

Bodies and Minds in Yoga: a response to *Yoga Body*

A new book has just come out into the crowded yoga marketplace: *Yoga Body* by Mark Singleton. Unlike so many of the other yoga products this is neither full of glossy photographs (though the front cover picture is quite cute) nor making any particular promises. Instead this is a book that seeks to question some of the assumptions underlying our yoga practice.

It is written by an academic – but an academic who has been a highly dedicated practitioner for more than 15 years. Mark is not only very adept in the physical postures (practising third series Astanga) but a serious student of yoga – he is qualified in the Iyengar school as well as within the Satyananda system – and a long-term meditator. This book might be dismissed by some as a product of “modern scholars who barely dip their toes into the ocean of yoga” – but such dismissals reveal inability to honestly consider the circumstances of this yoga which is practised by so many people across the world. Yet although this is an academic book (there are detailed footnotes and the bibliography runs to more than 30 pages) it is without doubt readable and accessible. There is a skilful balancing between the maintaining of academic credibility while ensuring that a good story is told well.

This is a book that made me pause and think. Its subtitle is ‘the origins of modern posture practice’ and the aim is to understand the forming of yoga postures. What so many of us spend so much time doing – where has this come from? What are the influences that structure the shapes that upon which we expend so much effort? This book doesn’t unfortunately touch on why so many of us are doing these practices but this wasn’t a topic of *Yoga Body*. Hopefully this will be a conversation that happens afterwards – as an example, there is an academic article soon to be published on why people in London do yoga. The points that are made within these pages of *Yoga Body* deserve serious consideration by all sincere yoga practitioners.

There is no doubt that in India there have been physical postural practices throughout the centuries – in this, India is similar to many other societies such as ancient Greece (birthplace of the Olympics) and even medieval England (what after all are Morris dancers but an expression of the human need for movement). But in a process that was dynamic – which means in this context that there was an exchanging of philosophies and practices – there was a growing interest in the western world about yoga from late 19thc onwards. As we know, this interest has now grown to such an extent that there are more than 2.5 million people practising yoga in the UK and over 20 million in the USA.

One of the most important figures in this exchanging was Swami Vivekananda. He is particularly famed for his speech at the Parliament of the World’s Religions in 1893 where he introduced the subject of yoga to a curious western audience. But Vivekananda – like all of us – had his own agenda. Although he presented the philosophy of yoga, at the same time he was opposed to many of the actual practitioners of yoga as these individuals were very much on the margins of Indian society. As such, their rebelliousness was a threat to the respectability of the Swami. An example of this hostility is in a letter

that Vivekananda wrote in 1890: “the queer breathing exercises of the Hatha-Yoga – which is nothing but a kind of gymnastics”.

What is being suggested in *Yoga Body* is that the physical practices that we do today could owe more of a debt to people such as Eugene Sandow and Genevieve Stebbins than someone such as Vivekananda. Sandow (1867-1925) was a world-famous bodybuilder who had an enthusiastic following in India and Stebbins (1857-1915) was influential in developing a system called ‘harmonic gymnastics’. In a book written in 1892 – a year before Vivekananda’s triumphant appearance – she described her practice as: “a completely rounded system for the development of body, brain and soul; a system of training which shall bring this grand trinity of the human microcosm into one continuous, interacting unison... (and remove the) inharmonious mental states (that lead to discord)” (*Dynamic Breathing and Harmonic Gymnastics: a complete system of psychical, aesthetic and physical culture*). Stebbins actually presented her techniques as part of the traditions of “religious training”.

It is clear that predating yoga’s arrival there was an active culture of stretching and strengthening in the west – and intermingled within this culture were elements of what may be described as esoteric and mystical religious approaches. So the yoga being exported from India (ignoring the fact that this Indian yoga was already western influenced) was landing on ground that had been prepared. Like so much, what was happening – and is still happening – was a blending: a blending of different practices and philosophies to fit the requirements of particular times. And one of the most skilful of these blenders is the man often referred to as ‘the father of modern yoga’: Krishnamacharya (1888-1989).

