

Selling YOGA



From Counterculture to Pop Culture

Andrea R. Jain

Selling Yoga

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to Pop Culture*



ANDREA R. JAIN

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For the loves of my life:

*Tim Lyons—my companion, co-creator, and comrade and
Huxley Jain Lyons—my child and pure joy*

*Orthodoxy is the diehard of the world of thought.
It learns not, neither can it forget.*

—ALDOUS HUXLEY

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>xix</i>
<i>Note on Transliteration</i>	<i>xxi</i>
1. Premodern Yoga Systems	1
2. From Counterculture to Counterculture	20
3. Continuity with Consumer Culture	42
4. Branding Yoga	73
5. Postural Yoga as a Body of Religious Practice	95
6. Yogaphobia and Hindu Origins	130
Conclusion	158
<i>Notes</i>	175
<i>Bibliography</i>	203
<i>Index</i>	225

Preface

*There is therefore no central something to which the
peripheral people were peripheral. One person's center is
another's periphery.*

—WENDY DONIGER, *The Hindus* (2009: 29)

MY FIRST ENCOUNTER with a yoga guru occurred on July 1, 2006, in Rajasthan, India. It was quite literally face to face with Acharya Shri Mahaprajna (1920–2010), the *acharya* or monastic leader and guru of the Jain Shvetambara Terapanth.¹ Mahaprajna prescribed what he called *preksha dhyana*, literally “concentration of perception” but most often translated by insiders to the tradition as “insight meditation and yoga.” One component of *preksha dhyana* is modern postural yoga, which includes a variety of regimens consisting of some combination of *asana* or “posture” synchronized with the breath through *pranayama* or “breath control.”² In *preksha dhyana*, postural yoga is one component of a complex yoga system, which also includes meditation and relaxation techniques.

Of course, I had encountered postural yoga before this meeting, having lived in American cosmopolitan environments during childhood, college, and graduate school and thus having seen postural yoga practically everywhere I turned, from strip-mall yoga studios to advertisements for the Gap. I had even attended a semester-long postural yoga class while I was in college and continued to incorporate some of the practices I learned there into my daily exercise regimen. But this encounter with Mahaprajna and his *preksha dhyana* was particularly enlightening as it forced me, for the first time, to critically examine postural yoga as a transnational cultural product. Due to industrialization and the dominant and global socioeconomic forces of market capitalism, developments in the construction and practice of cultural products such as yoga have simultaneously occurred in urban areas across the globe. The stories of yoga in South

Asia, Europe, North America, the Middle East, and other regions of the world, therefore, are each a part of a larger global narrative.

I had just arrived in the city of Ladnun in the Marwar district of Rajasthan and was adjusting to its fiercely ascetic landscape. Ladnun is in the desert. It was the middle of the summer, and the temperature was well over a hundred degrees Fahrenheit. The sand was in my hair, clothes, and lungs. I could even feel it crunch between my teeth. This was my first meeting with Mahaprajna. I entered a largely empty room in which five or six *munis* sat quietly in front of a short table on which Mahaprajna sat elevated about a foot above the ground.³ The Jain *acharya* was an elderly man, with a bald head and bare feet. He wore nothing but a white robe and a *muhpatti* or “mouth-shield.”⁴

After explicating his view on what it means to self-identify as “Jain,” he turned to me and asked if I was a “Jain,” to which I replied, “No.” He then asked, “Why wouldn’t you want to be a Jain?” Although today we often rely on such distinguishing categories as *Jain* and *Hindu* to talk about what are perceived as identifiable, bounded South Asian religions, those terms have been far more fluid and contested in their applications throughout the history of religions. Yet it would be correct to state that the category *Jain* in at least most cases has been useful for identifying those individuals and institutions over the past twenty-five hundred years or so primarily in South Asia who have shared a certain dualist assessment of the world, which was tied to a particular understanding of history, and resulted in the construction of a particularly ascetic path toward salvation. Yet for Mahaprajna, I did not need to state my position on such matters in order to self-identify as Jain. In his encounter with an American scholar of religions, Mahaprajna was more concerned with defining Jain identity in terms of a desire for “universal peace and health” rather than in terms of membership in a particular religio-philosophical or social group committed to a shared ontology (system of ideas with regard to being or what *is*), history, and axiology (system of values or goals). Why, Mahaprajna was asking me, would anyone not want what he was so confident was the right path to “peace” and “health”?

