

Why Yoga?

A cultural history of yoga

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Introduction – Why this book?

1. What is the book about?

Yoga texts and adverts

Let us start this introduction with a short reflection on an advertisement for a watch. This strangely enough will enable the reader to get an initial idea about what this book is about and how it is trying to establish a new way of understanding the history of yoga.



The watch in the advert probably costs a hundred times more than an ordinary and inexpensive watch. Why pay so much? In order to tempt and persuade, the advert it does not tell us about the technical qualities of the watch – the materials, the mechanics, the precision, the longevity, the quality control, or the extended warranty. There is not a single word or hint about this: the technical aspect of the watch. The advert confirms what we all know: we are *not* paying a fortune for such a watch because we are obsessed with for instance extreme precise time keeping. The advertisers know that, and we the readers also know that.

The clue to what makes you want to buy the watch is of course the person depicted: one of Hollywood's most famous star celebrities. He is the key. He is rich, he is successful, he is powerful and he probably lives a life we ordinary people can only dream about. In other words, through the actor the watch becomes *associated* with extreme success. This watch – the advert tells us indirectly – is made for and worn by only the best: people who can afford it, people who want to wear and *display* a symbol of their success. By wearing this watch, the owner similarly becomes *associated* with success. Hence the advert it is not communicating *technical superiority* – this is not significant in our choice of such products – but instead its message is a *symbol*, a difference, a fantasy, a dream. This is what we are primarily buying.

Exactly as the watch has a technical and a symbolic aspect to it, so has yoga . What they have in common is they both have *use-value* (the technical aspect) and, at the same time, they radiate and communicate meaning, value and difference (the symbolic aspect). The latter is called *symbolic-value* – as opposed to use-value. Thus the advert above is creating symbolic-value: it is encoding the watch with symbolic messages *by linking* it to cherished cultural icons and beliefs.

As I studied the history of yoga, it became clear to me when I was reading old yoga texts that they were actually in some respects similar to this advert: They stated almost nothing about the technical aspects of yoga – the use-value. It was clearly not in the mind of the authors of yoga texts to provide technical insights. As in the advert above, the yoga texts were instead concerned with communicating *symbols* to their contemporary society. So if yoga texts seemed mostly occupied with communicating symbolic messages, why not make this symbolic-value the subject of a study? What symbolic messages did yoga texts send to their contemporary societies and why were they so occupied with communicating

symbols (instead of technical information, for instance)? How and to what degree is contemporary yoga culture orientated by symbolic-value?

Thus the guiding tenet of this book is to investigate the symbolic aspect of yoga – or more precisely to investigate yoga as a *sign*. The notion ‘sign’ is central to this study. Signs – like for instance road signs or national flags - are ‘anything conveying messages to us’.

By this I mean that not only the advert above, but also the actual physical watch and the actual actor all *refer to something outside themselves*. Hence - according to semiotics - they are ‘*signs*’. Anything can be a sign as long as someone interprets it as meaning (‘signifying’) something - referring to or *standing for* something other than itself. *In other words something becomes a sign when we encode it with messages*. Above we have seen how the advert is a sign encoded with messages. The guiding idea for this study is to investigate yoga as a sign – yoga as something encoded with cultural messages.

Symbols only exist within a culture

Further, I could see as I travelled through history that as society and cultures were changing, the symbolic signals of yoga *had* to adjust to this. Each epoch had its mind set, fantasies, dreams, perceptions, aspirations and worldviews – its own *culture*. And the yoga sign *had* to change and become a part of a specific historical culture in order to be meaningful for this given epoch. If we think about it, symbolic communication is an intrinsic part of a given culture and society and it cannot be lifted out of this context. If done so the symbol utterly loses its meaning. An example.

Take the watch advert and, within your fantasy, time-travel five hundred years into the future. Will the people of the future react to this advertising sign in the same way as those of today – will they attribute the same symbolic meaning to the watch? The celebrity in the advert would only be known to very few if any people and hence the advert’s symbolic communication would be meaningless: “*It is a photo of some guy who is wearing something they called a watch and a shirt in those days*”, people might say. Or travel five hundred years back in time and people would not even comprehend what kind of “*strange jewellery*” was displayed: “*It is a depiction of how the man, using mind power, can make this jewel fly in the air*”, people might say as they see the watch hovering in the foreground. Not many sales would be generated on such an interpretation.

Thus yoga’s symbolic-value – its encoded messages - *must* change as culture and society change – otherwise ‘the yoga sign’ like the advert would be incomprehensible to different societies. Hence if we agree that symbols are central to society and if we want to understand *yoga as a sign (a conveyor of messages)*, we need to investigate each specific historical culture and society of which the yoga sign is a part. We can only understand the symbolic messages of yoga by putting the yoga sign into its *cultural and social context* - which turns this book into a *cultural sociological study* of yoga.

