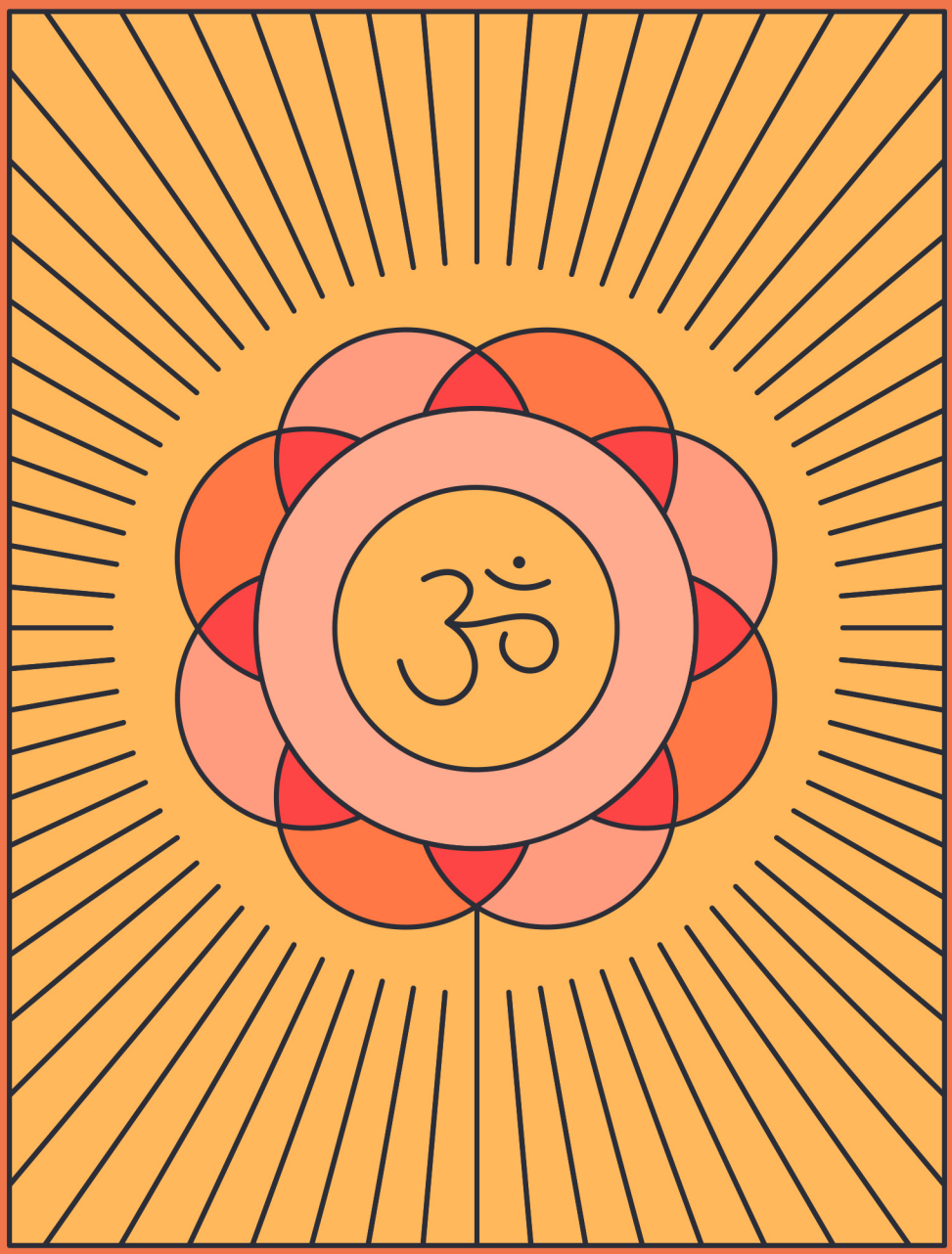
THE TRUTH OF YOGA



A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE TO YOGA'S HISTORY, TEXTS, PHILOSOPHY, AND PRACTICES

DANIEL SIMPSON

North Point Press
A division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux
120 Broadway, New York 10271

Printed in the United States of America
First edition, 2021

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Simpson, Daniel, 1974– author.
Title: The truth of yoga : a comprehensive guide to yoga's history, texts, philosophy, and practices / Daniel Simpson.
Description: First edition. | New York : North Point Press, a division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021. | Includes bibliographical references.
Identifiers: LCCN 2020035109 | ISBN 9780865477810 (paperback)
Subjects: LCSH: Yoga.
Classification: LCC B132.Y6 S52145 2021 | DDC 181/.45—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2020035109

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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

INTRODUCTION

SEEKING TRUTH

When I first started practicing yoga, I knew very little about where it came from, or its objectives. Neither seemed all that important. It was enough that it made me feel calmer, more content, and less depressed.

