nebraska. Hamati became Bernard's guru and taught him hatha yoga techniques. Bernard spent years reveling in the public spectacle of his yogic trances that apparently were so deep that doctors could thread needles through his face without even causing him to flinch. In later years, he became a fashionable businessman and community leader. He was at once charismatic, generous, mysterious, and deceitful.

At every stage of Bernard's yoga career, mainstream Americans remained suspicious of his teachings. Furthermore, he did not witness the popularization of modern yoga in his lifetime. For these reasons, Bernard only attracted a small following made up of those who could afford, both financially and socially, to be eccentric. And despite the numerous attempts by law enforcement, the media, and the Christian clergy to force Bernard and his students to forfeit yoga, they resisted.

But it was not easy. Bernard struggled to construct a public persona as a man of science and scholarship, although he held no degrees from any higher-education institution. For years, he and his students were run out of city after city (as far as London, where one of his closest disciples attempted to recruit students and was consequently deported by British authorities). In New York City in 1910, there were accusations that Bernard was involved in the "white slave trade" and, more specifically, was forcing young women to engage in antinomian sexual practices. While awaiting trial for the alleged crimes, he was imprisoned in "the Tombs," a New York City prison famous for its horrific living conditions, for three-and-a-half months. The only evidence in support of the accusations was the

testimony of two of his former disciples, so he was released when those disciples suddenly dropped all charges and fled the state.

Finally, in 1918, Bernard and his disciples settled in Nyack, New York, where Bernard built an esoteric country club for “tantriks” (practitioners of tantra) that flourished for years thanks to the abundant financial support of rich and famous individuals and families, most noteworthy of which were members of the Vanderbilt family. Clients came to Bernard’s club to learn his rendition of hatha yoga, which he promised would enhance their pleasures in life, as well as to enjoy the opulent circuses and other celebrations hosted by Bernard and his disciples.

All of this reflects Bernard’s life-affirming rendition of yoga. He constructed yoga anew by combining the physical techniques of modern hatha yoga—as detailed below, this form of hatha yoga was influenced by modern physical culture—the erotico-mysticism of tantra, and a communal ethic based on his nondualist philosophy. Yoga, according to Bernard, enabled people to enhance their physical health and pleasures and thus experience a life lived well. Bernard supplemented yoga by enhancing the pleasures of life at the club in every way he could. Unlike many of his modern yoga contemporaries in the United States, including numerous Indian gurus, such as Swami Vivekananda (more on Vivekananda below), who disseminated ascetic, intellectual, and meditative renditions of yoga, Bernard was a guru of immanent means to an immanent aim: pleasure. For that very reason, given the puritanical mores that dominated his social world, he had to keep much of his yoga system secret.

And there were other European and American yogis who kept their interests in and practice of yoga secret for fear that they would stir controversy and perhaps even direct conflict. Sir John Woodroffe (1865–1936), a British High Court Judge in Calcutta, was another esoteric modern yogi of this variety.¹⁰ Woodroffe studied tantric texts, selected from the *Tantras*, probably translated by his Bengali friend and pundit Atul Behari Ghose (1864–1936). For Woodroffe, tantra was a scholarly interest as well as a personal one. In fact, it is possible he underwent tantric initiation under the guidance of a guru and may have also participated in other esoteric tantric rituals. Under the pen-name *Arthur Avalon*, which, in addition to keeping his identity secret, may have functioned to represent the figures of both Woodroffe and Ghose, a number of texts on hatha yoga and tantra were published, including *The Serpent Power: The Secrets of Tantric and Shaktic Yoga* (1919). That text became a major English-language resource

on such topics for countercultural religious groups in North America and Europe throughout the twentieth century.

It turns out that, in addition to American and European countercultural yogis such as Craddock, Bernard, and Woodroffe, many nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Indian yogis were also subject to serious and persistent criticisms for their interests in and practice of yoga. Their stories show a very different part of modern yoga’s history from the one Vivekananda’s visit to the United States conveys. More than anything else, a bifurcation between yogic meditative, philosophical, and ethical dimensions, prescribed by Vivekananda and associated with what has often been termed *classical yoga* or *raja* (“royal”) *yoga*, and the physical techniques associated with hatha yoga affected the perception of yoga practitioners. The extreme hostility toward Craddock, Bernard, Woodroffe, and Indian proponents of hatha yoga as compared to the more subdued hostility toward proponents of raja yoga reflects the fact that, despite what one might suspect given the prevalence of postural yoga in pop culture today, modern yoga’s early history shows that involvement in physical yoga cost a person more social currency than involvement in yoga focused on meditation, philosophy, or ethics.