Our relation to yoga

In this book, the *cultural history yoga* – the study of the ever changing meaning of ‘the yoga sign’ – I will of course discuss not *only* symbolic-value, culture and society but also explain the shifting technical meanings of yoga through history. However, I will not try to identify innovative and new-fangled interpretations of the *technical meanings* of yoga. This is not the thrust of the book. The technical aspect of yoga is only a supporting actor in my narrative. Instead the leading actor – the true protagonist, who drives the history of yoga as I see it, is the *symbolic aspect* of yoga. The cultural messages encoded in the yoga sign.

Thus paradoxically my answer to the question “*why* are people today, for instance, buying incredibly expensive items like carrier-bags, fragrances, cars, yachts, houses and clothes?” is on an abstract level the same as my answer to the question “*why* have people practised yoga throughout history?” Our relationship to such signs is primarily driven by symbolic-value (cultural messages), not use-value (technical excellence). Yes, there are various *use-values* in all those mentioned signs, but what really engage people are the *symbolic-values* of those ‘signs’.

Symbols are expressions of our *relation* to things – what they mean to us. Hence a cultural study of yoga enquires into our *relation to yoga* – what does yoga *mean* to us as *a society*? In my understanding of cultural studies, we are studying ‘yoga culture’ as we would study for instance ‘body culture’ or ‘consumer culture’: How do we relate to body and consumption? What meaning do we ascribe to body and to consumption? How have the roles of body and consumption changed through history? When the same questions are asked of yoga, they will reveal *the yoga culture* of a given society. In other words we are studying the *role of yoga in various societies*.

The subject of the book defined

Let me finally define the subject of “*Why Yoga?*” in as few and precise words as possible: It is a *critical cultural-sociological investigation of the yoga sign throughout its entire history*. Let me explain the words used.

Critical: Many popular and academic books on yoga tend to be written in a spirit ranging from implicit to strongly explicit endorsement of yoga ideas and practices. Often they do not challenge the validity and logic of the claims and assumptions they have identified as central to yoga. This uncritical acceptance of a text is sometimes called ‘*the dominant reading*’ or ‘*the preferred reading*’, as this style of reading endorses the dominance and power often embedded in the text. In contrast ‘*a critical reading*’ scrutinises and asks sceptical and unwarranted questions. A special variety of the critical reading style is sometimes called ‘*oppositional reading*’. The purpose of this particular type of critical reading, to which I and most cultural sociology adhere, is to reveal and challenge the underlying assumptions, ideologies of dominance, power games and myths, which the ‘preferred reading’ style has rationalised and replicated.

Cultural: By ‘culture’ I understand a shared (but never totally agreed) way of living. It is about how we experience the world. It is a software program or an app, which enables us to make sense of ourselves and the world around us. In this book ‘culture’ is mainly about the creation of meaning, self-identity, symbols and discourses (‘discourses’ are the actual practice of talking and writing, resulting in bringing an object - like for instance an ‘electron’ or a ‘saint’ - into being for us).

Sociological: This book makes it a central theme to explain how yoga was formed by, changed by and took part in social conflicts and changes; the role of ‘yoga culture’ in society. Yoga is seen here as a part of a specific cultural sub-system of society – *a cultural know-how system empowering certain groups* - what is sometimes called a *cultural field*. From a sociological point of view, any culture - especially cultural fields - is closely interlinked with power, conflict and society.

Yoga sign: This book reveals that the yoga sign is without eternal nature or meaning but is instead fluid and evolving. In the words of semiotics (the study of signs) we can say that the yoga word – the physical sound – has stayed relatively stable over thousands of years. However the meaning – ‘the signified’ – of this word and the physical reality it pointed to – the practice or ‘the referent’ – were both utterly unstable. So even if the word yoga was often used, the meaning and the practice associated varied not only between different epochs but also varied between groups within a given historical epoch.

History: The *yoga sign* – or the yoga discourse – is followed from when it first appeared in India, about 400 BC, to its present usage in the 21st Century. Hence a history – or *genealogy* – of yoga is about the specific historical processes, which made possible (i.e. conditioned) the yoga discourse in different historical epochs.

In short, the book frames and discusses yoga in an entirely new way. It approaches yoga as *culture*: a site for the creation of meaning, symbols, self-identities and discourses. Let me talk about some of the background to the approach and conclusion I arrived at above.

2. What inspired this book?

Yoga popularisers and yoga history

A modern reader interested in the history of yoga has in my view two principal different sources. One source is to consult the many popular yoga books we find in well-stocked bookshops and on web sites. Many websites will actually produce listings sorted according to popularity.

Most popular yoga books are written by people I label ‘*yoga popularisers*’, practitioners and adherents who have made a business out of yoga. Often popularisers are Western *professional* yoga instructors or Indian gurus with a group of followers. Sometimes the popularisers are ‘yoga amateurs’ – non-professional practitioners - with a passionate and lifelong dedication to yoga practice. In their books the yoga popularisers promote yoga philosophy and practice. Often the reader will find a separate chapter or two on yoga history, which will suffice for a short introduction to the subject, but not for a thorough and detailed understanding.

