



# Sanskrit Pathways for Mobilizing Knowledge of Premodern Yoga to Studio-Based Practitioners

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## Abstract

Acknowledged in 2016 by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, yoga today can be said to impact three primary sets of stakeholders: (a) global practitioners and professional instructors of studio-based postural yoga; (b) academic scholars investigating yoga’s historical, textual, and cultural life; and (c) traditional culture bearers within established guru lineages in South Asia and the diaspora. These groups are not mutually exclusive, exhaustive, or homogeneous, but there are often significant cleavages between them—particularly in the production and dissemination of authoritative knowledge about yoga’s premodern “roots.” This essay investigates how (anglophone) practitioners of studio-based postural yoga are currently able to access new scholarship on premodern yoga traditions, and the extent to which specialized Sanskrit language training may offer practitioners a pathway for more active participation in this knowledge mobilization process. We suggest that a kinesthetic approach, in which Sanskrit pedagogy is juxtaposed with physical yoga practice in the studio, might further enhance this process, leading to a more equitable engagement between scholars, studio-based practitioners, and traditional culture bearers of yoga.

**Keywords** Sanskrit · Studio-based postural yoga · Premodern yoga studies · Knowledge mobilization · Public-facing humanities

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“Yoga” has always been a flexible concept. For at least two millennia, yoga constituted a distinct school of Indian philosophy, but also was a term used across the major religious traditions of South Asia to denote a diverse range of mental, spiritual, and somatic practices for soteriological and supra-normal ends (White 2012; Jain 2012; Nicholson 2013; Whicher and Carpenter 2003). In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, distinct guru lineages, thinkers, and researchers in India promulgated a modern yoga practice that emphasized regimens of physical postures (*āsana*) and breath control (*prāṇāyāma*) as part of a novel-yet-traditional wellness lifestyle that retained older religious valences but was now mobilized for more worldly purposes: health and fitness (Alter 2004; De Michelis 2004; Newcombe 2009). Exported globally in the early twentieth century, and gaining a burst of popularity during the countercultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s, yoga today has become deeply woven into the cultural fabric of urban life, especially in its secularized and commercialized form as the familiar physical fitness/wellness practice that we refer to as “studio-based postural yoga” (hereafter, SBPY).

In this study, we identify three distinct sets of stakeholders in contemporary global yoga practice (Fig. 1): (a) practitioners and professional instructors of SBPY; (b) academic scholars who investigate its historical, textual, and cultural life; and (c) traditional culture bearers, or “origin communities” (Fish 2010: 176–7) of expert practitioners located within established guru-based lineages in South Asia and the diaspora, for whom yoga serves as a core marker of cultural and religious identity.<sup>1</sup> In this essay, we refer to these groups, respectively, as “SBPY practitioners,” “scholars,” and “traditional culture bearers.” We should note at the outset that these labels are not to be taken as exclusive, homogenous, or exhaustive. That is, a culture bearer may also be a studio-based instructor, practitioner, or scholar. A scholar may also be a practitioner. Furthermore, there are many different kinds of yoga practitioners, scholars, and culture bearers, of varying identities, commitments, and modes of practice. And there are certainly other stakeholders than those mentioned here, including, perhaps most prominently, yoga therapists and clinicians whose robust biomedical work lies beyond the ambit of this essay.<sup>2</sup> Still, at times there appear key points of cleavage between these particular stakeholder identities, particularly around issues of authenticity, tradition, and innovation. As Mark Singleton and Jean Byrne declare, there has been a “long-standing, mutual prejudice between those who *study* yoga professionally (as students, researchers, and teachers in university settings) and those who *do it*” (Singleton and Byrne 2008: 3). What do Singleton and Byrne mean by this provocative statement? On the one hand, when determining what is or is not “genuinely” yoga, scholars, until relatively recently, had tended to valorize classical yoga texts over practical experiences within modern studios. On the other hand, as Singleton (2015) notes in the preface of the Serbian translation of his *Yoga Body*, practitioners often harbor suspicions that scholars are engaging in “debunking” projects in order to invalidate SBPY practices or to prove that SBPY does not have ancient Indian roots.

<sup>1</sup> On “core” and “arbitrary” markers of cultural identity from a folkloristic perspective, see Zhang 2015.

<sup>2</sup> See De Michelis 2007: 2. For reviews of therapeutic, clinical, and biomedical research on yoga, see Field 2011, 2016; Jeter et al. 2015. Patwardhan (2017) offers a succinct summary and overview of stakeholder concerns within what he terms “medicalized yoga” research.