An especially deep suspicion of those Indian yogis engaged in body practices was dominant among European, American, and Indian social and intellectual elites. Following the onset of British colonialism in India, elites from the United States, Europe, and India dismissed Indian systems of hatha yoga as extreme, barbaric, and antisocial practices. British colonialists and Christian missionaries, along with those Indian elites who sympathized with either or both causes, thought of hatha yoga as a backward and savage religion.

Much of that denunciation was fueled in the nineteenth century by widespread stereotypes about hatha yoga. First, abilities to contort the body into what were considered bizarre yoga postures, techniques associated with hatha yoga, were also associated with those abilities of Western contortionists (Singleton 2010: 57–59). Consequently, the physical techniques of hatha yoga were reduced to mere crass entertainment. Second, the supposed *siddhis* or magical powers of some such yogis resulted in the association of hatha yoga with occult magic (Singleton 2010: 64–66). Most scandalous of all, as a result of Aleister Crowley’s (1875–1947) experiments with tantra, it became associated with sex magic (Urban 2006: 111). Hugh B. Urban suggests,

Indian mysticism was imagined as something otherworldly and identified with Vedānta or other philosophical schools... Tantra represented, for both Indian and European authors, mysticism in its most degenerate form: a kind of mysticism that had been corrupted with sensual desire and this-worldly power. (Urban 2003: 15n53)

Because the “degenerate” vision of tantra included yoga’s body practices, as opposed to the philosophical dimensions of Vedānta and other more widely respected schools of Indian thought, those techniques were most disdained in the early history of modern yoga. And because they received widespread attention in the writings of travelers, journalists, and scholars, derogatory visions came to represent hatha yoga to mainstream Europeans, Americans, and Indians. Mass-circulation writings on yoga reified colonialist and Orientalist conceptions of hatha yoga as particularly mysterious, bizarre, uncivilized, and threatening to modernity and rationality. Mark Singleton describes the situation: “As mass-circulation print media brought images of yogic austerities to a wider audience, the *hatha* yogin’s reputation as the eccentric extreme of the Indian religious spectrum was increasingly cemented” (Singleton 2010: 56).

Modern Yoga from the Neck Up

Participants in various modernizing movements, however, were interested in salvaging yoga from its reputation as a system of extreme, anti-social practices and instead establishing its legitimacy as a philosophical, meditational, or ethical tradition. They reflected a general trend in the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century global religious landscape. As mentioned above, this was a period of religious questioning in light of modernity. In response to new questions about the nature of the body, the soul, and the mind, metaphysical, philosophical, and social movements arose, motivated by the desire to redefine the relationship between these three constituents of the human being. Transcendentalism, Theosophy, New Thought, Christian Science, and the Vedānta Society as well as Indian reform movements, including the Brahmo Samaj and the Ramakrishna Mission, were some of the most notable movements that assimilated and syncretized ideas and practices from Christian Protestantism, modern science, yoga and other South Asian traditions, and sometimes Mind

Cure, a new healing system that invoked the power of the mind over the body in order to treat illness.

In the various attempts by members of such movements to construct systems of yoga deemed compatible with their modern agendas, they elided certain aspects of yoga and emphasized others. Because of hatha yoga and tantra’s associations with what were considered bizarre yoga postures, extreme asceticism, magic, sexual obscenity, and popular entertainment, they did not take them seriously. Instead, in various ways, they all emphasized the ethical, philosophical, or meditational components of yoga associated with so-called classical yoga or raja yoga. Many of the movements that only assimilated those aspects of yoga were less subject to controversy than figures like Craddock and Bernard because they censored yoga of its most scandalous practices. European and American individuals and organizations who remained on the side of Christian orthodoxy, and especially those energized by a new fundamentalist ideology, however, still thought such movements were a danger to all they considered decent, pure, and godly.