Such books are often limited by commercial reality. They address a general market which publishers perceive not to be interested in an extended and detailed scrutiny of the history and concepts of yoga. Further, as most popular books basically are manuals of yoga poses, they are, understandably,

primarily occupied with physical instructions and Western anatomical issues (like how not to injure your ligaments).

Thus there is in the general book market little information about the history of yoga. The yoga philosophy presented often consists of a conglomeration of fragments of ideas picked up on the romantic-spiritual circuits: the meaning and concepts of yoga are in many cases presented as a blend of therapeutic and 'spiritual' rewards; explanations are repeatedly spiced with mystic and alien Sanskrit terms, and are regularly framed by various New-Age worldviews.

The main sources for contemporary popular writers are mainly other yoga popularisers. Reading and referring to critical academic literature is, so to speak, non-existent. Thus no comparisons of conflicting views, no critical investigations of core yoga assumptions, no philosophical and political confrontations with some of the obscure yoga ideas and practices are deemed necessary as a part of disseminating yoga knowledge.

Popular yoga discourse at its best will give the interested reader a brief, romanticised and fragmented introduction to the history of yoga. At its worst it claims there is an 'ancient yoga tradition' – maybe 5000 years old – where primordial yoga sages in deep meditation developed yoga philosophy and yoga poses. Modern yoga in this view is thought to be a direct descendant of that mythical tradition.

Academic yoga history

Alternatively the reader can decide to look deeper into the matter by reading *academic books* about yoga and Hinduism. We could call these sources the intellectual or academic yoga discourse.

Since the renaissance (around 1350 AD) there has been in Europe an on-going so-called humanist research tradition of conducting historical, philosophical critical investigations of the cultural past. The first humanists were renaissance Italians and their subject was the legacy of the cultures of the Roman Empire and Classical Greece. What is good about such humanist critical research (which later was included in all academic research) is that it is supposed to proceed like a lawyer or a judge in a court case: to present open documentation which can be critically and rationally examined and controlled. The process involves carrying out a probing investigation; producing and scrutinising the evidence; delivering arguments for and against; evaluating the case from many points whilst not accepting the first or best version, and so on. These methods have not been adopted by today's popular yoga discourse.

From about 1800 AD there emerged such a European humanist writing tradition on India's religio-culture. It was called *Orientalism*. It had its zenith in the 1930-40s. The cultural-historical studies of the Orientalists are mainly dry, detailed and often concerned with translation issues of ancient Sanskrit scriptures and signs (i.e. their work was mainly *philological*). Any educated reader can read the Orientalists – but you will need much patience, diligence and a special interest. These books provide many interesting details, but their style of writing and conclusions are in many cases marked by the signs of time. They reflect an era where yoga was relatively new and unknown to Western elites.

Today, the main academic yoga discourse is found within university departments of Religious Studies. This research is often today labelled *Indology*. Within modern Indology the interested reader will only find a few *general* books about yoga history and philosophy in English. The oldest of them is the towering classic written by the influential religious scholar Mircea Eliade: *Yoga –Immortality and Freedom* (1958). This book has been re-published numerous times, but is little known today among yoga popularisers and 'yoga sympathisers' (amateurs, who practice yoga). Modern 'yoga sympathisers' – as I tend to call non-professional yoga enthusiasts - are probably better acquainted with Georg Feuerstein: *The Yoga Tradition* (1998). At first glance these two extraordinary historiographies clearly stand in the humanist research tradition and throw a great deal of light on the history of yoga. However closer reading reveals that they belong to the 'preferred readings' approach of yoga writing: They do not provide any *critical* evaluation of fundamental yoga notions. They foster undertones of religio-philosophical agendas, promoting yoga as the cure for the ailments of our civilisation and humanity in general.

A more recent opus is Peter Connolly: *A Student's Guide to the History and Philosophy of Yoga* (2007). It understands and propounds yoga as signifying 'spiritual practice', which is a usual conception within modern Western yoga discourse. Accordingly Connolly's historiography of yoga turns into a broad and general review of India's religio-philosophical ("spiritual") systems. Regrettably it further tends to treat these "spiritual systems" as isolated from history and sociology.

Finally, there is Geoffrey Samuel: *The Origins of Yoga and Tantra* (2008), which is an impressive account of various scholars' views on India's religions up to the thirteenth century. It is clearly written for the undergraduate student of religion and anthropology and is the only one of the yoga historical accounts to focus on history, politics, sociology and anthropology. Samuel, an anthropologist, digs deeper into social and cultural issues. His book is however mainly a historical-anthropological study of Indian religion *as such* and barely addresses specific ideas of yoga.