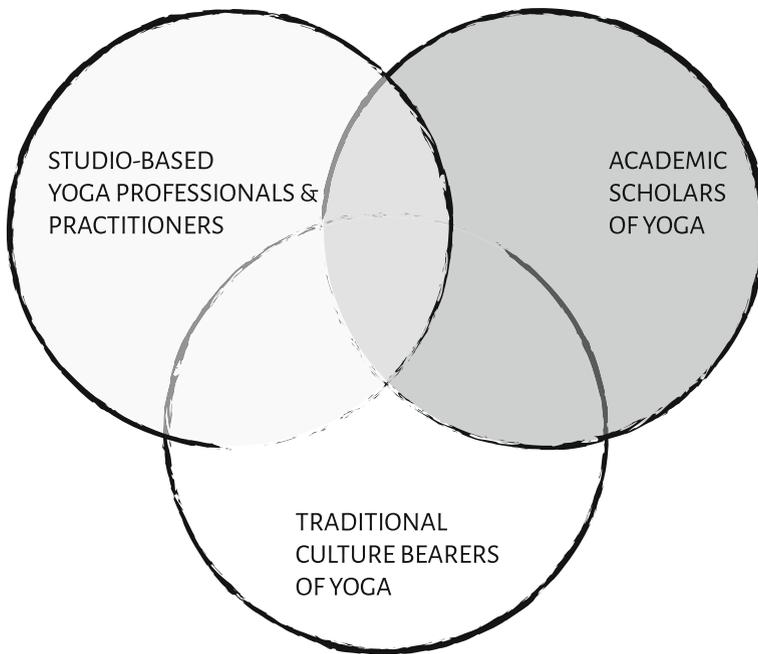


Fig. 1 Key stakeholders in global yoga practice

Similar discomfitures often appear between traditional culture bearers and the other two groups. One example may be found in the Ashtanga Vinyasa community, where a famous dictum of the founder, Pattabhi Jois—“ninety-nine percent practice, one percent theory” (Smith 2008: 153)—is often repeated to side-step academic questions of textual history or philosophy. Likewise, Joanne Waghorne has noted that during her fieldwork with Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev her identity as a professor of religion was viewed as being an impediment to her gaining any “real understanding” of the yogic practice on offer at the Isha Yoga Institute (Waghorne 2013: 289–290). Within the South Asian diaspora, concerns over misappropriation, misrepresentation, or degradation of traditional yoga by SBPY practitioners have inspired both an attempt by the Hindu American Foundation to “take back yoga” (Jain 2014), as well as a progressive, multi-ethnic movement, largely through blogs, websites, and online discussion groups, to “decolonize” yoga (Sajovich 2015; Blu Wakpa 2018).<sup>3</sup> The rhetoric of decolonization has also been applied to international yoga scholarship under the mantle of “Swadeshi Indology” (e.g., Sharma 2016), an Indian/diasporic scholar-activist movement that has accused international scholars of Sanskrit, Hinduism, and ancient Indian history of being anti-Indian, neo-Orientalist, “Hinduphobic,” or otherwise acting in bad faith against Hindu communities, who are argued to be the rightful culture bearers of

<sup>3</sup> Exemplary here are the writings of Susanna Barkataki (2015) and others on the *Decolonizing Yoga* website (<https://www.decolonizingyoga.com>). Also valuable are posts on Barkataki’s own personal blog, <https://www.susannabarkataki.com>, as well as *Honor Don’t Appropriate Yoga* (<https://honordontappropriateyoga.com>), a new series of online videos that involve a number of practitioners, instructors, activists, and scholars speaking on promoting equity within the yoga studio.

yoga. Despite the incommensurability of these ideological positions, as Patrick McCartney has noted, there is a striking discursive alignment between progressive yoga movements and Hindu nationalism on the topic of authenticity within studio-based postural yoga (McCartney 2019a, b). This situation is further complicated by the entanglement of SBPY with on-the-ground political vectors within North American cities. One example of this is the “Om the Bridge” incident of 2015, in which intense public pressure in the city of Vancouver, Canada, stemming from rivalries between local politicians and temporal conflicts with indigenous cultural events, led to the cancellation of a prominent public celebration of the inaugural “International Day of Yoga.” Local politics thus managed to overshadow the progressive as well as the Indian/Hindu nationalist agendas involved in planning this event (Bramadat 2019). Ultimately, we may surmise that while distinctions between yoga’s various stakeholders may appear on the surface to be linked to divergent interests and concerns (physical practice, textual history, religious/cultural heritage), there are deeper political, social, and cultural issues involved in the formation of boundaries between them.<sup>4</sup> And by all indications, such cleavages are growing wider and more exacerbated through the impact of digital and social media (e.g., Wildcroft 2020).

With this picture in mind, this essay, co-authored by an academic specialist of Sanskrit and a professional yoga instructor, examines a set of efforts currently being undertaken to mobilize knowledge between academic scholars and SBPY practitioners concerning the premodern precursors of studio-based postural yoga. In particular, we wish to highlight the development of several public-facing pathways for Sanskrit language acquisition in the form of print publications as well as online media and course platforms designed especially for SBPY practitioners. We find that these new “Sanskrit for Yoga” initiatives have the potential to help practitioners engage *actively* rather than *passively* with cutting-edge scholarship on the textualities of haṭha yoga—the principal premodern precursor to SBPY—and its historical development in classical and medieval India.

An increase of Sanskrit proficiency among SBPY practitioners may furthermore foster productive, multilateral engagements with traditional culture bearers of yoga—our third identified set of stakeholders. While it is not always clear what exactly constitutes a “traditional culture bearer” of yoga, and who speaks for this constituency, we adopt Allison Fish’s definition of yoga’s “origin communities” as being expert practitioners within established guru-disciple lineages within South Asia and the diaspora. Lineage-based yoga specialists are often deeply invested in Sanskrit learning and culture (Mahadevan 2020: 12–13), in ways that are distinct from academic scholars or SBPY practitioners. The incorporation of Sanskrit terminology and language training, for example, has long been a central feature of Ashtanga practice (Pattabhi Jois 2010). Sanskrit is an equally core element within the Sivananda lineage (Strauss 2004: 50–51). Sanskrit texts have played a key part in the scientific research activities of the Kaivalyadharm Ashram of Swami Kuvalayananda (Newcombe 2017), and they are fundamental to the efforts of India’s Traditional Knowledge Digital Library, which has

<sup>4</sup> For a political analysis the UN’s “International Day of Yoga” declaration (United Nations 2014) as well as UNESCO’s (2016) declaration of yoga as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, see Ahuja 2015, Gautam and Droogan 2018, McCartney 2019a: 385–389. For further studies of the entanglements between politics and yoga, see Godrej 2017, McCartney 2017, 2019b.

cataloged more than 1500 distinct yoga postures as part of an effort to safeguard yoga and numerous other forms of Indian traditional knowledge from “biopiracy” or misappropriation through international patenting and trademarking (see Chakravarty and Mahajan 2010: 297; Fish 2014). It remains somewhat unclear whether the TKDL or the Union Ministry of AYUSH (Ayurveda, Yoga & Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha, Sowa Rigpa, and Homeopathy), in their efforts to “reclaim yoga as something distinctively Indian” (McCartney 2017: 6–7), equitably engage with the heritage communities who have preserved this traditional knowledge, or whether their advocacy is motivated by state-level political and economic interests (Nadkarni and Rajam 2016). While we briefly return to traditional culture bearers in the conclusions, the present essay will largely focus on public engagements between global SBPY practitioners and academic scholars regarding the knowledge of premodern yoga; further ethnographic study and dialog with traditional culture bearers of yoga are necessary for understanding how this set of stakeholders integrates Sanskrit language usage and premodern yoga knowledge within their yoga practice.