American Transcendentalists, for example, most significantly Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) and Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862), were deemed threatening to Christian orthodoxy when they valorized yoga’s ethical and meditational dimensions.¹¹ They encountered yoga by reading Indian literature, particularly the *Bhagavad Gita*, and their interests were primarily in what they perceived to be the intellectual components of yoga. The Transcendentalists thought their democratic religiosity that privileged unmediated intuition as a means to the realization of God was compatible with nondualist Indian thought that maintained that knowledge of ultimate reality could be discovered through a yogic process of turning inward, away from the external world of doctrine. Transcendentalist thought countered and, therefore, was perceived as a threat to mainstream American religious values, which deemed God to be outward, beyond the world and the self, rather than inward, immanently present within the self. For this reason, Emerson was ostracized from his alma mater, Harvard University, after his famous “Divinity School Address” (1838) in which he shared his Transcendentalist vision.

Some quasi-unorthodox European intellectuals also valorized the intellectual components of yoga while simultaneously criticizing the physical practices of hatha yoga. The Oxford University Indologist, Max Muller (1823–1900), for example, criticized:

[the] tortures which some of them, who hardly deserve to be called Samnyasins, for they are not much better than jugglers or Hathayogins, inflict on themselves, the ascetic methods by which they try to subdue and annihilate their passions, and bring themselves to a state of extreme nervous exaltation accompanied by trances or fainting fits of long duration. (Muller 1974 [1898]: vii)

At the same time, Muller valorized yoga in its “early stages,” when it “was truly philosophical” before he believed it degenerated into practical systems, worst of which was hatha yoga (Muller 1899: 407, 465, quoted in Singleton 2010: 43).¹² Another esteemed Oxford University Indologist, Monier Monier-Williams (1819–1899), shared Muller’s contempt for hatha yoga, describing it as “a strange compound of mental and bodily exercises, consisting [of] unnatural restraint, forced and painful postures, twisting and contortions of the limbs, suppression of the breath and utter absence of mind” (quoted in Love 2010: 73).

The Theosophical Society, founded in New York City in 1875, shared such intellectuals’ contempt for hatha yoga.¹³ Helena Blavatsky (1831–1891), co-founder of the Theosophical Society, and other members consistently criticized hatha yoga, although they were not opposed to all yoga systems. In fact, it was the Theosophical Society that first reified the notion of raja yoga, which would come to be identified with classical yoga, by equating it with a narrow philosophical and meditational tradition based on a selective reading of the *Yoga Sutras* (de Michelis 2004: 178). They even arranged for the publication of an English translation of the *Yoga Sutras*, the source most widely cited on classical yoga to this day. On the one hand, they considered the physical techniques associated with hatha yoga to be inferior forms of practice (de Michelis 2004: 178). Even breathing, according to Blavatsky, was a backward yogic practice and:

... pertains to the lower Yoga. The *Hatha* so called was and still is discountenanced by the Arhats. It is injurious to the health and alone can never develop into Raja Yoga. (Blavatsky 1888: 95; see also de Michelis 2004: 178; Albanese 2007: 351; Singleton 2010: 76–77)

In Blavatsky’s thought, raja yoga, in contrast to hatha yoga, was a valuable meditational and philosophical yoga system. She equated it not only with Patanjala Yoga, but also with the *jnana yoga* or the “yoga of knowledge”

of Shankara’s *advaita vedanta* or “nondual vedanta” school as well as with modern “hypnotism” and “self-mesmerisation” (de Michelis 2004: 178).¹⁴

Another Theosophist, William Judge (1851–1896), provided a commentary on the *Yoga Sutras* in which he continued along the same lines as Blavatsky, emphatically distinguishing between hatha yoga and raja yoga and warning of the dangers of hatha yoga’s physical techniques, which he believed were “not spiritual” (Albanese 2007: 352). In light of Judge’s condemnations, Catherine Albanese suggests, “What appealed to a late-nineteenth-century Anglo-American about the *Yoga Sutras*, we can guess, was the moral inscription that the text—and Judge’s presentation of it—wrote over yogic practice” (Albanese 2007: 352). In other words, Americans and Europeans elided those aspects of yoga that were not compatible with their own modern intellectual, ethical, and religious ideas and practices and emphasized those on which they could project their own modern agendas.