Much of what being Jain was about, according to Mahaprajna, was yoga and, more specifically, yoga as a means to a modern conception of health and well-being. Furthermore, his vision of yoga intersected with much of what I tended to associate with the postural yoga market. I was surprised to witness such a position in someone who was a Jain monastic and thus embodied the very ascetic ideal that results from a characteristically

Jain worldview and practice. Mahaprajna's position on the importance of a modern conception of physical health and the means to get there posed the question of whether or not he represented a change in attitude toward the body from the traditional Jain denunciatory one, which perceives the body as something to be "conquered," as an obstacle to salvation.

In my study of South Asian religions, I had always been interested in the shifting nature of religion in its multifarious orientations toward the human body. In my encounters with different religio-somatic phenomena, I had consistently found myself asking: How is this idea about the body or body practice indicative of acclimation to shifting social contexts? I had been particularly interested in these questions with regard to the historical and contemporary structures and social implications of ascetic religious orientations toward the body. Consequently, in this encounter with Mahaprajna, I immediately asked whether or not the contrast between the traditional Jain attitude toward the body and that of this living Jain yoga guru reflected adaptations to his contemporary social context.

I could not grasp, and thus was set on a trajectory that would involve many years of research, the contrast between the world-, society-, and body-negating ascetic ideology of traditional Jain monastic thought and the active concern with modern conceptions of universal peace, physical health, and psychological well-being of Mahaprajna and his many disciples. Upon my return home from Rajasthan to Houston, Texas, I immediately began exploring the Terapanth center in my own city, where two *samanis*, female monastic disciples of Mahaprajna, lived and taught *preksha dhyana*. There I found an even greater contrast between what I understood as the Jain ascetic ideal of the Terapanth and what the *samanis* taught to mostly members of the South Asian Jain diaspora.⁵

I quickly accepted that indeed the phenomena I witnessed between Mahaprajna in Rajasthan and the *samanis* in Houston were transnational in scope. In their propagation of *preksha dhyana*, I was certain I was witnessing an attempt to establish continuity with a global market in which popularized varieties of postural yoga reflected dominant demands and needs. In other words, Mahaprajna and the *samanis* attempted to attract people to *preksha dhyana* by making it intersect with the global yoga market in which yoga served to fulfill aims specific to the context of a transnational consumer culture.

Individuals in India, the United States, and other parts of the world where postural yoga was becoming increasingly popular were undergoing shared cultural processes. The common trope that the popularization of

yoga in the contemporary world reflects the transplantation of a cultural ware from “the East” to “the West” does not take into account that people of all regions and nations today are intertwined in many of the same cultural processes (see, e.g., Caldwell 2001: 25; Bryant and Ekstrand 2004; Williamson 2005: 149; and Williamson 2010). It is, therefore, unreasonable to retain the opposition of East and West or a notion of a static, isolated Indian culture, American culture, or otherwise.

I sought to explain how the symbols, practices, values, and ideas I encountered in the contemporary Terapanth relate to contemporary transnational cultural circumstances. How are members of the Terapanth invoking transnational social symbols and discourses? Mahaprajna’s yoga betrayed many of the qualities of popularized varieties of postural yoga. For example, he appropriated modern scientific discourse and modern fitness methods hardly present in Jain traditions prior to the twentieth century, and he translated explanations of traditional Jain cultural symbols oriented around ascetic purification, such as fasting and vegetarianism, into modern biomedical terminology. Preksha dhyana, therefore, struck me as an attempt to resolve the tension between the ascetic disassociation from the body, society, and world, a commitment characteristic of Jain soteriology, and the popular needs and demands that fueled the global postural yoga market in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

To understand preksha dhyana’s relationship to the global postural yoga market, I had to move beyond a face-to-face encounter with the Terapanth acharya and his immediate community and go from place to place in a methodological approach George Marcus terms *multi-sited ethnography* (Marcus 1995: 95–117). Marcus suggests, “[E]thnography is predicated upon attention to the everyday, an intimate knowledge of face-to-face communities and groups” (Marcus 1995: 99). For preksha dhyana to be ethnographically accounted for, I could not limit myself to a face-to-face encounter with a single site or even two sites. Mahaprajna, after all, prescribed his path toward peace and health for all human beings and thus sent the samanīs throughout the world to disseminate his rendition of Jain thought and practice. The samanīs sought to “take Jainism beyond the Jains” by means of the popular dissemination of preksha dhyana. They dispersed to numerous locations with the mission to diffuse that system to the greatest extent possible.