Going to classes got me absorbed in complex shapes, distracting me from my unease with strange instructions. I felt newly connected to previously alien parts of my body, from the "big-toe mound" to the "armpit chest." I enjoyed getting bendier and breathing more freely. But after a while I wanted more. Some of my teachers liked quoting from texts, such as the *Bhagavad Gita* and *Yoga Sutra*. Yet as far as I could tell, these had little in common with what we were doing. They barely mentioned postures, and they talked about concepts I struggled to grasp.

Having fondly imagined that yogis in caves had performed the same practice for thousands of years, I was confused. And the more I read, the less I felt I understood. There were many different versions of yoga, and some of their philosophies seemed contradictory. I had already

encountered this with practice: each method I tried had a rival idea about why it was right. However, most teachers said the aim remained the same, which was vaguely defined as union, liberation, or awakening. Most ancient texts said these goals were attained by renouncing the world. That sounded neither appealing nor like what one did on a plastic mat.

Over time, a few things became clearer. Popular books often blur the distinctions between different systems, but there has never been any such thing as "One True Yoga." The practice and the theories behind it have evolved, becoming combined in a variety of ways. None of these is "truer" than others. Each makes sense in context, but there is no obligation to pick one text, or one form of yoga, and uncritically follow whatever it says. We are free to ignore what might not seem relevant. But that makes it important to know what traditional teachings say, and to distinguish this from how we interpret them.

Ultimately, yoga is a system of practice not belief. No leap of faith is required at the outset, beyond trusting that it might be worth trying. Anyone who does so can test for themselves if it actually works. What this means will depend on priorities. If our goal is to put our legs behind our heads, to push up into handstands, or simply to relax, we might not feel inclined to read old texts. However, if we want to inquire more deeply, traditional philosophy can still be insightful. The aim of this book is to make it accessible to modern practitioners.

Most approaches to yoga blend ideas and techniques from a range of sources. Anyone today can make a similar hybrid of their own, provided they acknowledge this is

what they are doing. What follows is a summary of themes that have influenced practice as it developed.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Much of what is said about yoga is misleading. To take two examples, it is neither five thousand years old, as is commonly claimed, nor does it mean "union," at least not exclusively. In perhaps the most famous yogic text—the *Yoga Sutra* of Patanjali—the aim is separation, isolating consciousness from everything else. And the earliest evidence of practice dates back about 2,500 years. Yoga may well be older, but no one can prove it.

Most modern forms of yoga teach sequences of postures with rhythmic breathing. This globalized approach is largely the same from Shanghai to San Francisco, with minor variations between different styles. Some of these methods are recent inventions, but others are ancient. As described by the Buddha and in Indian epics, among other sources, ascetics used physical practice to cultivate self-discipline, holding difficult positions for extended periods. Other postures evolved in the meantime, originally as warm-ups for seated meditation.

Scholars have learned a lot more about the history of yoga in recent years. However, their discoveries can be difficult to access. The latest research is published in academic journals, or edited collections of articles held in university libraries. Although some of this work is now available online, its insights are aimed more at specialists than general readers. This book includes many new findings, presented in a format designed for practitioners. The

aim is to highlight ideas on which readers can draw to keep traditions alive in the twenty-first century.

It offers an overview of yoga's evolution from its earliest origins to the present. It can either be read chronologically or used as a reference guide to history and philosophy. Each short section addresses one element, quoting from traditional texts and putting their teachings into context. The sources for translated quotations are provided in notes at the end of the book, along with a detailed bibliography. My intention is to keep things clear without oversimplifying.

What I write has grown out of my teaching—at the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies, on yoga teacher trainings, and in online courses on texts and traditions. I have had the good fortune to study with some of the world's foremost researchers in this field, earning a master's degree from SOAS (formerly the School of Oriental and African Studies) at the University of London, which has been home to the pioneering Hatha Yoga Project. I am also a devoted practitioner, making frequent trips to India since the 1990s.

I hope you find this book insightful and inspiring.

WHAT IS YOGA?

The word "yoga" is hard to define. It comes from *yuj*, a Sanskrit root that means to join things together, from which English gets "yoke." Depending on the context, "yoga" has dozens of different meanings, from "a method" to "equipping an army" by harnessing chariots. Most descriptions of practice involve concentration, refining awareness to see through illusions.

Texts mainly talk about yoga as an inward-focused state, in which the absence of thought yields transformative insights. If consciousness perceives no object but itself, we are not who we think we are. The ultimate fruit of this realization is freedom from suffering. However, there are also other goals on the way, from the pursuit of material benefits and superhuman powers to renouncing possessions and worldly existence. In general, most approaches strike a balance between disciplined action and detachment.