But Europeans and Americans were not the only ones who reified and privileged a notion of raja yoga that censored the physical practices associated with hatha yoga and that was perceived to be compatible with modern ideas and values, especially a modern interpretation of *advaita vedanta* or neo-vedanta, which interpreted nondualism as a rational Indian philosophical religion based on self-development and ethical activism. Reid Locklin and Julia Lauwers note two opposing Indian responses to the global diffusion of *advaita vedanta* (2009). On the one hand, various forms of Indian religious nationalisms that emphasized geocentric national identity, such as that of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), resisted global diffusion (Locklin and Lauwers 2009). On the other hand, accommodationist approaches, such as that of Vivekananda and Swami Chinmayananda (1916–1993), actively pursued global diffusion by emphasizing Hindu universalism and deemphasizing caste and national identity (Locklin and Lauwers 2009). Accommodationist approaches to yoga sought to revive *advaita vedanta* for Indians and to simultaneously promote it as a universally accessible gift to humanity (Locklin and Lauwers 2009). Accommodationists accomplished this mission by presenting *advaita vedanta* in the modern “universalist, objective language of natural science, meditative technique, and spiritual therapy” (Locklin and Lauwers 2009: 183).

More than any European or American, the famous Hindu proselytizing guru Vivekananda was responsible for systematizing and globally diffusing a narrow and modern version of yoga. Vivekananda was one

among many Hindus who expressed contempt for certain types of yoga based on a bifurcation between yoga's philosophical and meditative techniques, often equated with raja yoga, and its physical techniques, often equated with hatha yoga (Singleton 2010: 44–49, 70–80).

De Michelis, who suggests that Vivekananda was the “creator” of “Modern Yoga,” argues that he was responsible for starting “something of a ‘yoga renaissance’ both in India and in the West” (de Michelis 2004: 1–9, 90, 182). He did this through the diffusion of a modern notion of raja yoga. Vivekananda used *raja yoga* to refer to what he considered authentic yoga according to his selective reading of the *Yoga Sutras*. Vivekananda was the founder of the Ramakrishna Mission, an Indian organization that promoted a modern interpretation of advaita vedanta, and advocated for the spirituality of Indian culture as opposed to the so-called materialism of Western culture. Vivekananda and his Ramakrishna Mission served as models of the Orientalist stereotype of India. In Richard King’s words,

In Vivekananda’s hands, Orientalist notions of India as ‘other worldly’ and ‘mystical’ were embraced and praised as India’s special gift to humankind. Thus the very discourse that succeeded in alienating, subordinating and controlling India was used by Vivekananda as a religious clarion call for the Indian people to unite under the banner of a universalistic and all-embracing Hinduism. (King 1999: 93)

Under the influence of colonialist, Orientalist, Christian missionary, and Theosophical condemnations of hatha yoga, Vivekananda sought to disseminate a form of yoga to “the West” that would be perceived as the antithesis to the body-centered religion popularly associated with yoga. His first visit to the United States came in 1893 with his famous speech to the Parliament of the World’s Religions in Chicago, in which he described the Hindu tradition in a way that portrayed it as an experiential, not doctrinaire, philosophy that was compatible with the ideals of modernity.¹⁵ This charismatic guru impressed many in the audience, and his appearance at the Parliament initiated a series of lecture tours throughout the United States.

A number of Vivekananda’s qualities appealed to certain segments of the American and South Asian populations. Vivekananda especially appealed to American women interested in alternatives to orthodox religion. The guru joined Transcendentalists, Theosophists, and Hindu

reformers in projecting modern values and ideas onto a reified notion of Hinduism. The result, for Vivekananda, was a modern and nondualist interpretation of Patanjala Yoga, and with his book entitled *Raja Yoga* (1896) and other texts, Vivekananda and the Ramakrishna Mission ossified the equation of raja yoga with a modern and nondualist interpretation of Patanjala Yoga by providing it with indigenous authority.¹⁶

For something to qualify as modern, it had to be compatible with science, so Vivekananda sought to prove that raja yoga was scientific. In this context, he did invoke some components of hatha yoga, but only on his own terms. Basically, he appropriated the notion of the subtle body, which he argued had correspondences in the physical body as mapped out in modern anatomy and physiology (de Michelis 2004: 166–167). In this way, he argued, subtle energy could function as a healing agent (de Michelis 2004: 163–168). Health benefits, however, were inferior to what he considered the true aim of yoga: spiritual development (Vivekananda 1992 [1896]: 20).