Since preksha dhyana intersects at so many points with postural yoga, I found myself trying to account for postural yoga’s popularization in urban areas across the world. As I broadened the scope of

my study to include postural yoga generally, the study increasingly required an ethnography of multiple sites. A multi-sited ethnography, as elegantly articulated by Marcus, “moves out from the single sites and local situations of conventional ethnographic research designs to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space” (Marcus 1995: 96). Such a methodological approach, according to Marcus, is a response to empirical changes in the world that result in the shifting locations of cultural production (Marcus 1995: 97). The empirical changes in the world I observe and analyze in the present study have occurred in the modern period and have involved processes of market capitalism, industrialization, globalization, and transnationalism, which have facilitated the increasing growth and spread of consumer culture. This study is concerned with a cultural object, postural yoga, that I argue is today largely a product of consumer culture. The construction, dissemination, and practice of postural yoga are the key dimensions for connecting multiple sites.

Marcus suggests that a certain assumption underlies the multi-sited ethnographic method: An ethnography of any single cultural formation in the world system is an ethnography of the system itself because it is the cultural formation produced across time and space that is the object of study (Marcus 1995: 99). In my analysis of postural yoga, therefore, I hope to not only better understand postural yoga, but also to better understand the transnational system within which it exists and thrives—that is, contemporary consumer culture.

From Ladnun and Houston, I set out to follow postural yoga through a series of associations and relationships to physical sites in London and throughout the United States and India. I followed it farther, through websites and publications, to other contemporary areas of cultural production. Contemporary popular culture defies the ability to locate any cultural object at one site or even several sites. And in the case of postural yoga, we cannot locate it in my chosen sites alone. However, as a practical move, this study uses them as windows into the incalculable sites of the construction, dissemination, and practice of postural yoga.

Finally, as argued by Marcus, multi-sited ethnography is “comparative . . . as a function of the fractured, discontinuous plane of movement and discovery among sites” (Marcus 1995: 102). Comparison, therefore, as a method is vital to my analysis, which seeks to understand postural yoga in its heterogeneous forms and locations. I evaluate, compare, and explore the relationships between various postural yoga systems

and figures, attending not just to similarities across time and space but also, and especially, to discrepancies and incongruities. As I will suggest, the most important lesson from the history of yoga is that yoga is contextual and malleable. And the construction and practice of postural yoga alone are heterogeneous, perpetually shifting as one moves from one site to another. In other words, the same rule Wendy Doniger notes with regard to what is commonly termed *Hinduism*—"One person's center is another's periphery" (2009: 29)—applies to the world of postural yoga.

Self-Reflexivity and Heterogeneity in Contemporary Culture

Before embarking upon my study of postural yoga, I would like to provide some self-reflexive thoughts on the unique circumstances of my encounter with my subject. Questions with regard to the heterogeneity of cultural products are salient for the current study, which evaluates the ever-changing forms of yoga in the contemporary context of consumer culture, but also for me personally. After all, like postural yoga, I am a product of such heterogeneity and the consequent encounters between previously isolated cultural formations in the late twentieth century. I am the daughter of a white mother who grew up in a small blue-collar Protestant community in Illinois and an Indian father from Mumbai who was raised in an elite Jain Digambara family.⁶

Although my familial background did not determine my area of research—not consciously anyway—it did frequently come up in my ethnographic encounters simply as a consequence of my last name, which is "Jain." My consistent attempt to assert myself as "Jain...but not Jain" in the sense of name but not religious self-identity stirred interesting responses from my subjects that relate directly to questions regarding contemporary phenomena as products of encounters across what was previously non- (or at least rarely) traversable space.

