

Mark Singleton, Part Two

Posted on 13. Oct, 2010 by [Susan M](#) in [Ideas](#)



Photo: Cover Image, *Yoga Body*, ©Sigrid Olsson, 2010. Art Direction: The Magazine of Yoga

Translations, Belief Frameworks and Modern Yoga Practice, continued

The author of *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* talks about the translation of yoga.

BY MAGAZINE EDITOR [SUSAN MAIER-MOUL](#)

[Conversation: Mark Singleton, Part One](#)

[Book Review: Yoga Body](#)

Before resuming our conversation with Mark Singleton, let's take get his perspective on the exchange of influences between the West and India. Here's an excerpt from *Yoga in the Modern World*, edited by Mark Singleton and Jean Byrne.

The fault most commonly found with contemporary yoga, by both scholars and “informed” practitioners, is that it is inauthentic with regard to the Indian traditions it claims to transmit. In this view, many of yoga’s

manifestations in the (post-) modern, transnational world are simply phony, in so far as they speciously claim affiliation with a more or less ill-defined “tradition” of yoga, while simultaneously masking their modern accretions and innovations.

Though certain markedly modern variants, such as Yogalates, Yogaerobics, or Hot Naked Yoga, blazon their trademark hybridity for all to see, others explicitly project the impression that they partake of a pristine and unchanging, millennia-old lineage of yoga theory and practice.

If there is one thing that recent studies on contemporary yoga have made more than clear, however, it is that in its dissemination in the Western world, yoga has undergone radical transformation in response to the differing world views, logical predispositions, and aspirations of modern audiences.

Such new kinds of “export yoga,” it also seems evident, were the result of a reframing of practices and belief frameworks within India itself over the last century-and-a-half, in response to encounters with modernity and the West.

- Mark Singleton and Jean Byrne, Introduction, Yoga in the Modern World

Practicing yoga

Susan Maier-Moul How does everything we’ve been talking about relate to practice – to actually doing yoga?

Mark Singleton Practical yoga in modern times has changed immensely, sometimes out of all recognition. This is also a process of translation. Practices are taken from earlier traditions, added to, edited, spun and re-cast, until they become something completely other.

This is particularly visible in the way that yoga these days has become almost synonymous with posture practice—this is a new situation, that has very few precedents in any pre-modern yoga traditions. I examine the reasons for this development in my recent book *Yoga Body, The Origins of Modern Posture Practice*.

As in translation of texts like the *Yoga Sutras*, the translation of practices is guided by the belief frameworks and needs of that particular time and place. So in early

twentieth century India, Hindu Indians were seeking to assert their own indigenous religious practices, in the face of colonial impositions. One of the names given to this project was “yoga”.

The identity politics of “classical” yoga

Susan What we are doing now and naming yoga – whether it’s something that’s being called “classical yoga” or “flow yoga” or something else – it isn’t consistent with even the yoga of Patanjali, much less “ancient” practices.

Mark The body of practices that grew up (mainly among English-educated, urban Indians) was quite different from what we might call “grass roots” versions of yoga.

For one thing, in spite of their assertions of religious and cultural independence from abroad, many of these men (and occasional women) borrowed significantly from Western philosophical and esoteric concepts. It was these people, and particularly the immensely successful Swami Vivekananda, who first brought yoga to the West, and who, to a large extent, shaped early American and European understandings of yoga.

Susan You’re saying even the yoga brought by teachers from India to the West was itself already deeply influenced by Western ideas and belief frameworks.

Mark When we read these early founders of “transnational” yoga, then, we need to be aware that the ideas they put forward, and the practices they teach, are mixtures of traditional and markedly modern notions.

Our own contemporary understandings of yoga are similar kinds of mixtures. It’s for this reason that it’s preferable to speak of plural “yogas” rather than “yoga” in the singular. There is no single body of practices called “yoga” (although there are certainly dominant ones through history). Modern yogas are usually very particular and unique renderings, which often radically depart from tradition. They are, in other words, translations.

Inventing modern posture practice

Susan Say more, please, about postures. In what sense are postures translations?

Mark As I propose in *Yoga Body*, modern posture practice is essentially a combination of gymnastic exercise with some selective principles from hatha yoga.

In the early years of the twentieth century, postural yoga practice was re-conceived as a replacement for the European systems of keep-fit and gymnastics which

predominated in India at the time.

Just as Vivekananda and his predecessors saw their “yoga” as a way to displace Western impositions of religious and philosophical meaning, so innovators of postural yoga (asana) saw this as a way to usurp the kind of colonization of the body that was taking place through Western gymnastics.