None of the four historiographies mentioned has any significant contribution to the yoga history after say 1500 AD. There are however a few works focusing on contemporary yoga forms. Joseph S. Alter: *Yoga in Modern India – The Body between Science and Philosophy* (2004) gives an anthropological account of the development of yoga in Colonial India. Elizabeth de Michelis: *A History of Modern Yoga - Patanjali and Western Esotericism* (2004) focusses on how Colonial yoga merged with Western esotericism. Finally there is Mark Singleton's *Yoga Body – The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (2010) focussing on modern yoga's relation to Western body practices and discourses. All three works are clearly not conceived as general and comprehensive yoga historiographies.

In general we could say there seems to be a sharp dividing line in historical yoga research between pre-modern and modern yoga forms. Hence there is no general yoga history covering both eras. Experts in Sanskrit and religious studies mainly cover pre-modern yoga, while modern yoga forms are covered by academics leaning towards anthropology and cultural studies. Between the two groups there seems to be a historical research gap: pre-modern yoga forms in India under foreign rule in the period circa 1500 to 1850.

Post-modern expectations

Considering the enormous interest in yoga we have witnessed since the 1990s, there is, in my opinion, a lack of an accessible, general and critical socio-cultural history of yoga. This is the background for writing this book: it should be *comprehensive* and it should be *critical*. Of course there are the aforementioned critical reviews of *modern* yoga produced by academics like Alter, de Michelis and Singleton. But they are not *comprehensive* histories of yoga.

Secondly there is no general history of yoga, which reflects the outlook and methodologies of what is often termed our 'post-modern life conditions'. Let me expand on this because this is where the disregard of the *critical* element - the so-called 'oppositional reading' - becomes an issue.

Based on our experiences in a world of globalisation, mass media, the internet, anonymous urban life, instant news, mobile technology, casino banking, Watergate style political scandals, corporate fraud (Enron), spin, and public relation management contemporary, readers have different expectations of historiography and the documentary. Most modern educated readers are guided by a sceptical and probing outlook which anticipates investigative research to look beneath the polished surface of things in order to reveal concealed interests and power structures. The admiration that former historical periods have attributed to cultural icons and symbols is often seen as misguided or even naïve.

To illustrate what I mean, take modern political discourse as an example. Through mass media, movies, literature and education we have today developed a very sceptical and transparent view on the political elites and their power games. These elites are not the celebrated public figures they used to be. Any modern observer would agree that political speeches and pamphlets cannot just be evaluated on their words and semantics. How powerful and wonderful politicians would then appear, if judged on their own utterances. Instead, we know that we need to analyse critically political statements for *spin*; for what they are not talking about; for the timing of their publication; for their change of subject; for the omissions and twisting of events; for the audience they are addressing; for the underlying power game; and for symbolic messages. We *expect* a discrepancy between presented reality and underlying reality.

Today many educated readers presume ancient yoga texts similarly to be full of spin, distortions, signs, power and politics. We carry this sceptical attitude with us when we encounter cultural icons and symbols like yoga. For us such cultural signs and discourses *also* need to be critically evaluated in their political and sociological context. We need to discover their symbolic signals – their implicit messages to society and their entanglement in power and politics. Otherwise we recognise that we will never grasp why such signs and discourses were conceived and what they were trying to achieve.

Take for instance the extraordinary claims of many yoga texts: that super-human powers are achieved through yoga – e.g. postulating that a highly advanced yogi can fly or experience god. A modern observer would immediately start to question such claims: why do the yogis claim this; what do they want to get out of this? A modern reader would assume that such an account about 'magic power' and 'god access' could be an expression of the discourse trying to attribute fearsome power to the yogi.

The aim of this book

The purpose of this book about the cultural history of yoga is firstly to address such post-modern sensibilities. Many of the methodologies of contemporary cultural sociology reflect such post-modern attitudes and orientations.

The methodologies, which have guided this study, are often labelled 'post-structuralist'. Central to much post-structuralism is *to challenge and criticise implicit ideologies of dominance and power*

structures embedded in our cultural and social world (this effort is often within semiotics labelled 'oppositional-' or 'counter-hegemonic readings'). Let me explain this.

There is a shared belief among many cultural sociologists like myself that cultural systems and signs often work as instruments for what is termed 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu 1984). By this rather harsh term is meant that members of subordinate groups - or the population in general - tend to adopt the beliefs, values and outlooks of the groups dominating the social hierarchy. An example would be an Indian woman claiming that "*only men can achieve yogic liberation and following union with god. We women are too polluted to achieve this. Hence the aim of my life is to serve my (male) guru in such a way that I am purified and reborn as a male*". Here the 'male' sign is clearly ascribed superiority. This symbolic-value (the message encoded in the 'male' sign) is in this example even adopted by the female speaker, who in fact is suffering under the 'symbolic violence' of the 'male' sign and the accompanying discourse of 'purity'. This internalisation is 'symbolic violence'.