When my Jain subjects were aware of my name, I was frequently reminded that my Jain identity was not something they were willing to compromise on given their commitments to a traditional Jain ontology that maintains karmic explanations for one's current state in the world. In other words, they were not willing to give up their karmic explanations of my Jain-ness. For them, I was not a product of my social context.

I was a Jain because my karma determined it be so. And my persistent attempts to assert my “Jain . . . but not Jain” identity just amused them—that is, they were unwilling to grant me agency in identifying as either “Jain” or “not Jain.”

On the one hand, I found that, given my “Jain” status, my Jain subjects often expected that I would differentiate, in their favor of course, the “true” Jain tradition from “false” corruptions and likewise the “true” yoga tradition from “false” corruptions. For Jain and yoga traditions have a long history, much like religious individuals and institutions generally, of battling over authenticity. In the history of religions, orthodox representatives often frame change as part of reformation, a return to origins and authenticity rather than as appropriation or adaptation. Representatives maintain that reformations introduce qualities lost at some point that are now being rediscovered. Accordingly, they consider reformations in line with an eternal orthodoxy and see them as “purified” from heterodoxy, which corrupted original, authentic teachings over time.⁷ My academic colleagues and friends, on the other hand, often looked to me to reduce my subjects’, Jain or otherwise, concerns with yoga and health to *mere* socioeconomic and cultural adaptations, to mere commodifications or “borrowings.”

As shocking as the Terapanth innovations are, however, I suggest that they do not deauthenticate it as a Jain tradition, but contribute to the stability of that particular institution in its present-day social context. Likewise, the innovations unique to postural yoga more broadly do not deauthenticate it as “true” or “authentic” yoga simply because they represent products of consumer culture. Postural yoga is a transnational product of yoga’s encounter with global processes, particularly the rise and dominance of market capitalism, industrialization, globalization, and the consequent diffusion of consumer culture. To refer to its innovations as “cosmetic” or “borrowings,” however, would undermine the ontological, axiological, narrative, and ritual functions and meanings of postural yoga for the practitioners I engage with in my study, the insiders to postural yoga.

If it could be conclusively shown that pop culture yoga was in part a result of the interaction between consumer ideology and values and yoga in the twentieth century, should any person seriously argue on that basis that it should therefore be dismissed from any notion of “true” or “authentic” yoga or reduced to mere borrowings? I suggest that it should not be dismissed and am inspired by John Cort’s assertions in response to the

reduction of Jain *bhakti* or “devotional” traditions to mere borrowings from Hinduism:

At one level the issue of “borrowing” is really a nonissue. When a scholar argues that because a practice, institution, or belief has been borrowed from another tradition its role in the borrowing tradition is therefore of negligible importance, the scholar is making a fundamental error of judging the data by standards inappropriate to any form of objective scholarship. (Cort 2002: 60)

In the popular imagination and in much scholarship, postural yoga often is dismissed from any serious consideration of what yoga *is*. Some individuals and institutions, discussed in detail in proceeding chapters, have implicitly and explicitly criticized postural yoga as illegitimate or a corruption of the center of true yoga. But their portraits of postural yoga are misleading. In this study, I analyze how yoga has been perpetually context-sensitive, so there is no “legitimate,” “authentic,” “true,” or “original” tradition, only contextualized ideas and practices organized around the term *yoga*. Postural yoga, then, should not be set apart as a mere accretion simply for its context sensitivity for the same reason I should not be judged as not *really* a person of color or not *really* a person of white Midwestern American heritage because my parents’ relationship was possible only as a result of recent social circumstances.

Rather, if the popularization of postural yoga can be accounted for satisfactorily with recourse to explanations of yoga proponents responding to contemporary consumer cultural values, processes, and ideas, then our understanding of yoga itself needs to be modified, our understanding of the role of social context in the development of yoga as a whole needs to be modified, and our understanding of contemporary culture needs to be expanded.