Practically speaking, yoga is about our relationship with everything. Although it is not a religion in itself, it has roots in religious traditions from ancient India. Texts often teach yogic techniques alongside metaphysics and spiritual doctrine. The title of one of the most popular books about yoga, the *Bhagavad Gita*, means "God's Song." However, teachings on practice repeatedly emphasize that anyone can do it, regardless of whether or not they are religious.

Yoga is sometimes described as a science, but its effects are not easily measured. Since practice consists of experiments on oneself, its results are subjective and broader conclusions are hard to establish. What works for one person affects others differently. This is part of the reason there are so many methods. For example, texts say the yogic state can be attained by effort (*hatha yoga*), dispassionate action (*karma yoga*), or devotion (*bhakti yoga*). Apart from their shared objective, each of these disciplines has one thing in common: they have to be practiced. Words can only spark a quest for direct knowledge.

Traditional practitioners can therefore be wary of yoga philosophy, preferring instead to embody what it signifies. This is all very well, but few of us today share the same

basic aims as ancient yogis, who strove for freedom from rebirth. Most of us are trying to find peace in response to life's challenges, or exploring what gets in the way of feeling whole. Yogic teachings can offer us guidance, but some of their ideas might not align with our priorities, and some aspects of tradition might need reinterpreting in light of modern knowledge.

Adaptations have always been part of how yoga develops. Although its ultimate objective transcends time and space, it has always been changing, drawing widely from different traditions. Even so, there are basic ideas that make practices yogic, as opposed to something different (such as drinking beer while halfheartedly stretching, to cite one modern trend). By refining awareness of inner experience, yoga is both a method and its outcome, as described in the commentary accompanying Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra* (3.6):

> Yoga is to be known by yoga, and yoga itself leads to yoga.
> He who remains steadfast in yoga always delights in it.

NOTE ON SANSKRIT

Sanskrit is the classical language of Indian literature, including yoga texts. It shares a common ancestor with Latin and Greek and is therefore a distant cousin of English and other European languages. The Sanskrit word for "Sanskrit" makes no reference to place, or to people who speak it: *samskrita* means "perfected" or "well-formed."

As far as we can tell from the earliest texts, a version of Sanskrit was originally used by Vedic priests more than

three thousand years ago. The precision of their rituals preserved oral teachings for generations: they were memorized before being written, and are still learned in traditional ways by modern Brahmins, whose chants recall the musical sound of ancient India.

The most widely used script to write Sanskrit is *devanagari*, whose name means "divine." Some of the sounds represented by its characters have no English parallel. For clarification in transliterated texts, dots and lines called diacritical marks are sometimes added to roman letters. Since these only really make sense to budding Sanskritists, I have chosen to leave them out and adapted some spellings for ease of reading.

As an example, here is Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra* 1.2, defining yoga as a state beyond the mind. In *devanagari*, it reads:
योगश्चित्तवृत्तिनिरोधः

Linguists transliterate this as *yogaś cittavṛttinirodhaḥ*, which sounds like *yogash chitta vritti nirodhaha*. In general, the letters *sh* and *ch* are pronounced together, as in "ship" and "chip." All other consonants followed by *h*—including *th* and *ph*, and the *dh* in this example—are not combined. Instead, the *h* remains breathily silent, as in "ghost."

Now for the challenge of translating the *sutra*, whose minimalist form looks deceptively simple. Some words have so many definitions that they only make sense when read in context. Others have no English equivalent, or can only be conveyed with longer phrases. As Wendy Doniger, a prominent scholar, jokes: "Every Sanskrit word means itself, its opposite, a name of God, and a position in sexual intercourse."

Agreement among translators is elusive, as can be seen from the endless editions of Patanjali's *sutras*, whose

meanings have been debated for centuries in Indian commentaries. One recent version of the sentence above, by Edwin Bryant, defines yoga as: "The stilling of the changing states of the mind." A century earlier, James Haughton Woods put it as: "The restriction of the fluctuations of mind-stuff." The latest take, from the Patanjali expert Philipp Maas, sounds more intense: "Yoga is the shutdown of the mental capacity's processes."

To illustrate what can be made of the same Sanskrit phrase, consider this creative interpretation by Kofi Busia, a teacher of yoga since the 1970s: "Wholeness consists of a complete grasp and command over the process of being and becoming aware."

There are rarely definitive versions of yogic texts. The closest scholars get is called a critical edition, which gathers as many surviving manuscripts as possible, ironing out discrepancies in Sanskrit from problems like copying errors. Even with the best of intentions, translations are still imprecise, based on a mixture of knowledge and intuition. In any case, the insights of yoga are said to be impossible to put into words, so some of their nuance is inevitably lost by trying to capture them in English.

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