It is a central motive for contemporary cultural sociology to reveal the ways in which cultural repression – 'symbolic violence' – works through cultural signs, discourses and practices. How they protect dominant groups and how subordinate groups face misery because they have internalised such violent cultural signs and discourses. Hence it became a central aim of this book to identify and reveal any eventual cultural violence – internalised ideological repression – intrinsic to the yoga sign in a given historical époque .

The second aim is, with the help of cultural sociology, to produce a historical account of yoga's *entire* cultural history: a narrative of the cultural history of yoga, where both pre-modern and modern yoga naturally fit in. This should enable us for the first time in the historiography of yoga to create a vision where the last centuries of yoga are reassessed as crucial and *symptomatic* within general yoga history. The aim is to create a cultural history where *any* yoga form is accepted as a valid expression of yoga culture and where *no* form is deemed to be 'more true' than any other.

By using existing scholarly research, we will generate a new and different yoga history based on genealogy and change. So there will be no need to uncover any new-and-never-before-seen-evidence to establish such a historio-sociological account of yoga. By de-constructing, re-combining and re-interpreting existing research by means of cultural sociological (post-structuralist) methodologies and inter-disciplinary academic disciplines, we will take steps in the direction of a *counter-hegemonic understanding of the yoga sign*. In short the aim is not to present new historical data and translations but to find a *new critical way of talking about yoga* .

This new way of framing and talking about yoga – my oppositional reading – may be perceived as disrespectful, profane and misleading by the specialists in the cultural field. However, delving into history and society and discussing their impact on the yoga sign will place a cherished sign in an interesting new light.

3. Yoga seen through the lens of Cultural Studies

Method and Approach

I mentioned that I would use some of the insights of *post-modern, post-structuralist or social constructionist* philosophies , which have influenced our contemporary outlook so much. Post-modernism and social-constructionism recently have been seriously and rightly criticised for a range of issues . Despite the criticism, there is still a range of approaches and viewpoints, which I feel can be used constructively to draw up a new vision of yoga. Many scholars would find my approach more precisely being based on *post-structuralism* . Personally, I perceive myself as a contributor to what is called *Cultural Sociology* or *Cultural Studies* and such studies are today highly influenced by post-structuralism .

Some researchers in social science and historiography, specialising in Indian studies, have since the mid-1980s already used these post-modern philosophies. But I have found very little in their texts directly relating to yoga. In the post-structuralist worldview one observes any system of knowledge (or discourse) - including yoga - as closely connected to power. So a central method of post-structuralism is *discourse analysis*: critical investigations demonstrating how discourse and power create and support each other.

Central to critical discourse analysis is to *deconstruct* yoga. Deconstruction is a method where – in our case - it is demonstrated how yoga's various ideas and practices create social differences and power hierarchies. In this context yoga discourse is shown to be an integral part of a specific *cultural field*, with its own specialists, hierarchies, myths, ideologies, power discourses, and economic exchange.

Further it will be demonstrated how the meaning, the truth-claims, the purpose and the social identities of the yoga discourse are *fundamentally* changing as historical epochs shift. This is explored with *genealogical analysis*, which shows how each generation, through necessity, re-interprets, re-formulates and alters yoga's practice and ideas in light of its present circumstances – thereby creating a changed yoga discourse with new social identities and roles. Instead of searching for the 'the essence of yoga' - a 'timeless and constant' yoga sign - genealogy is instead constructing the yoga sign as fluid and evolving. Change is not an exception in such a yoga history, but the norm.

My overall sociological approach will be to understand the yoga discourse at any given moment in history by investigating how specific forces in society condition and form it. Such an analysis will investigate how *yoga culture* (shared practices and ideas creating meaning and identity) and the surrounding society interact with and re-form each other as a permanent process. This cultural sociological approach replaces a narrative of *harmony and continuity* throughout history by one of *discontinuity and conflict*. This may sound very abstract, but as the book progresses the practical consequences will start to unfold as a very different history of the yoga discourse is recounted.

Yoga is visualised as a discourse within a wider cultural field, which constructs fluid social groups fighting for power, recognition, resources, identity and survival in their contemporary society. It is a *history of conflict* where the continuing interaction of humans, social institutions and anonymous processes are reflected in the yoga texts, the signs and the practices.

The underlying and guiding cultural sociological model is in other words one of *conflict sociology*, to which most cultural sociologists subscribe - especially the highly influential French sociologist Bourdieu, who is a rich source of inspiration. I have chosen to label my version of conflict sociology *Darwinian conflict sociology*. By this I want to highlight the Darwinian aspect, because I want to emphasise that discourses do *not* primarily evolve out of older and former discourses. Instead discourses primarily evolve out of conflicts and change in the culture and society in which they are situated. Here discourses – like biological species – adapt to and are formed by their present conflict and environmental change. Discourses are visualised as DNA – codes of information – contributing to the social identity of certain social groups, as they struggle to survive and become socially recognised. As people adapt their social life to conflicts and changes in circumstances, we will follow how new yoga discourses evolve as a part of this. So this is an *evolutionary model*, where new yoga ideas are not so much evolving out of *previous* ideas but mainly out of *contemporary* social life and its conflicts. It is an *active* process where interactors *dynamically* adapt to what is.