Issues regarding borrowings and derivations are not reasons to disregard postural yoga but are important for helping us understand the history of yoga. The case of postural yoga evidences that the history of yoga includes processes of assimilation, commodification, branding, and consumption. This all encourages an expansion and reconceptualization of our understanding of yoga. If scholars of yoga study as equally meaningful all those ideas and practices that insiders to yoga systems over the centuries have called *yoga*, they find that yoga is a complex, heterogeneous

cultural product, which is understood and practiced differently in different times and places, including contemporary consumer culture. Likewise, yoga more broadly is not one single thing. It is many things, and a significant part of the study of yoga generally and postural yoga in particular is the study of the strident disagreements over what yoga is, how it is to be practiced, and by whom.

It is, therefore, neither within my capacity nor within my interests to delineate the boundaries of a true, authentic, or original yoga tradition. In response to the scholarly tendency to write off Jain bhakti traditions as mere borrowings from Hindu bhakti, Cort rejected all questions of legitimacy, instead arguing that, in his sociohistorical analysis, “the legitimacy of Jain bhakti is not a subject that is open to scholarly debate” (Cort 2002: 60). Likewise, the legitimacy of preksha dhyana, Bikram Yoga, Anusara Yoga, or Iyengar Yoga, among other varieties of postural yoga, is not a subject to debate in the current study.

As postural yoga becomes increasingly a part of pop culture around the world, it is more often subject to complex interactions between not only local private and public individuals and institutions, but also transnational corporations and state governments. Postural yoga is a valuable commodity available for exchange through globally franchised corporations, such as the Bikram’s Yoga College of India and Anusara, Inc. With each exchange, postural yoga morphs into new forms. Increasingly, individual yoga proponents and opponents, transnational corporations, and state governments attempt to locate a center to yoga in their arguments both for and against intellectual copyright, patent, and trademark claims on yoga products and services. Many individuals and corporations have, often in an effort to control the fiercely profitable yoga market, registered thousands of intellectual property claims on yoga products and services, while state governments have attempted to enforce regulatory laws on the yoga market. Some Hindu and scholarly antipostural yoga movements and thinkers have reacted to the profitable yoga market by attempting to exercise power over defining what counts as true, authentic yoga and what amounts to mere commodification or corruption.

The purpose of the current study is not to establish what counts as true, authentic yoga or determine who rightfully owns yoga. The purpose is, rather, multifaceted and includes the following: to provide a major chapter in the history of modern yoga by attending to the question of what cultural changes enabled postural yoga to become a part of pop culture; to

demonstrate that popularized postural yoga systems are not mere “commodifications” or “borrowings” but idiosyncratic and complex creations all of which insiders call *yoga*—in other words, even in consumer culture, yoga is in part what yogis say it is; and to bring critical scrutiny to bear on social and religious expressions in popularized yoga systems.

In my discussion of yoga and, more specifically, modern yoga I want to avoid implying that a monolithic tradition exists. Although in popular and academic discourse, we abstractly speak about *yoga* in the singular, there is, in reality, no single yoga, only *yogas*. I use the singular term *yoga* throughout this study because this is the term privileged today by those who “do yoga” as it is colloquially put. I deliberately avoid reifying yoga as something that has an essence or core, however, by not capitalizing it and by illuminating, wherever possible, the divergences and differences between yoga systems.⁸

In an attempt to speak to a wider audience that includes the variety of contemporary people who do yoga, rather than simply that of my academic peers, I deliberately approach the study of postural yoga through a more accessible style than traditional academic studies. This book seeks to raise a series of questions that speak to wider cultural concerns and constituencies than are usually appealed to in academia. I hope to speak to many audiences about why so many consumers across the world, including many who I hope will read this book, are choosing yoga as a part of their everyday regimens. I also hope to speak about why some consumers reject it outright, sometimes with great hostility.

Yoga undergoes certain acts of assimilation to its current social context. However, as convincingly argued by Max Weber, religion is a process of assimilation to the contingencies of social life. Likewise is yoga. I thus remain neutral and make no attempts to locate what is “authentic” or “original” in the world of yoga or, more specifically, postural yoga. And I take its many expressions seriously as complex social phenomena. My interest and capacity as a scholar are to convincingly argue that postural yoga, like religion, is nonstable, ever-adaptive, and never monolithic. One postural yogi’s center is another’s periphery.