Furthermore, while acknowledging that yogic metaphysics and meditation could have implications for the physical body, he largely rejected the physical practices associated with hatha yoga. In fact, on the topic of hatha yoga practices, he insisted, “we have nothing to do with it here, because its practices are very difficult, and cannot be learned in a day, and, after all, do not lead to much spiritual growth” (Vivekananda 1992 [1896]: 20). Vivekananda focused instead on what he perceived to be the psychological benefits of yoga and an emphasis on the self that would be perceived as compatible with the modern democratic emphasis on the individual, and ignored those aspects of yoga that were perceived as nonrational.

Vivekananda’s elision of yoga’s body practices was not an isolated incident of censorship in Vivekananda’s life but reflected a larger pattern. As demonstrated by Jeffrey J. Kripal and Hugh B. Urban, Vivekananda also censored the hagiography of his guru, Ramakrishna (1836–1886), by selectively eliding those references that revealed the guru’s engagement with hatha yoga and especially tantra (Kripal 1998; Urban 2003). Such things were apparently too countercultural for Vivekananda’s taste. He probably also perceived them as incompatible with his desire for the global diffusion and universal application of Hindu thought.¹⁷

And yet, simultaneously, in a countercultural move akin to that of Emerson and other Transcendentalists, Vivekananda encouraged his disciples to turn inward, toward the self, rather than outward, toward either Christian or Hindu orthodox doctrine. He took the modern version of

advaita vedanta and prescribed it as a universal religion that he believed was rational, practical, scientific, progressive, utilitarian, and psychological (de Michelis 2004: 91, 119). Echoing Muller's conception of the history of yoga, Vivekananda claimed that any version of yoga other than the one he prescribed was a corruption of its true, original form, arguing, "From the time it was discovered, more than four thousand years ago, Yoga was perfectly delineated, formulated and preached in India" (Vivekananda 1992 [1896]: 20).

Vivekananda's approach to yoga was a nondualist one aimed toward enhancing life in the world, but not in the same ways that figures like Craddock or Bernard had in mind. Vivekananda, himself a celibate monk, was not concerned with enhancing the pleasures of the body, but with enhancing life through a psychological process requiring self-control and meditation.

Vivekananda's emphasis on meditation and self-realization appealed to many countercultural Americans who rejected mainstream institutional forms of Protestant Christianity for new metaphysical movements, such as Christian Science and New Thought. Vivekananda and these Americans were all interested in wedding metaphysics with modern ideas and values as well as the aim of self-realization.¹⁸ Attracted to his individualistic and democratic religious teachings, these Americans welcomed Vivekananda as a teacher, and he in turn responded to their desires and needs. As articulated by Elizabeth de Michelis, "This pattern of social interaction continued throughout his stay in the West: embraced by the more fluid, unchurched, affluent strands of the cultic milieu, he in turn adapted to them" (de Michelis 2004: 114). In all of these ways, Vivekananda appealed to an American audience made up of individuals with largely unorthodox religious interests, though they were unwilling to go so far as to embrace the most controversial of yoga practices popularly associated with hatha yoga.

Vivekananda prescribed yoga in a form that differed dramatically from those of more controversial early modern yogis, such as Craddock and Bernard. Craddock and Bernard's renditions of yoga even resulted in persecution because they were interested in the physical practices that could result in more pleasurable experiences of the body. Vivekananda censored yoga of the physical practices that were most sacred to Craddock and Bernard and most despised by American, Western European, and Indian intellectual and social elites. Because he prescribed an ascetic, Protestant yoga, he was successful in establishing a network of American centers for

what he called the Vedanta Society, an organization for the dissemination of yoga. In his attempt to contrast Craddock with Vivekananda, Schmidt illuminates the approach to the body in Vivekananda's yoga:

While the swami's emphasis on focused meditation connected nicely with Craddock's New Thought leanings, his body talk was hardly conducive to her sex-reform gospel. A proponent of chastity and renunciation, Vivekananda characterized his relationship to women in desexualized, child-like terms and consistently glossed over the eroticized mysticism of his own sainted guru, Ramakrishna, in favor of a more abstractly universalistic philosophy. In many ways Vivekananda actually stood as something of a Comstockian censor of Hindu traditions, hiding the bodily concerns and anxieties of his own teacher behind a veil of pure spirituality. That meditative version of yoga—no body-twisting postures, no openly erotic content—certainly helped Vivekananda make his Vedanta Society a relatively palatable offering in the American religious marketplace. (Schmidt 2010: 125)

Yet despite its opposition to the controversial body-centered yoga techniques, the Vedanta Society and its members were still marginalized by the American mainstream, which perceived yoga in all its forms to be a threat to social mores. Robert Love describes the Society:

It was all very polite. The yoga the Vedantists taught was mental exercise—yoga from the neck up—and it went over very well in the hushed parlors of Back Bay, Fifth Avenue, and Lake Shore Drive. Any controversy it provoked derived not from scandals of the flesh, but from the domestic frenzy that ensued when its most fervent American converts followed the trail of incense to its logical end and renounced all worldly desires, in some cases breaking ties with husbands, wives, children, and family fortunes. (Love 2010: 72)

Yoga, in all its varieties, eventually developed such a bad reputation in the United States, especially for what were considered its ascetic challenges to marriage—there was clearly a misogynist thread to the criticism—that in 1909, even the Theosophical Society banned all conversation on yoga. Annie Besant (1847–1933), president of the American Theosophical Society at that time, went so far as to describe women who

were practicing yoga as “animalistic” (Author unknown 1909b: 8; see also Author unknown 1909a: 3). A 1911 headline in a *Washington Post* Sunday special on the variety of controversies surrounding American yogis succinctly evidences the general identification of yoga with the antithesis of American social mores:

This Soul Destroying Poison of the East: The Tragic Flood of Broken Homes and Hearts, Disgrace and Suicide That Follows the Broadening Stream of Morbidly Alluring Oriental ‘Philosophies’ into Our Country (Author unknown 1911c: M6)

Soon, the United States government began an investigation of various yogis to reveal just how many Americans, especially American women, had been seduced and cheated by yoga (Author unknown 1911a: 538; Author unknown 1911b: 20). By censoring yoga of the body, Vivekananda and his Society had developed a substantive following, but it was still perceived as a countercultural one in some parts of the world, to say the least.

Modern Yoga from the Neck Down

Today most people associate yoga with postural yoga, a fitness regimen that engages the physical body, mostly from the neck down. Yet this chapter on the early history of modern yoga is yet to reveal how postural yoga developed. Even figures like Craddock and Bernard, though they embraced yoga’s physical techniques as one part of yoga practice, did not equate those techniques with fitness alone. They were also interested in the metaphysical manipulation of subtle energies and combined postures with nonphysical yoga techniques, all of which were associated with hatha yoga and, more specifically, tantra. Furthermore, the majority of early modern yogis, most significantly Vivekananda, despised body practices altogether.

The heterogeneity of systems that make up the history of modern yoga and the contrast between a disdain for body practices and a valorization of them in that history is exemplified by comparing Vivekananda to S. K. Pattabhi Jois (1915–2009). As described above, at the turn of the century, Vivekananda argued that the body practices associated with yoga had nothing to do with the true aim of yoga. In the middle of the twentieth century, however, Jois was one among many yoga proponents who became

globally famous for prescribing yoga as a physical fitness regimen, primarily organized around posture practice. His emphasis on posture practice departed not just from the early history of modern yoga, but also from the history of yoga in general. In other words, posture practice was not central to any yoga tradition prior to the twentieth century.¹⁹ So if postural yoga was not a direct continuation of something in the early history of modern yoga, and neither was it a revival of some premodern yoga system, the question arises: What occurred in the gap between Vivekananda and Jois that explains postural yoga’s emergence and development?

Contemporary scholars, most notably Singleton (2010), have set about answering that question. In response to early-twentieth-century transnational ideas and movements, including military calisthenics (Sjoman 1996), modern medicine (Alter 2004), and the Western European and American physical culture of gymnasts, bodybuilders, martial experts, and contortionists (de Michelis 2004; Singleton 2010), modern yoga proponents ignited a passion for hatha yoga by constructing new postural yoga systems.²⁰ Postural yoga emerged “as a hybridized product of colonial India’s dialogical encounter with the worldwide physical culture movement” (Singleton 2010: 80).