Krishnamacharya was the teacher of the three most influential Indian yoga teachers: K Pattabhi Jois (1915-2009), BKS Iyengar (1918-) and TKV Desikachar (1930s-). His brilliance was the blending together of Indian philosophies that stand the test of time (such as yamas and niyamas) with modern gymnastics and yoga asanas – and his mission was to popularise this blend that he termed ‘yoga’. One reason for the gymnastic/asana blend was that mission of popularity – as one of Krishnamacharya’s students explained: “that kind of circus work...to draw people’s attention”.

These practices – like everything – have to be seen in their social context: the rising of Indian nationalism, the declining of the British Empire, the renewal of Hinduism. Another factor in the development of Krishnamacharya’s influence was the patronage of the Maharaja of Mysore (1884-1940). The Maharaja was particularly interested in yoga asana with the result as Mark writes: “...the flowing sequences similar to the ones seen today in Astanga yoga were conceived at least in part as performance pieces in a modern Indian court as well as spectacular enticements to draw the people (back?) to yoga”.

An example of this modern convergence with an older practice (which is then presented in its entirety as an ancient form) is the sun salutations (*suryanamaskars*). The older Hatha Yoga manuals such as *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (dating from 14th century) define postures such as *sirsasana* (headstand) and *padmasana* (lotus) – but there is no mention of any sun salutations – nor in any of the other old texts. Shri Yogendra (1897-1989) who taught outside Mumbai declared “*suryanamaskars* – a form of gymnastics attached to the sun

worship in India – indiscriminately mixed up with the yoga physical training by the ill-informed are definitely prohibited by the authorities” (*Yoga Asanas Simplified* (1928)).

However Pattabhi Jois claimed that the sequences that he taught – Suryanamaskar A and B – were derived from particular passages in the Vedas but as Mark dryly notes “it is hard to see how either of these verses pertain in any way to suryanamaskar, let alone delineate the individual movements”. This attachment of suryanamaskars to older asanas can easily be argued is the same as the attachment of standing postures into the sequences that we practice today: an example of this blending of yoga asana with bodybuilding and gymnastics.

But in this chair based civilisation with these bodies of tension and tightness, perhaps there is a requirement for such shapes as suryanamaskars and standing postures. It might be said that Krishnamacharya and Pattabhi Jois were showing great foresight in their creative asana/gymnastic blending. Yet instead of acknowledging this insight, teachers such as Pattabhi Jois are often dismissed as acrobatic instructors (which isn’t what Mark is suggesting in *Yoga Body*). This ignores the fact that actually Pattabhi Jois was a scholar and a philosopher who thought deeply about practice and – for a South Indian Brahmin who are notoriously conservative – was remarkably open to other systems (such as Buddhism).

What is common within these practices is the thread of individuals – whether they are an Indian yogi or a Danish gymnast – wanting to explore their physical possibilities: which is in many ways an intrinsic part of being human. So whether that possibility might be a trikonasana (a standing pose that laterally stretches the spine) or a kapotasana (a sitting back bend), it’s this exploring of individual limits. And this exploring is simply another thread in that human need for movement. But there can be dangers in that need when it is not being sustained by spiritual consciousness (a manifesting of which is interconnection and interdependence). There is the obvious danger of indulgent self-obsession and that body beautiful. There is also a linking between fascination with movement and eugenics (a system of improving human genetic qualities which was a prominent feature of Nazi Germany).

The question might then be how can we explore without becoming too attached (a level of attachment is almost inevitable but there is a direct relationship between attachment and suffering). The Buddhist teacher Tsokyni Rinpoche said:

“One of the pitfalls when hatha yogis use the body solely is arrogance. People start identifying with and then clinging to the body – a transitory, composite impermanent – and so end up suffering in the aging process and having to let go of attachment to a body that they spent so much time cultivating.....sincerely take a look at any practice, and notice within yourself if compassion, faith and wisdom are developing from it. If they are, then stay with it. If they’re not, take a look and either change the way you experience the practice or change the practice itself”.

Perhaps we need to let these yoga practices stand on their own feet rather than this seeking of authenticity (which can be a symptom of disappearing traditions). So in standing on their own feet, are these practices helpful in understanding ourselves? Do

these practices enable a greater connecting to ourselves and each other or do they just reinforce the already existing disconnect? Do they make us more selfish and self-centered or more generous and selfless? Do they diminish straining and striving or do they encourage those common tendencies to compare and to compete? And is the physical component of practice overriding what could be called the 'mind training' aspects? Essentially this means an establishing of the importance of mind training which has always been present within yoga philosophy but has lost influence within recent decades.