De-constructing the yoga ideology

If we listen to the rhetoric of yoga we will often hear yoga constructed as 'eternal' and as having 'an essence' to it, an essence that is resistant to conceptualisation. The yoga specialist – 'the guru', 'the sage', 'the mystic' – is in this context signified as *disinterested* (not motivated by worldly concerns) and 'embodying ancient meditative truth'. The 'yoga sage' is said to reach 'ineffable mystical experiences' significantly transforming his existential being. Such rhetoric is typical of social groups trying to solidify or expand their power and status, and I will show that this also applies to the cultural field where the yoga discourse is situated. Hence, I call this the rhetoric of 'ideology and myths'. This book is about de-constructing such ideological claims.

The decisive guiding idea of my approach is, for instance, to de-construct the image of a 'yoga guru' as an otherworldly holy man. I argue that the 'guru' sign is an ideological vehicle. Instead, by enquiring, for instance, how holy men (some of them practising yoga) survived economically, socially and politically, I re-construct them as 'professional specialists'. I treat the profession of holy men as a social species living in a specific historical environment – a cultural field, to use a term coined by Bourdieu. In this cultural field the yoga specialists subscribe to very worldly concerns as they compete to survive, for economic resources, and for recognition and status.

The many yoga cultures

My exposition is structured around several historical forms of yoga - including contemporary forms - many of which have very little to do with each other and all of them treated as legitimate yoga cultures.

Each main chapter is dedicated to the analysis of these historically distinct yoga cultures. In order to capture their historical specificity I have classified each yoga culture in relation to its historical situation. Hence we will see yoga discourses labelled as proto-yoga, early-yoga, theistic yoga, Tantric yoga and modernist colonial yoga. Although these are not general accepted categories, they are mine.

The different yoga strata

From what has been said in this introduction it should be clear that I operate with two separate groups of *cultural professionals* who have made a living in modern society from their yoga knowledge. Firstly, there are the *professional yoga popularisers*, who (in our society) sell their know-how and skills to a burgeoning market of yoga sympathisers (non-professionals). Secondly, there are the *yoga intellectuals*, who (in our society) are employed by state institutions and religious funded organisations. These two strata represent what is called the *cultural field of yoga* – they make a living out of their yoga knowledge.

Yoga professionals seem to be central to most of yoga's history. My historical investigation of yoga in India showed that each historical era had its specific cultural field of yoga. It dawned on me that the *cultural field of yoga* – the yoga professionals - should be made a central part of any investigation of yoga, as this field in general has the power to define, to a greater degree, what yoga is about.

However I could also see that under *specific historical conditions* a third group played a role in shaping the yoga sign. It was the practitioners: the *amateur yoga sympathisers* to which I actually belong myself. Under certain circumstances we amateurs ('*amateur*' – French, "*lover of*") would send the yoga sign in new and surprising directions – sometimes to the dismay of the professional elite. Actually, I was drawn increasingly to the conclusion that only in two historical periods was yoga culture driven to a greater extent by amateurs: as the sign surfaced and again in our post-modern society. However, in most other eras, yoga culture seems to be dominated by yoga professionals.

Thus a cultural study of yoga, as it is sketched here, attempts to answer some and raise yet more new questions, which should have wide implications, even for practitioners of yoga. This is not only about theoretical exercises. After reading this book I hope, firstly, that a modern yoga practitioner will feel inspired to start to contemplate – critically re-evaluate and re-design – existing *practice* and *meaning* ascribed to yoga. Secondly, I hope that the various specialists within the *cultural field of yoga* will start to re-consider the yoga ideology and myths, which as this book argues they often unwittingly re-enforce.

4. Who is the book written for?

Any reader will after only a few pages into this book realise that this cultural history of yoga is - due to its stringently applied *contextual perspective* - addressing much more than just yoga. So any reader concerned about more general topics like culture, history, social conflicts and change and how they interact with specific cultural practices like yoga will find much of interest. So the book is for readers curious about the complex interplay between religion, culture, politics and society. Even for the more methodological and philosophical involved, there are many theoretical discussions of how to explain culture (like yoga) and change in relation to the overall society.

Particularly for readers fascinated by or studying Hinduism, Tantra and Buddhism and who would like to see these explained as an integral part of Indian history, there is also much of interest. These religio-philosophical systems are also briefly discussed because they are woven into the history of yoga. For readers more specifically drawn by the philosophical aspect of *liberation and meditation* – central to mysticism, spirituality, Buddhism and Tantra to mention a few – there is also much of interest as yoga was often a part of a wider cultural field of liberation and meditation.