What precisely is at “stake” between these stakeholders of global yoga practice? Beyond the therapeutic/clinical value of SBPY, mentioned above, scholars have highlighted a number of key sites of cultural debate, including questions of authenticity, religious/spiritual value, commercialization, and appropriation. Historians have described the hybrid formation of yoga schools and lineages in modern India (e.g., Alter 1997, 2004; Newcombe 2005; Strauss 2005), as well as ideological, theological, and practical continuities with earlier, precolonial formulations of yoga (De Michelis 1995, 2004; Sjoman 1996). Mark Singleton’s *Yoga Body* (2010) has perhaps tackled the question of authenticity most directly, providing a comprehensive historical account of the hybrid traditional-modern context in which Tiramulai Krishnamacharya’s teachings were formulated in early twentieth-century Mysore. Among a number of key findings, Singleton had argued that “the practice of asanas within transnational anglophone yoga is not the outcome of a direct unbroken lineage of hatha yoga. While it is going too far to say that modern postural yoga has no relationship to asana practice within the Indian tradition, the relationship is one of radical innovation and experimentation” (Singleton 2010: 33). Claims of authenticity within modern yoga schools and studios, therefore, can at best be indicative of fidelity towards these already innovative and hybridized lineages established in the colonial period.<sup>5</sup> That is to say, yoga concords with what the folklorist Henry Glassie has theorized about “tradition” more broadly—that it is not simply a static, unchanging mode of cultural practice, but rather “the ineluctable consequence of human experience, the result of growth among unavoidable influences” (Glassie 1995: 408).

Scholars have also sought to understand how commercialization, spiritual movements, and other factors have shaped the global reception of yoga after World War II. Andrea Jain’s *Selling Yoga* (2015) outlines the evolution of yoga practice from counter-culture to consumer culture, leading to the creation of a globalized yoga market where brands often eclipse lineages, but in which SBPY nonetheless comes to “constitute a body of religious practice in its own right” (Foxen 2017: 7, citing Jain 2014). The

<sup>5</sup> Callie Maddox (2015) explores how discourses of authenticity within the Ashtanga school both reinforce the yoga tourism industry in Mysore, and, conversely, how yoga-touristic expectations result in a denial of India’s “postcolonial present.”

contributors to *Gurus of Modern Yoga* (Singleton and Goldberg 2014) have explored the extent to which modern global yoga has been spiritualized, institutionalized, and nationalized by a number of guru-centered Hindu movements (e.g., Aurobindo, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, Sathya Sai Baba, Ramdev), alongside prominent lineage-founders (Krishnamacharya, Pattabhi Jois, Iyengar, John Friend).<sup>6</sup> In examining the North American context of yoga, Anya Foxen (2017) has argued that the popularity of Paramahansa Yogananda as an archetypical “Yogi” in the early twentieth century had preconditioned the North American spiritual imaginary to embrace the practical somatic methods of the Krishnamacharyan schools.<sup>7</sup> Suzanne Newcombe (2018) has analyzed how the various contemporary spaces of practice (stage, school, studio) play a performative role in producing a polysemy of global SBPY, which Theodora Wildcroft (2018) has argued to be best considered “post-lineage yoga”—that is, communities of practice that value non-hierarchical networked learning environments over vertical, authority-oriented pedagogy. Others, meanwhile, have explored the complex political discourses and cultural “flows” that empower the unfolding global business of modern yoga, as well as the economic and legal complexities involved in its re-appropriation back into South Asia, a cultural phenomenon that Aghananda Bharati (1970: 273) had termed the “pizza-effect” (see Antony 2014; Askegaard and Eckhardt 2012; Fish 2014; Mora et al. 2018; Thompson-Ochoa 2019).

Alongside the analysis of intercultural and transnational exchange, there has also been a flowering of critical scholarship examining contemporary spaces of yoga practice through the lenses of feminist and postcolonial theory.<sup>8</sup> Exemplary of this approach are contributions to the new scholarly journal *Race and Yoga* that grapple with the complex issues of whiteness, appropriation, and inclusivity that impact contemporary North American studio-based culture.<sup>9</sup> Equally notable are the writings on the prominent blog *Decolonizing Yoga* (<https://www.decolonizingyoga.com>; e.g., Barkataki 2015), which aim to engage directly with practitioners and professionals on issues of equity and diversity within North American studio-based practice.<sup>10</sup>

Keeping in mind these questions of authenticity, globalization, and decolonization, this essay foregrounds another intellectual site of engagement between yoga scholars and SBPY practitioners: the mobilization of knowledge about the premodern precursors of studio-based postural yoga. Classical yoga philosophy has, of course, long been disseminated to SBPY practitioners through translations of various canonical Sanskrit works from early India (e.g., the *Bhagavadgītā*, the *Upaniṣads*, or Patañjali’s *Yogasūtras*), as well as through masterful analytic works written for public readers by scholar practitioners (e.g., Feuerstein 1996; Whicher

<sup>6</sup> For other studies of gurus and quasi-gurus within major yoga lineages, see Armstrong 2018 (Bikram Choudhury); Deslippe 2012 (Yogi Bhajan of Kundalini Yoga); Goldberg 2013 (Amrit Desai of Kripalu Yoga).

<sup>7</sup> Foxen’s recent volume (2020), unreleased at the time of this article’s writing, makes a strong argument for analyzing SBPY within European and North American religious, intellectual, and historical contexts.

<sup>8</sup> Representative publications include Berila et al. 2016; Bhalla and Moscovitz 2019; Mangiarotti 2019; and Nair 2019, as well as a number of recent theses and dissertations (Gandhi 2009; Sajovich 2015; Miller 2019).

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Blu Wakpa 2018; Sood 2018; Cameron 2019; Batacharya 2018.

<sup>10</sup> See Sajovich 2015 for a thorough analysis of contributions to *Decolonizing Yoga*. Also valuable are posts on Barkataki’s personal blog, <https://www.susannabarkataki.com>, as well as *Honor Do not appropriate Yoga* (<https://honordontappropriateyoga.com>), a new series of online videos involving Barkataki and a number of practitioners, instructors, activists, and scholars concerned with encouraging equity within the yoga studio.