The methods of postural yoga were specific to the time period and would not have been considered yoga prior to this period of Indian history (Singleton 2010: 177). In fact, postural yoga was the “cultural successor [of] established methods of stretching and relaxing” that were already common in parts of Western Europe and the United States (Singleton 2010: 154). The physical culture movement emerged as “a new moral crusade was championing physical vigor” (Albanese 2007: 361). The physical vigor that resulted from exercise was tied to morality, nationalism, and economic vitality since survival in the industrial world was perceived to require physical strength (Singleton 2010: 82–83). Physical culture became increasingly accessible to elite segments of society as various fitness organizations, such as the YMCA (Young Men’s Christian Association), flourished.

The valorization of physical fitness traveled from Europe to British India, where Indian yogis assimilated physical culture (Singleton 2010: 81–82). In this way, they salvaged hatha yoga from the onslaughts of Orientalist and reformist criticisms by prescribing it as physical fitness. The result was a “hatha yoga renaissance” (Singleton 2010: 84). Basically, the body practices associated with hatha yoga, that tradition that had been disdained and criticized by European, American, and Indian elites, were

now reconstructed in ways that made them salvageable “indigenous” fitness techniques. Singleton suggests that modern yogis began constructing “‘indigenous’ exercise forms distinct (though often borrowing) from these imported systems... Often, nativized exercise such as this was also referred to as ‘yoga’” (Singleton 2010: 82). Indian nationalists often participated in this movement and turned to posture practice as a way to promote “muscular Hinduism,” a masculinized ideology incorporating issues of health, strength, and vital energy (Alter 2004: 146; see also Alter 1994). This new form of yoga functioned as a means to physical vigor, which symbolized the power of Indian men in resistance to colonial powers.

The global physical culture had its own countercultural dimensions. Most significantly, it opposed the intellectualism of modern Western European and American culture. Part of the physical culture agenda was to repair the perceived “imbalance of ‘body-mind-soul’” because of what was considered too much emphasis on the mind or “intellect” (Singleton 2010: 84).

Simultaneously, however, postural yoga shared certain qualities with yoga systems in which body practices were censored, as prescribed by figures like Vivekananda. First, a spiritual discourse continued to permeate the culture of postural yoga (Singleton 2010: 89–91). In this way, it resembled Vivekananda’s raja yoga. It also resembled, however, other systems and organizations constructed out of the global physical culture, such as the YMCA (Singleton 2010: 91). Such organizations as well as postural yoga represented a reawakening of the sacralization of the body (Singleton 2010: 84, 89–94, 119).

It differed, however, from the sacralization of the body by figures like Craddock, Bernard, or Woodroffe. Although they shared with physical culture a desire to counter the mainstream triadic opposition between mind, body, and soul, Craddock, Bernard, and Woodroffe were inspired by tantra to use the body as the locus of erotico-mystical experience and pleasure. Physical culture, on the other hand, provided a context in which physical fitness was perceived to enhance an ascetic and Protestant notion of self-control, moral development, and purity.

Second, modern science was key to the process of constructing postural yoga. Just as Vivekananda argued that the meditational, philosophical, and ethical components of yoga were compatible with science, so those who prescribed postural yoga argued that it could be scientifically proven to improve fitness and health. Joseph S. Alter suggests, through

this discourse, “Yoga was modernized, medicalized, and transformed into a system of physical culture” (Alter 2004: 10).

In India, yoga as physical culture underwent growth as demonstrated by the establishment of the first two modern yoga institutions: the Yoga Institute at Santa Cruz, Bombay (established 1918), and the Kaivalyadhama Shrimad Madhava Yoga Mandir Samiti at Lonavla (near Pune) (established 1921). Inspired by Vivekananda’s experiential yogic quest for knowledge of the self in combination with the assimilation of physical culture into yoga systems by Indian nationalists, these institutions began disseminating loosely structured, nondogmatic yogic ideas and practices to India’s public.²¹ Proponents of yoga at these institutes, especially Kaivalyadhama, readily and aggressively appropriated the discourse of science to explain the perceived fitness and health benefits of yoga.

