

“The History of Hatha Yoga in America: the Americanization of Yoga”

Book proposal

By Ira Israel

Although many American yoga teachers invoke the putative legitimacy of the legacy of yoga as a 5000 year old Indian practice, the core of the yoga in America – the “asanas,” or positions – is only around 600 years old. And yoga as a codified 90 minute ritual or sequence is at most only 120 years old. During the period of the Vedas 5000 years ago, yoga consisted of groups of men chanting to the gods around a fire. Thousands of years later during the period of the Upanishads, that ritual of generating heat (“tapas”) became internalized through concentrated breathing and contrary or bipolar positions e.g., reaching the torso upwards while grounding the lower body downwards.

The History of Yoga in America is relatively brief yet very complex and in fact, I will argue that what has happened to yoga in America is tantamount to comparing Starbucks to French café life: I call it “The Americanization of Yoga.” For centuries America, the melting pot, has usurped sundry traditions from various cultures; however, there is something unique about the rise of the influence of yoga and Eastern philosophy in America that make it worth analyzing. There are a few main schools of hatha yoga that have evolved in America: Sivananda, Iyengar,

Astanga, and later Bikram, Power, and Anusara (the Kundalini lineage will not be addressed in this book because so much has been written about it already).

After practicing many of these different “styles” or schools of hatha yoga in New York, North Carolina, Florida, Los Angeles, Santa Barbara, and Paris as well as in Thailand and Indonesia, I became so fascinated by the history and evolution of yoga that I went to the University of California at Santa Barbara to get a Master of Arts Degree in Hinduism and Buddhism which I completed in 1999. My undergraduate degree is from the University of Pennsylvania in sociology and I have an additional Master of Arts Degree from the University of Connecticut in Comparative Literature. Since 1991 I have earned my living primarily as a screenwriter working on such films as “The Professional,” “The Fifth Element” and “Live Virgin.”

I have spoken about “The History of Yoga in America” with David Gordon White who wrote the foremost academic books on yoga in India “The Alchemical Body” and “Kiss of the Yogini.” I’ve also spent much time with Ganga White who founded the first Center for Yoga in Los Angeles in 1966. These two people along with Georg Feuerstein, who wrote “The Yoga Tradition” and founded the only yoga college in America, I will use as mentors on this project. I’ve also been in contact with Elizabeth Kadetsky who just published her book on her personal experience with Iyengar yoga and she has put me in touch with a few doctoral candidates who are interested in the history of yoga. In addition, I’m in close contact with the founders of City Yoga, Power Yoga, Earth Yoga, Jivamukti, Om and most of the other yoga

studios in Los Angeles and New York so I can contact these people with questions at any time.

The target market for “The History of Hatha Yoga in America” is some portion of the 20 million American yoga practitioners who no longer wish to blindly follow particular “gurus” or yoga teachers and want to enrich their understanding of the yoga practices that they partake in. Regarding possible competition for “The History of Hatha Yoga in America,” currently there is no unbiased overview of the history of yoga in America: all of the books written are from one of the founders or practitioners from a particular yoga school.

“The History of Hatha Yoga in America” will consist of two parts: part one will be a chronological history of the different lineages as delineated below; part two will be a specific commentary on the particular changes and sequences that have made the yoga we practice here distinctly “American,” along with a comparison of the how the schools differ in their philosophies, branding, and marketing.

General Overview (approximate table of contents)

Part One

Introduction - A general overview of the history of yoga in India

Chapter 1: Swami Vivekananda, student of Ramakrishna, speaks at the Parliament of Religions in 1893

Chapter 2: Paramahansa Yogananda writes “Autobiography of a Yogi” and begins Self-Realization Fellowship in Boston

Chapter 3: Swami Muktananda (Siddha Yoga Dama)

Chapter 4: Sri Aurobindo founds Integral Yoga

Chapter 5: Sivananda Yoga, series of 12 postures, is created by Swami Vishnudevananda, a disciple of Swami Sivananda

Chapter 6: Swami Satchitnananda

Chapter 7: Krishnamacharya standardizes the pose sequences into three series: primary, intermediate and advanced. His four most famous disciples become the founders of yoga schools in America: K. Pattabhi Jois, Iyengar, Indra Devi (a Soviet woman), and Krishnamacharya’s son, Desikachar

Chapter 8: B.K.S. Iyengar. Iyengar added precision to asanas and therapeutic descriptions, abandoned Krishnamacharya’s viniyasa style, recognized in 1960s as a leader of yoga

Chapter 9: Pattabhi Jois founds Astanga yoga

Chapter 10: Indra Devi writes the first best-selling book on yoga in 1953 “Forever Young, Forever Healthy”

Chapter 11: Desikachar furthers Viniyoga which is developed by Krishnamacharya towards end of his life

Chapter 12: Bikram Choudhury founds Bikram Yoga which consists of 26 poses performed in a heated room

Chapter 13: David and Sharon Life found Jivamukti Yoga in the East Village in New York

Chapter 14: John Friend founds Anusara Yoga, 1997

Part Two

Chapter 15: Brief discussion of various scandals in the yoga community - Yogi Bhanan, the Naropa Institute, etc.

Chapter 16: An overview of the differences between the “styles” and schools

Chapters 17: Discussion of the evolution of schools

Chapter 18: Discussion of the branding and marketing practices employed by the schools and studios to distinguish themselves

Chapter 19: Argument regarding the “Americanization” of yoga and how it has evolved differently here from other parts of the world

Chapter 20: A look at the future of yoga in America