1998; Chapple 2008). However, SBPY practitioners remain largely unaware of intensive philological efforts over the past decade to recuperate a diverse corpus of medieval Sanskrit and vernacular texts that involve premodern precursors to the postural practices of modern yoga studios. To this end, we will review some of the key research findings within this stream, and how online, distance-learning platforms are being designed to enable SBPY practitioners to access this new body of scholarship. We will then examine new resources (in print and on the internet) intended for yoga practitioners to learn Sanskrit so that they may engage more actively with the premodern textual materials that yoga scholars are themselves studying. Throughout this essay, we offer reflections that draw on our initial community outreach in the Vancouver area in late 2019 and ask whether developing studio-based, kinesthetic methods of pedagogy to complement existing textual and web-based materials might be an effective means for enhancing Sanskrit language learning among SBPY practitioners and professionals based in North America.<sup>11</sup>

## New Developments in Premodern Yoga Studies

As De Michelis had already anticipated in her 2007 survey, philological and historical research on premodern yoga has been one of the more robust areas of active research over the past decade. Following Geoffrey Samuel's comprehensive history of classical yoga (2008), a number of textual scholars (e.g., Birch 2011; Alter 2012; Maas 2013; Mallinson 2014, 2017) have provided revelatory new insights into the complexities of medieval haṭha yoga texts and practices. Their efforts have begun to weave a continuous historical narrative that carries us from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries up to the colonial period.

The past decade has witnessed the growth of a number of prominent international collaborative research projects focused on the editing and careful historical analysis of early haṭha yoga texts, many of which had never previously been studied. The most prominent of these is the Haṭha Yoga Project (HYP), based at the School of Oriental and African Studies (University of London).<sup>12</sup> Led by Mallinson and Singleton, the HYP began its operations in 2015 under a five-year grant by the European Research Council. Over the course of this time, the HYP has produced several landmark publications whose impact has reached beyond the walls of academia and into global communities of yoga practitioners. Among these, two examples illustrate the span and impact of the HYP's research: Mallinson's (2018c) study of the *Amṛtasiddhi* and the co-authored work of Birch and Singleton (2019) on the *Hathābhyāsapaddhati*. Mallinson's philological

<sup>11</sup> Two public events were organized in Vancouver, in partnership with Karma Teachers Centre for Yoga and Meditation, Canada's only federally registered non-profit yoga studio and teacher training school (<https://www.karmateachers.org>): (1) A "Sanskrit for Yoga" workshop on October 26, 2019, with 12 trainees within Karma Teachers' 200-hour Yoga Teacher Training program, and (2) A conversational public forum on Sanskrit for professional yoga instructors, involving 25–30 attendees and hosted at Karma Teachers on November 14, 2019.

<sup>12</sup> See Baier et al. 2018, a rich collection of scholarly essays that encapsulates the equally prominent "Yoga in Transformation" project at the University of Vienna. Also noteworthy is the "Ayuryog" project, which seeks to bring premodern yoga (along with Ayurvedic medicine and alchemy) into conversation within contemporary health practices (e.g., Wujastyk et al. 2017). See also Chapple and Funes Maderey 2019.

investigations have definitively established that an eleventh-century Sanskrit text known as the *Amṛtasiddhi*, which contains the earliest references to many practices that came to characterize haṭha yoga, must have been composed within a Vajrayāna Buddhist context. Working at the other end of the premodern spectrum, with the eighteenth-century *Haṭhābhyāsapaddhati*, Birch and Singleton make a crucial link between the postural practices of precolonial haṭha yoga and the colonial-era teachings of Krishnamacharya. This text provides the earliest evidence of the dynamic and sequenced postural practice that has come to characterize Krishnamacharya's methods, and was likely to have been available to him during his time at the Wodeyar Palace in Mysore (Birch and Singleton 2019: 4, 49). Armed with this careful philological work, we find ourselves in a better position to understand the processes of "radical innovation and experimentation" that Singleton (2010: 33) had noted were at work in the production of modern yoga in colonial India. Not only do we have a clearer picture of the esoteric traditions of medieval yoga upon which Krishnamacharya had innovated and experimented, as well as their multireligious contexts, we are also getting a better account of how they ultimately evolved into what are arguably the most prominent transnational schools of modern postural yoga.

Future directions in premodern yoga studies appear to be expanding the scope of text-centered research to investigate how haṭha yoga practices and frameworks may have impacted, or found inflections within, other religious cultures of South Asia in the first and second millennia. Much of this pathbreaking research is being conducted by emerging scholars, a glimpse of which was on display within a special section on "Yoga and Āyurveda" convened by Dagmar Wujastyk and Philipp Maas as part of the 17th World Sanskrit Conference, held in Vancouver, Canada, in July 2018. While the session included philological studies of haṭha yoga texts of the type mentioned above (Birch 2018; Gupta 2018; Liersch 2018; Mallinson 2018a; Singleton 2018), there was also a noticeable trend towards identifying and contextualizing premodern postural yoga within other textual, religious, and cultural traditions, such as Śaiva literature (Powell 2018; Barois 2018); Vaiṣṇava literature (Ondračka 2018); the Sanskrit epics (Negribs 2018); or Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain philosophical works (Bouthillette 2018; O'Brien-Kop 2018; Slatoff 2018; von Ostrowski 2018).

Two events held during the 17th WSC further exemplify the growing public-facing dimensions of premodern yoga studies. First, a special film preview and discussion was held for conference delegates titled "*Haṭhābhyāsapaddhati*: A Precursor of Modern Yoga Practice." The event offered conference attendees a glimpse into a textual study and documentary film under preparation by Birch and Jacqueline Hargreaves, which involves live video demonstrations of the yogic postures described in this key medieval haṭha yoga text. Second, Mallinson (2018b) delivered an evening public lecture that was co-organized and promoted by a prominent Vancouver-area multi-arts festival (Indian Summer Festival; see Humphrey 2018). This high-profile event attracted nearly 400 attendees and provided a publicly accessible overview of the premodern life of haṭha yoga, and how a certain set of physical practices earlier used to mortify the body were transformed to cultivate the body. Both the film and the public lecture reflect a convergence in the interests of yoga practitioners and academic scholars over the past decade and highlight the importance of visual media and mainstream cultural events in the development of a public-facing dimension of yoga studies.