For readers more keen on contemporary themes like New Age spirituality, fitness culture, commercialisation, globalisation, colonialism, female body culture and cultural narcissism there is much to find as modern yoga is discussed in these terms.

We can then turn to the readers particularly interested in yoga. The question naturally emerges, which of the three strata I have discussed so far am I addressing: the non-professional sympathiser, the yoga populariser or the yoga intellectual?

The educated reader

First the millions and millions of people who enjoy the practice of yoga one to three times a week - the yoga sympathisers. If the reader belongs to this group of non-professional enthusiasts and anticipates a quick and easy introduction to yoga techniques and their history, she has probably already realised that this is not my aim. First of all, I do not have the pedagogic skills of such popular writing. Secondly, this book does not attempt to provide a new explanation of the *technical meaning* of yoga. It is primarily a

critical review of yoga's *role in history*. In other words it is a study of a yoga culture as, for instance, we would have conducted a cultural study of 'dance' – the role of dance in society. Similar cultural studies could also be about sports culture; or food culture and so on. Hence, if the reader wishes to understand yoga not just as technique, but also as *culture* (something which provides us with meaning, values and identities) and has found that existing literature provides few answers, this book will provide some answers. This kind of reader then represents what publishers call the *educated reader*, who is willing to put time and effort into non-fictional writing, *provided it is written in an accessible language and style*.

People involved in yoga as a profession

The second group consists of the yoga popularisers, who make a living from selling their expertise and know-how to a general market. Today, most consumers expect that a vendor in a market – be it of products, knowledge or services – has ensured that quality assurance and leading edge solutions are a central part of the process. This especially applies to the knowledge industries to which yoga belongs. Today any knowledge industry is under perpetual transformation. The accepted state-of-the-art knowledge never stands still. For those yoga professionals who aim to meet modern expectations, it is critical that they participate in thorough, critical and perpetual re-training. As part of this, the assumptions and taken-for-granted-beliefs underpinning a populariser's yoga knowledge – sometimes called *doxa* - should also come under scrutiny. For a yoga professional committed to such changes and standards a book like this will be of immense value. It takes a *critical look at the changes, signification and implication of the yoga concepts* that modern popularisers teach their students.

The intellectual expert

The final group consists of the intellectual yoga experts. Using a historio-cultural perspective, this book in many respects *re-categorises* the yoga field in which these specialists operate and prevail. This will probably generate some controversy and contention. Nevertheless debate and disagreement sharpens the knowledge of any cultural field. Further discord could also be caused by the fact that I have deliberately ignored many of the formal conventions within academic studies (like the style of quoting or referencing; jargon and tone etc.). This misdemeanour of mine might upset some formalists. Furthermore, academics who orientate yoga signs by religious or spiritual discourses may not approve my critical and debating stance.

Since the times they are a-changing and information technology allows us to write in new and different ways, it is now possible to reach all of the above disparate audiences with a single book. Below I show how there are *many ways to read this book*. New technology has delivered *hyper-links and e-books*, which enable different interest groups (different target audiences) to study and enjoy the very same book because each group can read the book in its own way.

5. How to read this book

A book for browsing and modular reading

This book is not necessarily intended to be read *hierarchically* from the beginning to the end. Instead it is build up in small modules and is supplied with a plethora of hyperlinks (in the e-book version), links to Wikipedia (in the e-book version) and cross-references (in the paper version). This allows the reader to study the book in an *associative* way as one would read for instance *Wikipedia*: the reader may start at a place of particular interest and from here follow the links they fancy. So here 'reading' should be interpreted as 'browsing': scanning, skipping and selecting.

Hence each chapter is broken up into distinctive modules (typically a half to one page long) covering a delineated theme or two, which may be read individually. The modular structure enables short bursts of reading and the reader may go into as much depth as required by reading the modules before and after a given module. Or the reader can, from the list of contents, pick a *sub-chapter* of special interest (typically five to ten pages long). Sub-chapters are wherever practical composed as stand-alone-units. The modular construction however has necessitated some repetitions for which I apologise.

If, for instance, a reader's main interest is – regardless of being a lay-person or expert - the yoga of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, you will find specific modules discussing this style of yoga. If the reader is then captivated, the reading of the text may be expanded to include the enveloping sub-chapter analysing the *Mahabharata* and its society and culture. If curiosity leads the reader on, you can expand further and read about the *Era of the Axial Age civilisation* and eventually dive deeper into some of the other styles of theistic yoga from the Axial Age. There are a multitude of ways to navigate within a chapter or expand beyond it by following hyperlinks and cross-references.

What about technical and academic terms and expressions? All Western academic scholarly concepts deemed necessary to explain a subject matter are introduced and briefly reinterpreted in layman's terms, so academic knowledge and phraseology is not a prerequisite. At any point, academic and technical terms are accessible through cross-references and hyperlinks, so no accumulation of conceptual understanding is necessary. The same, of course, applies to yoga and Sanskrit terms. In the e-book version it is simple to search from any point through general search functions, which opens a whole new world of possibilities.