Mark presents the evidence in a clear form and it is likely that a jury hearing this case would find that these physical postures that we perform as our yoga practice are being informed by a blending of different approaches. This might be unacceptable to some people who prefer "the older the yoga system is, the more asanas you will find". But surely the key point is how do these practices influence the quality of our being? Do these practices enable us to experience – as an example – a greater embodiment?

What I would suggest is that in this society of TV dinners and Attention Deficit Disorder, a society of Botox, Prozac and widespread paranoia, a society where the age-old human condition of deep lack has been intensified – is it any wonder that there is such a thirst for meaning amongst so many people (remember those figures of yoga class participants). Then the question can become does yoga play a part in the fulfilling of this thirst or is it just another commodity to keep us as cogs in the wheels of capitalism – the yoga class as a maintaining of obedience to these structures or the yoga class as the grounds for transforming ourselves and our world?

Such questions are sadly beyond the boundaries of this book – but the contents of *Yoga Body* can help us to strip away some of the myth-making that has surrounded the manufacture of yoga into this very successful global brand. Perhaps then on that pedestal Krishnamacharya could be joined by individuals like Genevieve Stebbins: this linking of physicality with spirituality is much more than yoga and maybe we might just use 'yoga' as an overall phrase to describe these systems.

Because as I have said there is a great need for practices to bring us back into the body. There is a great need for practices that emphasise themes such as compassion, truthfulness and contentment. These are precarious and challenging times – we are faced by a requirement to significantly shift the way we live in order to sustain society. Can yoga possibly help us to do this? Can yoga perhaps help undermine the dominant religion of consumerism and encourage an acknowledging of what we have got and appreciating of what is already around us?

Coming back to *Yoga Body*: the conclusion left me wanting more – and I felt that the back cover declaration ("how the most prevalent forms of postural yoga today...came to be the hugely popular phenomena they are") wasn't in some aspects answered. And as an Astanga practitioner myself, I could feel a sensitivity towards the critique of that system. But Mark also critiques the Bikram system (clearly showing its roots in bodybuilding and gently mocking their Olympic sport pretensions) – and the importance of the Mysore legacy cannot be underestimated. This Mysore legacy is not just a matter of the Astanga system, it is also the foundation for so much of modern yoga such as all the power/dynamic flow classes and styles like Jivamukti.

There is always a need for more understanding – a suggestion for the subtitle of Mark’s next book could be ‘explaining the popularity of modern posture practice’ – as much as there is always a need for more practice. But perhaps through the help of *Yoga Body* we can go into practice with eyes wider open – which means there is greater clarity in our practice. A result of this could be a realising of elements that have been marginalised: practices such as dharana and dhyana, our behavioural patterns off that mat rather than just our physical abilities in performing postures.

When we do drop myths that can be a tool for transformation. When we do become able to clearly stand in our practices and value these practices on the basis of our own experiences rather than ancient scriptural authority, then we grow up. Apparently the last words of the Buddha were “be a guiding light to yourselves – continue forward with vigorous effort and steadfast commitment to the truth”: in the task of awakening find out from our own experiences as well as the many others who have trod these paths. And yoga has so much potential within this task because of its accessibility as anyone can do the practising of yoga: this is a doorway to the path.

Although there is criticism within yoga of ‘gymnastics’ (of which I have done my fair part), the irony is that at least a significant part of the roots of the physical practice is...gymnastics – but when within yoga there is that emphasising of mind training and when that mind training is grounded in an understanding of interconnection and interdependence, then it returns to the original roots as practice and philosophy for transformation.

Mark Singleton *Yoga Body: the origins of modern posture practice* (Oxford University Press 2010).

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Please feel free to distribute – and I welcome any comments/suggestions/criticisms.

Notes

The quotes “modern scholars who barely dip their toes in the ocean of yoga” and “the older the yoga system is, the more asanas you will find” both come from Gregor Maehle’s *Astanga Yoga – the intermediate series*.

The quote from Tsokyni Rinpoche is taken from an interview with Sarah Powers that appeared in *Elephant* (winter 2004).

All other quotes are taken from *Yoga Body*.