## Premodern Yoga Studies in the Public Eye

Given yoga's popularity and commercial value, it is no surprise to witness the growth of this public-facing dimension to the academic study of premodern yoga. There have been a number of attempts in recent years to mobilize new scholarly research on premodern yoga in a way that may reach SBPY practitioners as well as a broader general public. Among these publications, perhaps most prominent is *Roots of Yoga* (Mallinson and Singleton 2017). Designed as a sourcebook for general audiences, *Roots of Yoga* contains translated selections from more than one hundred Sanskrit yoga texts, dating from 1000 BCE to the 1800s, organized by subject matter with brief contextual introductions. Mallinson and Singleton (2017: ix) note that SBPY practitioners and instructors primarily engage with only three Sanskrit yoga texts: the *Bhagavadgītā*, the *Yogasūtras* of Patañjali, and the *Haṭhapradīpika* (and to a lesser extent, the *Upaniṣads*). By providing their readers a glimpse into the diversity of texts and practices that invoke premodern yoga, this anthology not only provides a textual grounding for SBPY practitioners' understandings of yoga's past, it also allows them to gain a better appreciation of the philological work that yoga scholars are doing.

Still, for most practitioners, the gateway for exploring premodern yoga remains the *Yogasūtras* of Patañjali, commonly perceived as a source-authority or *ur-text* for contemporary practice (Singleton 2008: 77, De Michelis Forthcoming: 18). Edwin Bryant's *Yoga Sutras of Patañjali* (2009) meets this need head-on, providing a comprehensive yet accessible volume that offers both historical contextualization and a survey of the commentarial traditions, designed uniquely for the modern practitioner. Daniel Raveh (2012) offers a thoroughgoing review and reflection on the philosophical underpinnings of various earlier studies and translations of Patañjali (including Chapple and Viraj 1990), as well as a new one of his own (pp. 120–146).<sup>13</sup> Also worth mentioning is David Gordon White's (2014) *Yoga Sūtra of Patañjali: A Biography*, which investigates the various historical, cultural, religious, and social contexts in which this foundational text has thrived throughout its long lifetime.<sup>14</sup>

Outside of the world of print, many yoga scholars are now utilizing blogs or podcasts as a means for public communication of textual research. Noteworthy in this regard is *The Luminescent*, a website founded by Jacqueline Hargreaves (2020), which "aims to offer an excellent standard of research on the rich history and diverse practice of Yoga to the broader community in the form of open-access articles, essays and visual material" ([https://www.theluminescent.org/p/jacqueline-hargreaves\\_16.html](https://www.theluminescent.org/p/jacqueline-hargreaves_16.html)). Another online platform that hosts scholars and seeks to occupy the middle space between academic knowledge production and public practice is *Embodied Philosophy* (Kyle 2020). It features an assortment of articles, a podcast, a practitioner-oriented journal *Tarka*, and several online courses featuring recognized yoga scholars and expert practitioners. The weekly J. Brown Yoga Podcast (n.d.) caters to a large audience of mostly yoga professionals and has hosted many of the same aforementioned academics, as well as Seth Powell, who has carved out a unique niche with his own comprehensive

<sup>13</sup> Raveh's monograph also includes an invaluable bibliography of translations of the *Yogasūtra* and its commentaries, as well as numerous scholarly resources on this topic.

<sup>14</sup> The contributions to Chapple and Funes Maderey 2019 offer additional investigations into how Patañjali's canonical text can be integrated into the philosophy, practices, and worldviews of yoga.

*Yogic Studies* website (Powell 2019a). Powell's site offers a wide range of online classes on subjects such as the *Bhagavadgītā*, the *Yogasūtras*, and the history of modern postural yoga. Within the site's bandwidth, a number of other yoga scholars are given the opportunity to offer specialized online courses in their areas of expertise. These courses operate in a fashion that is analogous to online university offerings, with weekly live lectures, online tutorials, readings, and optional quizzes, but geared specifically for yoga practitioners.

Universities and other higher educational organizations have also been quite active in developing authoritative resources for SBPY practitioners interested in engaging with yoga scholarship. Most prominent among these is the flagship Yoga Studies initiative at Loyola Marymount University (<https://bellarmine.lmu.edu/yoga>). Students within its Masters of Arts graduate programs (delivered through both face-to-face and online methods) explore philosophical and practical yoga texts, the Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain contexts of yoga and receive formal Sanskrit training. LMU Yoga Studies also includes several certificate programs, designed for SBPY professionals in the community, who are given exposure to authoritative knowledge of yoga philosophy, alongside offerings in yoga therapy, teacher training, mindfulness, etc. Similar graduate programs are offered at the Graduate Theological Union (<https://www.gtu.edu/academics/yoga-studies>), Naropa University (<https://www.naropa.edu/academics/masters/religious-studies/yoga-studies/index.php>), and the Maryland University of Integrative Health (<https://muih.edu/academics/yoga-therapy/master-of-science-in-yoga-therapy>). In the UK, similar outreach and graduate offerings are available online through the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies (<https://ochsonline.org/yoga-studies-pathway>) and the Centre for Yoga Studies at SOAS (<https://www.soas.ac.uk/yoga-studies>), which includes a robust, public-facing Yoga Studies Summer School (<https://www.soas.ac.uk/yoga-studies/yoga-summer-school>). In India, there are numerous schools, retreats, and programs across the subcontinent (e.g., The Yoga Institute in Mumbai, <https://theyogainstitute.org>) certified by the AYUSH Ministry to provide international SBPY practitioners with training in yoga practice, philosophy, Sanskrit, and other allied topics (Shukla 2019).