The stretching and muscle-building exercises that became associated with yoga in India were not yet associated with yoga outside of India, but with female physical culture and gymnastics, until widely influential yoga gurus such as Tirumalai Krishnamacharya (1888–1989) and Sivananda Saraswati (1887–1963) connected the two and trained students in postural yoga (Singleton 2010: 154). In fact, Krishnamacharya and Sivananda were the figures most significant in the process of reconstructing yoga in the popular imagination as postural yoga, since some of their students would be responsible for widely disseminating postural yoga within and beyond India.

Training students in the “pan-Indian hub of physical culture revivalism,” Mysore, India, from the 1930s to the 1950s, Krishnamacharya constructed an aerobic system of postural yoga whereby the practitioner performed postures in repetition and in sequence (Singleton 2010: 176–177).²² By the time Krishnamacharya began training a small group of students in the 1930s, yoga in India had come to be associated with the muscle-building and stretching routines that made up physical culture. Krishnamacharya’s students, especially B. K. S. Iyengar (b. 1918) and Jois, would successfully market idiosyncratic renditions of postural yoga to a global audience in the second half of the twentieth century.

Sivananda was a yoga guru in Rishikesh who chose to transgress the intimate guru–disciple relationship by participating in the transnational dissemination of his rendition of postural yoga through the distribution of English-language pamphlets throughout India and abroad. Sivananda formalized those activities when he established the Divine

Life Society in 1936.²³ He attracted students from all over the world, including Mircea Eliade, who studied with Sivananda in Rishikesh before becoming one of the most influential twentieth-century scholars of religion.

While Sivananda's appeal to disciples from all over the world made Rishikesh a major hub for postural yoga practice, Krishnamacharya continued to teach students his own rendition of postural yoga in Mysore. Some of his students became yoga teachers themselves, and Iyengar, one of the most famous proponents of yoga in the contemporary world, was one of them. Iyengar lived and studied with this innovative yoga guru in Mysore for three years (1934–1937), after which he moved to Pune, where he eventually became quite popular as a yoga instructor. Iyengar developed his own postural yoga system that was informed by the approach and techniques of his guru as well as increasingly refined biomedical understandings of anatomy and physiology (de Michelis 2004: 197–198).

In the 1920s and 1930s, yogis in India were practicing postural yoga, which developed out of the dialogical exchange between physical culture and modern yoga, but postural yoga was not yet “export ready” (Singleton 2010: 154). In fact, much of the techniques that we today associate with yoga, such as stretching and muscle-building postures, were popular in Europe and the United States by the 1920s but were not yet associated with yoga. Singleton argues, “This supports the hypothesis that postural modern yoga displaced—or was the cultural successor of—the established methods of stretching and relaxing that had already become commonplace in the West” (Singleton 2010: 154). After all, yoga mostly remained associated with the extreme and anti-social among mainstream populations in Western Europe and the United States.

Take Bernard for example. He referred to his own system of yoga as “advanced physical culture,” studied many of the trends in the emergent physical culture milieu, and was deeply concerned with the physical fitness of his disciples, yet he remained a countercultural figure. So, despite the assimilations that had taken place between physical culturists and yogis, yoga was generally still associated with social radicals like Bernard in the popular imagination outside of India. In fact, postural yoga would not undergo global popularization until certain social changes enabled postural yoga advocates to flourish in the global fitness market in the second half of the twentieth century.

Conclusion

Perhaps the most important lesson from the early history of modern yoga is that modern yoga is malleable. Yet, with all of the divergences that make up that history, the data reinforce a collective historical pattern: Modern yoga, until the second half of the twentieth century, was countercultural, elite, or scandalous. Before its popularization, modern yoga moved from the counterculture of Indian ascetic renouncers, to the counterculture of turn-of-the-century American practitioners of tantra, to the counterculture of Transcendentalism and metaphysical religion, and to the counterculture of proponents of physical culture. It was not until the late 1960s that it no longer opposed the prevailing cultural norms of Americans and Western Europeans and became readily available to the masses in urban areas across the world. And so all of this begs the question: What changes made that possible?