And like those others, these posture pioneers borrowed both from Western principles and practices, and from Indian tradition.

Susan It sounds incredibly dynamic. What constituted yoga at that point in time?

Mark The borders of what defined yoga were, at that time, very fluid, and people worked in many different directions. The picture we get from the early twentieth century is one of radical experimentation.

New systems abounded, and a few gained immense recognition and influence. Examples of these are the posture-based systems of Shri Yogendra, Swami Kuvalayananda, and T. Krishnamacharya (who has become very influential in the West, of course, through his students B. K. S. Iyengar, Pattabhi Jois, Indra Devi, T. K. V. Desikachar, Srivatsa Ramaswami etc.).

Susan A lot of innovation – there were a lot of people seeing opportunity.

A new translation of a practice called yoga

Mark So here’s the situation: a new wave of postural practice emerges in India in the early twentieth century, deeply informed by modern Western scientific and medical models of the body, and by the religious and philosophical framework given to modern yoga by the likes of Vivekananda.

These practices are then transmitted westwards, and are taken up by Western students and teachers, who then bring their own particular understandings to the postures. This in turn reinforces the stature of the new postural yoga systems in India. And so on...

Very quickly, these postures become naturalized knowledge, with a new orthopraxis (i.e. an accepted, standard way of doing them). Like our preference of contemporary translations of the *Yoga Sutras* over Victorian versions, modern posture practice feels right, feels natural. But it is still translation.

Shaping the body

Susan Can you give us an example of how this plays out in particular postures?

Mark An example I often use is the shoulderstand.

A shape very much like this was the emblem of the British Women's League of Health and Beauty during the 1920s. It was not associated with yoga, but rather had its own characteristic set of meanings. It helped one to stay young, trimmed fat around the waist and so on.

Obviously, this cosmetic reading of the posture makes it something wholly other than the meaning of a similar posture in a medieval hatha yoga context, where it is referred to as “a secret in all the tantras”. There it is an esoteric practice concerned with reversing the flow of the essential endogenous energies of the body.

A third instance is the medical understanding of the posture in Swami Kuvalayananda's scientific experiments in the 1930s, or B. K. S. Iyengar's explanation of its medical benefits in *Light on Yoga*.

If one were to draw these three shapes out on tracing paper, and place them one on top of the other, they would look identical—and yet each one of them carries a vastly different meaning.

As yoga enters the modern gymnastic-dominated world, these three meanings compete and sometimes merge. The sarvangasana that many people know today (especially in “gym yoga” contexts) incorporates some mix of all of them. This is what is interesting about how yoga has developed, for better or worse, in the West.

Modern, scientific, physical culture-oriented understandings are read back into the original yoga posture, and alter the former meaning of that posture.

Authentic yes, ancient – not so much

Susan So asana or posture practice – no matter who is teaching it – is really a modern innovation?

Mark Once again, it's a question of context. As yoga's popularity today attests, posture practice is a powerful and important component in the lives of millions of people around the world. So in one sense, it's working—on its own terms. It brings benefit to people's lives, no question about it.

However, it may also be useful to recognize that we are dealing with a very restricted

color palette here. The yoga traditions are far vaster than our modern translations usually give them credit for. And the range of benefits are also far wider.

Susan How should practitioners approach the desire for meaning in the modernity of their practices?

Mark Seeking further than the run-of-the-mill explanations of yoga that prevail today, one might well discover a new richness and depth.

Look into the contexts of practice: the first thing one will find is that the postural aspect of most yoga traditions is far, far less pronounced than it is today, even in medieval hatha yoga.

The other thing one might discover is that the understanding of the body is radically different outside of the modern context. Ideas as to the place of the individual in the world change also. While one may not wish to embrace these other paradigms (insofar as they may be foreign to one's most pressing concerns), it is nonetheless useful to know how far modern yoga can depart from pre-modern, non-anglophone understandings.

Combining the study of older traditions with analysis of modern traditions can help us to see where we have come from and where we are going. It will can also broaden our perspective on our lives, and thereby deepen our practice.

Mark Singleton teaches at St. John's College, Santa Fe. He is the author of *Yoga Body, the Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (Oxford University Press, 2010), and the co-editor of *Yoga in the Modern World, Contemporary Perspectives* (Routledge 2008). He is currently translating an early hatha yoga text, the *Vivekamartanda*.

© 2010, The Magazine of Yoga, LLC.

 Tags: [columnist](#), [susan](#)