## Sanskrit Pathways for SBPY Practitioners

Such public-facing educational resources enable SBPY practitioners to access the latest scholarship on premodern yoga traditions without necessarily having to become scholars themselves. However, we should note that these involve passive rather than active engagement. Rather than exploring premodern texts firsthand, practitioners must trust the authority of the scholar, who necessarily serves as an intermediary who curates, translates, summarizes, and speaks on behalf of the Sanskrit textual materials being studied.<sup>15</sup> In order to promote more active and equitable public involvement in the mobilization of this knowledge, there have been a number of initiatives over the past decade to create reliable pedagogical materials for learning Sanskrit (in print and online) expressly for (anglophone) SBPY practitioners who are likely to have no prior knowledge of modern South Asian

<sup>15</sup> The online courses, we should note, do offer more possibilities for interactive learning, in English, while the Sanskrit source materials remain inaccessible to practitioners.

vernaculars. Taken together, these pedagogical resources provide what Zoë Slatoff-Ponté calls “an invitation to go beyond reading works in translation, to join practice together with theory, and to be active participants rather than outside observers” (Slatoff-Ponté 2015: xviii). In our initial conversations with yoga instructors in Vancouver—who each had varying degrees of familiarity with the language—we observed a similar enthusiasm for Sanskrit as a gateway to access authoritative yoga texts, to acknowledge and honor yoga’s connections to South Asian culture, and as a means to overcome what one participant called a “sterilization” of postural yoga (from its traditional aspects) within current anglophone teacher-training methods.

There are many different ways for SBPY practitioners to learn Sanskrit without formally enrolling in university-based courses or certificate programs like those mentioned above. These range from the various “teach yourself” models (e.g., Coulson 2006 [1976], Kutumba Sastry 2013); flexible, distance-based versions of university courses (e.g., those offered by McComas Taylor and colleagues at Australia National University; see Taylor and Beckmann 2009); revivalist efforts in India, such as Samskrita Bharati (<https://www.sanskritabharati.in>; see Deshpande 2010: 226–7; Hastings 2008); or web-based, self-paced learning platforms, such as Vyaas Houston’s American Sanskrit Institute (<https://www.americansanskrit.com>; see Taylor and Beckmann 2009: 248), an initiative that has operated since 1989 and has developed yoga-based pedagogical techniques that “can have anyone reading and pronouncing Sanskrit in a weekend” (Hammond 2017).

A number of other websites, tools, and apps for learning Sanskrit can be found on the Internet, freely available and ever-growing in number (see, e.g., Dubey 2007, cited by Taylor and Beckmann 2009: 248). Likewise, intensive yoga programs, especially retreats or training camps in India, regularly offer varying amounts of Sanskrit as part of their curricula. Since these kinds of resources are being continually developed and updated, we have resisted the temptation to attempt an exhaustive survey, which would anyway be subjective, inaccurate, and incomplete. Instead, we have chosen to highlight in this essay a handful of new, academically grounded initiatives that offer Sanskrit language training specifically for anglophone SBPY practitioners in North America, and which we have found to be broadly representative of the principal methodologies or pedagogical approaches used by “Sanskrit for yoga” initiatives worldwide.<sup>16</sup>

The current options for “Sanskrit for yoga” language training may be classified into two categories: (a) *comprehensive* approaches, which teach the complete language in a manner quite similar to a standard Sanskrit course at a university, and (b) *specialized* approaches, which teach certain aspects of the language, such as posture names, the syllabary, or mantras, that appeal to the professional needs and personal interests of practitioners. In each category, we find both traditional print publications and online multimedia resources, including audio files, videos, interactive e-books, or guided distance-learning modules.

Perhaps the most comprehensive English-language publication that offers Sanskrit training especially for yoga practitioners is Zoë Slatoff-Ponté’s *Yogāvatāraṇam*, released by North Point Press in 2015. This textbook presents a complete Sanskrit language course, very much in the style of most major university-level primers (e.g.,

<sup>16</sup> For additional discussions of Sanskrit pedagogy for non-heritage learners, see Taylor and Beckmann 2009, Tull 2015.

Ruppel 2017; Egenes 2003; Goldman and Goldman 2019).<sup>17</sup> Slatoff-Ponté utilizes vocabulary, examples, and readings drawn from the world of premodern yoga, but the objective is to provide a full understanding of the Sanskrit language. Thus, after first introducing the Devanāgarī alphabet, *Yogāvatāraṇam* presents verb tenses and indeclinable forms, pronominal and nominal declensions, analysis of compounds, and rarer tenses and constructions. To illustrate grammatical points, authentic passages are extracted from well-known yoga texts, such as Patañjali's *Yogasūtras* or the *Haṭhayogapradīpikā*. Accompanying the passages are useful historical notes about these texts, as well as the traditions in which they were composed. A number of supplemental audio recordings for each lesson are available for download from the author's website, along with grammatical charts and other resources. After each of the book's three units, larger readings have been selected from bona fide yoga texts as translation review exercises (the *Gurvaṣṭakam* of Śaṅkara, the *Bhagavadgītā*, and the *Chāndogyopaniṣat*). *Yogāvatāraṇam* is currently unrivaled in its comprehensiveness and applicability for yoga practitioners, though we should note that the lessons are offered entirely in Devanāgarī script, without Roman transliteration. It has the potential therefore to pose a somewhat steep learning curve for its readers—especially for those engaged in self-study or who have had no prior exposure to South Asian languages. As Slatoff-Ponté (2015: xxiii) advises, “this book is to be approached slowly, over time.”

Slatoff has recently begun to offer similarly comprehensive Sanskrit courses through two different online platforms—the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies (Slatoff 2019b) and the *Embodied Philosophy* website (Slatoff 2019a), which is one of the premier educational sites for public access to scholarship on yoga. The 9-month course on the *Embodied Philosophy* site involves both on-demand video modules as well as interactive live online seminars, in which participants move through modules on Devanāgarī script, pronunciation, basic grammar, and translating passages from classical yoga texts. Participants are given homework assignments and receive Yoga Alliance continuing education credits. Through the online portal of Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies, Slatoff also teaches a similarly comprehensive set of seven (nine-week) modules that progress from script and pronunciation, to the various complexities of grammar, and then to readings from yoga texts. These also feature a mix of recorded lectures, live sessions, and downloadable notes and supplementary materials. Both online courses feature her *Yogāvatāraṇam* textbook as the structuring device and are perhaps best regarded as guided, web-based versions thereof. Both use a flexible model of distance-based Sanskrit pedagogy similar to the one developed at Australia National University (Taylor and Beckmann 2009).