The reader will find many small sections written in *italics*. These smaller modules clarify the *process of the book*. They are there to guide the reader and should preferably not be ignored. They are there to keep the reader up to date on the investigation and conclusions so far and where they lead to next. Sometimes they indicate that the reader may, if you wish, skip the following section. Many divisions of the book are for the special interest reader and can be skipped by the more casual reader with no consequences for an overall understanding.

Thus, in conclusion, this is *not* a book, which needs to be read hierarchically from A to Z.

Furthermore, I have used diagrams, boxes, arrows and bullet points to visualise some of the more complex and crucial philosophies and concepts. This clear modularisation of arguments, analysis and visualisation should also help the reader to browse through the book to find relevant topics. Scholarly concerns – theoretical and methodological considerations, documentation of sources, criticism of the academic yoga discourse – have either been placed in footnotes (as you see in this introduction) or in separate 'consideration chapters' and appendices. In those places the reader interested in theory will find detailed discussions, while it suffices for the educated or casual reader to read only the main chapters dealing with yoga culture. Finally, I have listed the literature supporting my findings (e.g.: *McCutcheon 2003*). The bibliography can be found at the end of the book.

Moving backward in history – the stable *signifier* and the unstable *signified*

If the reader wishes to get an overview of the modern yoga sign, I suggest they start with the chapter on *Western Popular Yoga*. Why start at the end of the historical narrative? Because the history and the creation of modern yoga is mainly conditioned by modernity. In other words, the meaning of *modern yoga* (a specific historical sign) has very little to do with *pre-modern* yoga signs. The chapter concerning *Western Popular Yoga* demonstrates that today's yoga surfaced in close interaction with new yoga signs, which emerged in British Colonial India. Thus by supplementing the reading of *Western Popular Yoga* chapter with the chapter on *Modernist Colonial Yoga*, the reader will find a good understanding of our contemporary yoga sign - the yoga of modernity.

As soon as we leave modernity behind and reach back into the history of pre-modern India, we encounter a very different "yoga-species", which we will struggle to recognise. Many informed readers probably embrace the notion that present-day yoga is a direct descendant of *hatha-yoga* – a bodily orientated yoga from India's Medieval Age. This is where a genealogy of contemporary yoga should start, they would advocate.

I recommend these readers to read the chapter on *hatha-yoga* and the following chapter on *Yoga under Foreign Rule*. These chapters show however that *hatha-yoga* has very little to do with our modern yoga sign. To understand the background of the *hatha-yoga* culture, the reader should instead read the chapter on *Tantra and Medieval India*. For the modern reader, it is only in the light of Medieval Tantric India that the *hatha-yoga* sign will give meaning to the modern reader – the medieval and Tantric *hatha-yoga* sign bears little comparison to our modern yoga sign.

If the reader – now having realised that both the *signified* of yoga (i.e. the meaning) and the referent (i.e. yoga practice) fundamentally change throughout history - still has the appetite to dig backwards in time to trace the genealogy of the yoga *signifier* (the sound, the word) to the very beginning, to this reader I recommend that you now turn to the chapters on *Proto-yoga* and *Early-yoga*. Soon the reader will discover that these archaic yoga cultures have very little to do even with the Medieval *hatha-yoga*. From this point the reader – now having dropped all expectations of finding a stable *signified* (meaning) and *referent* (practice) - can follow how the yoga *signifier* (the sound, the word) over and over changed *signification* throughout Indian history.

The structure and sequence of chapters

Thus the chapters of the book do not follow a strict chronological order. First the reader will find two chapters about the yoga sign as we understand it today – the yoga of modernity. Then follows the early origins (the genealogy) of ancient yoga cultures – a social history of the yoga cultures of pre-modern India. Here we start from the very beginning and then move up in history: yoga in late Archaic Kingdoms, Axial Age civilisations, the Medieval Age and finally leading to India under foreign rule. For those who want to dig even deeper into the material – especially scholars and students – there is extra material inserted. In these so-called *Considerations* and *Appendices*, methodological and philosophical issues related to the yoga discourse are often discussed.

If the reader does not care for my choice of sequencing the chapters they can be read in chronological order or in any order you may prefer. Each one of the historical yoga cultures can be read and understood on its own - questioning the oft-heard proposition that there is a long and continuous yoga tradition.

Finally, this book breaks new ground by considering the culture of yoga and the yoga sign strictly from a sociological and historical point of view. As such, it is a first uncertain step in new direction and I hope that these initial methodological attempts will inspire others to pick up where I have failed or stopped due to lack of knowledge and insight.

As a Dane, English is not my first language. My readability and grammar editor Miriam Harris has been a great help in weeding out many errors and mistakes but it was never her task – which would have been an overwhelming enterprise - to transform my English into the fluent writings of a skilled native.