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Note on Transliteration

HINDI, SANSKRIT, AND other non-English language terms are italicized upon their first usage with the exception of terms that have become a part of the English language lexicon, such as “guru” and “yoga.” Transliteration does not employ diacritical marks and follows the custom of the particular movement under consideration whenever relevant. Terms that sometimes appear together, such as *yogasutras*, are rendered separated (*Yoga Sutras*) to aid a general audience.

Selling Yoga

I

Premodern Yoga Systems

“Yoga” has a wider range of meanings than nearly any other word in the entire Sanskrit lexicon.

—DAVID GORDON WHITE (2012: 2)

WHEN WE THINK of yoga today, most of us envision spandex-clad, perspiring, toned bodies brought together in a room filled with yoga mats and engaged in a fitness ritual set apart from day-to-day life.¹ In that space, Christians, Hindus, atheists, and others gather to enhance something they deem sacred: their bodies, their selves.² In popularized yoga classes today, we most frequently find some variety of postural yoga, a fitness regimen made up of sequences of often onerous *asanas* or bodily postures, the movement through which is synchronized with the breath by means of *pranayama* or “breath control.”

Though these are images never seen before in the history of yoga, well-known proponents and opponents alike associate them with the “ancient yoga” of South Asia, claiming it is there that we can locate this widespread practice’s “origins.”³ In popular yoga discourse, claims to a linear trajectory of transmission—premodern yoga functions as what Mark Singleton describes as “the touchstone of authenticity” for proponents of modern yoga (Singleton 2010: 14)—are frequently made and assumed to be historically accurate. For example, postural yoga giants B. K. S. Iyengar (b. 1918) and K. Pattabhi Jois (1915–2009) have claimed direct historical ties between their postural yoga methods and ancient yoga traditions. While Iyengar has historically claimed ties between Iyengar Yoga and the ancient yoga transmission going at least as far back as the *Yoga Sutras* (circa 350–450 C.E.), he recently introduced a Sanskrit invocation to Patanjali at

the beginning of each Iyengar Yoga class in order to further associate his yoga system with that transmission.⁴ In like manner, Jois has suggested that verses from the earliest Vedas delineate the nine postures of the *suryanamaskar* sequences of postures in his Ashtanga Vinyasa yoga system (Singleton 2010: 221–222, n. 4).⁵

In the popular imagination, the development of a monolithic yoga tradition can be traced back to the *Yoga Sutras*, the ancient doctrines of the earliest Vedas (circa 1700–1500 B.C.E.), or to even more ancient origins over 5,000 years ago in the Indus Valley Civilization (circa 2500–1500 B.C.E.).⁶ Consider, for example, a statement about yoga on a PBS website featuring a special series entitled *The Story of India*:

Seals from the Indus Valley Civilization dating to the 3rd millennium BCE depict what appear to be yogic poses. The *Bhagavad Gita*, *Puranas*, and *Mahabharata* are among the texts that describe yoga's teachings, which were codified at about 150 BCE in the *Yoga Sutra* written by Patanjali. (PBS 2008)

Such statements about the history of yoga, which presume an unbroken lineage, do not reflect historical reality, which is far more complex and about which scholars are far more uncertain, especially given the extreme ambiguities involved in dating South Asian texts, events, and figures.

Yet, because such statements are common in popular discourse and make up the narratives that function to reinforce the postural yoga world's self-images, values, ideas, and practices, any study of postural yoga necessitates serious consideration of yoga's actual premodern history. For that reason, this chapter provides the premodern backdrop for the modern popularization of postural yoga. Though there is not nearly enough room in this chapter to provide exhaustive coverage of what scholars have uncovered about premodern yoga, I draw on recent secondary scholarship in order to make two points particularly relevant to my analysis of the popularization of yoga. First, modern postural yoga is radically distinct from premodern yoga traditions. Second, premodern yoga traditions were not monolithic; rather, they were dramatically heterogeneous, taking a wide range of forms, including Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain ones. I hope to frame these points in nuanced ways that challenge common assumptions about the history of yoga, especially the assumption that a static, monolithic yoga tradition gradually, increasingly, and in a linear way underwent popularization from the nineteenth to the late twentieth centuries.