Another online approach is found on the robust *Yogic Studies* educational platform, designed by Seth Powell (2019a). Through four distinct modules, Powell's (2019b) “Sanskrit for Yogis” course offers what he explains to be an “accessible and

<sup>17</sup> It is worth mentioning that several web-based supplements, valuable for self-guided study, are now available for these Sanskrit primers, though they are not specifically targeted to yoga practitioners. Ruppel has produced a series of Youtube videos supplementing the *Cambridge Introduction to Sanskrit*, along with handouts, charts, and other resources (<https://www.cambridge-sanskrit.org>). *The Joy of Sanskrit*, an online publication by Taylor and Scotellaro (2014), integrates Egenes 2003 with audiovisual lessons and spoken Sanskrit exercises and activities. *UBC Sanskrit Learning Tools* (<https://www.ubcsanskrit.ca>) (Sathaye and Bellefleur 2009) offers a lesson-by-lesson supplement to Goldman and Goldman 2019, featuring interactive handouts, exercise engines, flash cards, and other reference materials.

reliable introduction” to the Sanskrit language for beginners. The modules, each comprised of 3–4 video lectures, are designed to help SBPY practitioners gain an appreciation of the Sanskrit linguistic tradition, improve pronunciation, deepen their understanding of yoga terminology, and provide a starting point for learning to read Sanskrit yoga texts. These goals prompt a course structure that is a bit different from *Yogāvatāraṇam* or other Sanskrit primers. The first module provides an overview of the Sanskrit language, including script, pronunciation, and cultural history. The second is a rapid introduction to basic aspects of Sanskrit grammar needed for understanding yoga texts. The third module explores the pronunciation, meaning, and narratives behind modern yoga postures (*āsanas*), while the final module is focused on reading, reciting, and translating Sanskrit yoga texts. A 48-page workbook titled *Yogabhāṣā* accompanies the online lessons (Powell 2019c). In contrast to Slatoff-Ponté’s approach, Powell’s four-week course does not require the learner to engage with the Devanāgarī script, as examples and exercises are presented in both Roman diacritics and Devanāgarī. Powell’s course thus attempts to be both comprehensive and specialized, providing learners with variable levels of engagement with the Sanskrit language.

Other print and online resources present more specialized modes of Sanskrit language learning for SBPY practitioners. These primarily address practical, professional, or spiritual concerns. One notable example is Nicolai Bachman’s (2005) *The Language of Yoga*, an elegantly printed, wire-bound book that focuses on providing an extensive overview of chanting, terminology, and *āsana* names used in the Ashtanga school. The first part of the book provides texts and translations of key mantras and chants, as well as a glossary of essential Sanskrit terms. The second part of the book presents an extensive catalog of postures used in Ashtanga practice, organized alphabetically (by their Sanskrit names) as well as in the performance sequences of the Ashtanga school. Each posture is given in Roman diacritics and Devanāgarī and is accompanied by a word-for-word translation as well as small line drawings demonstrating how the posture is to be performed. Pronunciations of each mantra, term, and posture name are provided through two accompanying CDs. Bachman’s book is meant for practical usage within the studio, in order to “deepen a practitioner’s knowledge of the yogic path,” as well as to “provide a more complete understanding of the meaning and purpose of yoga *āsanas*” that cannot otherwise be grasped through English posture names (Bachman 2005: 1). Similar in structure is an online course released by the online educational platform, *AIMHealthyU*, and titled “Sanskrit 101 with Richard Rosen,” a contributing editor of the *Yoga Journal* (Rosen 2018). This six-week course of videos and interactive online content delivers a basic overview of Sanskrit, a glossary of 20 important Sanskrit words for yoga practice, and a survey of 32 common *āsanas* that explores the meaning and background narratives of each posture name alongside their accurate pronunciation.

The Internet is of course replete with other specialized Sanskrit resources for SBPY practitioners, of varying degrees of precision and scholarly value. Among the more notable examples are the courses, videos, pronunciation guides, articles, and other materials at *Yoga International* (<https://www.yogainternational.com>), *Glo Yoga* (<https://glo.com>), and *Yoga Journal* (<https://www.yogajournal.com/yoga-101/sanskrit>), as well as a module on “Sanskrit for Yoga Teachers” provided for members of *Yoga Alliance* (Livanos 2017) that gives an overview of basic Sanskrit terminology, and how it may “bring a deeper connection to your yoga class.”

Finally, in taking account of specialized approaches to Sanskrit for yoga practitioners, we should mention “From Mātra to Mantra” by Shivani Hawkins (2019), an eight-week online course targeted at spiritually-inclined learners within the SBPY community who wish to establish a core foundation for Sanskrit chanting and recitation of mantras as part of their yoga practice. The course involves eight live hour-long sessions in which each syllable of the Sanskrit syllabary is pronounced, analyzed, and discussed, one by one, in a live interactive mode with Hawkins, who provides guidance so that participants may “build an intimate relationship with their breath, sound, and speech while deepening their listening and sensing skills.” Among the resources we have discussed here, this online course is the most invested in Sanskrit as a medium for direct spiritual experience.

Taken together, the textual and online efforts of these scholars and educators provide SBPY professionals and practitioners in North America with a set of tools for Sanskrit language acquisition that is more robust than ever before. Less certain is how effectively these resources match the needs and learning styles of studio-based practitioners of postural yoga. One key issue is the spiritual or religious impact—or the perceived impact—of Sanskrit within the yoga studio. As we learned during our conversational events in Vancouver, spirituality/religiosity is both a learning objective as well as a point of concern for practitioners. Some participants expressed a personal motivation to engage with Sanskrit as a sacred language, or to deepen their understanding of efficacious mantras and scriptures. As one instructor put it, they were seeking to experience the “expansion” and “sonic sanctity” offered by Sanskrit mantra-chanting. Others—especially professional instructors—expressed concerns about how to incorporate Sanskrit into their yoga classes without either being disrespectful or appropriative towards traditional culture bearers, or making non-religious clients, or those with other religious commitments, uncomfortable in their studio. One instructor of children’s yoga, for example, reported that the school had specifically prohibited the use of non-English terminology, due to parents’ fears of religious proselytization (on this issue, see Douglass 2010; Jain 2012, 2014; Nicholson 2013). To varying degrees, then, “Sanskrit for yoga” initiatives must navigate a tightrope between religious/spiritual inclusivity and neutrality in how they present this ancient language for present-day practitioners.

Another point for consideration is the widespread preference among yoga practitioners for “embodied” or “kinesthetic” learning methods as opposed to purely cerebral ones. This is of course difficult to achieve through online platforms or textbooks. Of the Sanskrit learning resources discussed here, the only one that is fully interactive in its methodology is Hawkins 2019, in which learners participate in live online sessions with the instructor, and where enrollment is limited to 22 participants to keep the class interactions manageable. Other online course modules (e.g., Rosen 2018; Powell 2019b; Slatoff 2019a, 2019b; Houston’s American Sanskrit Institute) do feature interactive components within their syllabi, generally through the use of video-conferencing software such as Zoom or Skype. With perhaps the exception of Bachman’s *Language of Yoga*, none is designed to be integrated directly into the space where SBPY practitioners are undoubtedly most comfortable in engaging in learning: the yoga studio itself. Textbooks of course rely on written media for the reinforcement of grammatical skills and vocabulary. Online teaching platforms, even if they are fully interactive, still ask learners to sit passively in front of computer screens, phones, or tablets as they engage in language learning with their eyes, ears, and voices.

As a complement to these aural, visual, and written modes of Sanskrit learning, we suggest that the integration of kinesthetic/somatic (“hands-on”) modes of language pedagogy within a studio environment would help yoga practitioners achieve a more active and sustained engagement with Sanskrit (Larimer 2016; Streat 2017). For example, if Sanskrit vocabulary, pronunciation, and etymology are introduced during the interstices of a standard physical sequence of yoga postures, it would provide an immersive, embodied experience of the ideas and skills being taught, leading to increased retention and mobilization of knowledge (Asher 2003; Christison 2005). Such an approach would harmonize with time-honored methods of embodied recitation practices found in traditional Sanskrit learning environments in South Asia, especially Vedic schools (*pāṭhaśālās*) (Sarma 2014; Knipe 2015; Gerety 2017). Though our research on such methods is still at a nascent stage, our initial conversations and trial sessions with Vancouver-area practitioners have given a distinct impression that kinesthetic methods would mesh well with their needs and interests. One participant, for example, had particularly enjoyed learning Sanskrit through mantra recitation. Another, who had previously tried learning Sanskrit, reported that difficulties in reading and rote memorization had discouraged their efforts. A third expressed an eagerness to experience Sanskrit as a living language. These anecdotes resonate with a recent study in India (Mahadevan 2020) that presents data in support for developing a more well-rounded, immersive methodology for teaching Sanskrit to SBPY practitioners.

## Conclusions

As the field of premodern yoga studies has grown over the past decade, there are now more ways than ever for mobilizing knowledge between practitioners of studio-based postural yoga and academic scholars of yoga. In particular, this essay has investigated how specialized “Sanskrit for yoga” learning modules may provide active pathways for mitigating any “mutual prejudice” that might arise between these stakeholders in the sharing of authoritative knowledge about yoga’s premodern roots. Moreover, we have suggested that developing kinesthetic methods for incorporating Sanskrit language pedagogy within the yoga studio may further enhance these efforts towards mutual engagement between yoga’s stakeholders.

Before concluding, however, we should acknowledge that very few South Asian scholars are cited in this essay. It is certainly not the case that there is no yoga scholarship in India, Nepal, or the other countries of South Asia. On the contrary, a rich South Asian tradition of therapeutic and clinical research on yoga has been producing copious results for more than a century now.<sup>18</sup> The pursuit of philosophical and theological yoga research within the Indian academy has likewise continued unabated since the seminal work of Surendranath Dasgupta (1924). Furthermore, as we have mentioned earlier, Indian governmental bodies like TKDL or AYUSH are playing prominent roles in the “safeguarding” of yoga as an Intangible Cultural

<sup>18</sup> For an overview, see Khalsa 2004. The journals *Yoga-Mīmāṃsā* (which has been published out of Swami Kuvalayananda’s Kaivalyadham Ashram in Lonavala, India, since 1924) and *International Journal of Yoga* (published by S-VYASA University, Bengaluru) are prominent venues for these fields. See also the *International Journal of Yoga Therapy*, based in North America and published by the International Association of Yoga Therapists (IAYT) (<https://www.iayt.org/page/IJYTCurrent>).

Heritage of Humanity (UNESCO 2016; see Antony 2018; Gautam and Droogan 2018; Vats 2016), though there are some concerns about a turn towards Hindu nationalist interests within such activities (McCartney 2019b). The fact remains, however, that contemporary textual scholarship on premodern postural yoga, and the methods for its public dissemination, is largely the purview of research teams based in Europe, North America, or East Asia. Their efforts have involved, for the most part, only a minimal engagement with our third identified set of stakeholders in modern global yoga: “traditional culture bearers”—that is, master practitioners belonging to established guru lineages in South Asia or in the diaspora.

It thus seems quite clear that the field of premodern yoga studies is not beyond a certain degree of postcolonial self-reflection. Keeping in mind Edward Said’s warning that “the answer to Orientalism is not Occidentalism” (Said 1979: 328), future lines of scholarly research might do well to adopt hybridized, collaborative, or dialogical methodologies for the production and dissemination of knowledge about premodern yoga. And indeed, such innovative scholarship is already appearing in the field. For example, Daniela Bevilacqua’s (2017) “Let the Sādhus Talk” juxtaposes ethnographic dialog with renunciant Nāth yogīs alongside philological research on Sanskrit yoga texts. Hargreaves’s forthcoming documentary film on the postural practices of the *Hathābhyāsapaddhati* likewise promises to engage in interactive and collaborative knowledge mobilization (<http://hathabhyasapaddhati.org>). Finally, Powell’s (2019b) “Sanskrit for Yogis”, Slatoff’s courses (Slatoff 2019a, b), and Mahadevan’s (2020) teaching experiments in Chennai adopt hybridized language teaching methods that synchronize Western grammar/vocabulary training with traditional South Asian forms of memorization, chanting, and recitation. More of this kind of work is surely yet to come, as we create pathways towards a more robust and equitable engagement between scholars, practitioners, and traditional culture bearers regarding the knowledge of premodern yoga.

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