

Is Yoga ancient or modern?

Contributed by Massimo
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Reflections about the historical origins of yoga, after attending a recent program organised by the University of Oslo about the scientific researches done on yoga in the last years.

Recently I have attended a very nice program organized by the University of Oslo, a presentation of various scientific researches done on yoga in the last years.

The lecture given by Fahri Saatcioglu, professor of biology, about the effects of the yoga practices on the neuroendocrine system was particularly interesting. The way in which the asanas (yoga positions) and the pranayama (control of the breath) can effect the nervous system and influence the production of hormones in our body is one of the things that fascinated me the most about yoga since I started practicing about 25 years ago. It is fantastic that there are many scientific researches going on in this field now, and I believe that in the future many of the yoga practices will be integrated in mainstream medicine as side therapies.

It is very interesting also the fact that, according to this researches, the yoga exercises that really offer a beneficial, therapeutic effect on mind and body are not those performed in a glamorous, fast and acrobatic manner, but those performed slowly and gently, with a meditative approach.

There are still many scientific researches on yoga going on and it is really exiting to think about what the results of them will be. For those curious about that, is possible to read about the results obtained by some of the researches done so far in the following page:
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4623627/>

Anyway, during this program there was also a lecture given by Kathinka Frøystad, social anthropologist and professor of Modern South Asian studies, about the historical origins of yoga and about the interactions between the Western and the Eastern cultures in the development of many yoga practices. I found this part also very interesting, because probably for the first time in an academic setting, at least here in Oslo, it has been finally discussed the historical evolution of one of the most popular yoga "styles" of our modern times: Ashtanga Vinyasa.

Ashtanga is a very ancient word in the yoga tradition, it has been used by Patanjali in his Yoga Sutra (the first text written on Yoga, about 2500 years ago), and it means "eight limbs". Traditionally this eight limbs refer to: Yama and Nyama (2 lists of ethical principles to be used to develop a peaceful life style), Asana (yoga positions), Pranayama (control of the breath), Pratyahara (withdrawal of the mind from external stimulations), Dharana (concentration), Dhyana (deep meditation), Samadhi (absorption of the mind in the Self). So, eight limbs, eight techniques designed to reach a Yoga experience, an experience of Union with the Self. Any authentic, traditional school of yoga is familiar with this eight limbs, which are usually applied during meditative practices.

Though, the word Ashtanga became popular for other reasons in the recent years. Krishnamacharya, a South India Brahmin that learned the yoga practices studying with a guru in the Himalayan region, decided to give the ancient name Ashtanga to a sequence of physical, semi-acrobatic exercises that he created to train and entertain the guests of the king of Mysore (in South India) The king of Mysore at that time was interested in promoting a revival of traditional Indian knowledge, including yoga, so he asked Krishnamacharya to teach yoga practices to the guests of the Mysore palace and to train them also in martial arts and in physical strength. For this reason Krishnamacharya created a type of yoga in which martial art exercises taken from Kalaripayattu (south Indian traditional martial art) and Western fitness exercises were mixed together with more traditional Hatha Yoga positions. In this way he created the basis for the "Vinyasa Yoga"; a very physical, dynamic form of yoga that became extremely popular in the West some years later, and he decided to call it "Ashtanga"; probably in honor of Patanjali's ancient Ashtanga, even though the Ashtanga of Patanjali was a system of meditation rather than a physical, dynamic fitness program.

(Foto credit Angela Marie Henriette --> https://www.flickr.com/photos/mara_earthlight/3877957416)
Most yoga practitioners nowadays don't know about these two different "Ashtanga" and they believe that the dynamic form of yoga created by Krishnamacharya is the same traditional Ashtanga described in the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali.

Pattabhi Jois, one of the disciple of Krishnamacharya, is probably somehow responsible for this misunderstanding because apparently he always said that the dynamic form of yoga created by Krishnamacharya was in fact the same,

authentic yoga that Patanjali used to practice 2500 years ago.
But... it is not.

In the last 10 years I have written several articles and I gave several workshops about this subjects, but often I met quite a lot of skepticism from many people attracted to the modern, dynamic form of yoga created by Krishnamacharya and promoted by Patthabi Jois.

Apparently not many modern yogis accept always very easily the idea that Ashtanga Vinyasa is actually a modern creation and not the original yoga practice described by Patanjali in the Yoga Sutras. Still a useful practice of course, but not the same one that Patanjali used to practice. So, I have to admit... I finally found myself giving a long, restorative, ("yogic", I should probably say...) exhalation of relaxation and satisfaction when I heard that Kathinka Frøystad in her lecture was eventually confirming the story about modern Ashtanga that I tried to share in many workshops in the past.

Though, there is something in her presentation that is not resonating completely with me. She said that basically all the forms of yoga that we practice nowadays are not really ancient, but they are as well a mix of knowledge coming both from the East and from the West. So, according to her, the Ashtanga Vinyasa construction in modern times is not an isolated case.

I understand her point of view, but I find this statement a bit too "stretched", so to speak...

Even nowadays there are in India many yoga schools rooted in very ancient traditions. They might be influenced to some degree by elements of the Western culture absorbed under so many years of British colonialism in India, but they are not practices created mixing together Western gymnastic, martial art and Hatha Yoga. Their foundation is deeply rooted in the tantric Nath tradition of the Hatha Yoga Pradiipika, or in the original Raja Yoga (authentic Ashtanga of Patanjali), or in the esoteric Asthavakra's Rajadiraja Yoga, and/or in various other Shivaist, Tantric traditions.

Swami Sivananda, another famous yoga guru of our modern times mentioned by Kathinka Frøystad in her lecture, became a sannyasi (a yogic monk) after receiving an initiation in a Vedantic lineage by his guru Swami Vishwananda. So, Sivananda is placeable in a "Parampara" tradition, which means that his teaching comes from the teaching of another guru which was himself part of an ancient lineage of yoga traditions.

So, he did not create a new "style" of yoga mixing together Western gymnastic, Hatha yoga and martial art, but he continued a tradition, creating an Ashram in Rishikes from where he started to teach to a large number of disciples. He used to be a medical doctor before to become a monk, so he was having a high education and he was fluent in English. His knowledge in medicine and his ability of communicate in English put him in the condition of explaining to his Western disciples how the yoga exercises can effect the human body from a medical point of view. And this is how his school of yoga became popular also in the West.

It is certainly true that, like any yogi guru usually does, he adapted his teaching to the needs and the abilities of his students (just like, after all, Krishnamacharya did too, in the second part of his life when he was teaching in Madras), so yes, some of his teaching have been occasionally modified to make them more understandable by his Western pupils. But again, that does not means that he created a completely new "style" of yoga mixed with Western gymnastic and martial art like in the case of the Ashtanga Vinyasa of Krishnamacharya.

The history of yoga is long and complex, and there are many other important personalities part of this history. The more (relatively) recent ones are Ramana Maharishi, Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda, Tota Puri, Shrii Aurobindo, Paramahansa Yogananda, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Shrii Anandamurti, Swami Rama, Ananda Moy Ma, Mahaavatar Babaji, Mata Amritanandamayi, Yogi Bhajan and many others...

And for the yogis of the past the list is even longer.

Beside, we have also many ancient texts on Yoga and specifically on Hatha Yoga like the Hatha Yoga Pradipika (15th century CE), Gheranda Samhita (17th century CE), Datt treyayoga[stra (13th century CE), and various esoteric Tantras. Plus the texts on Yoga philosophy like the Upanishad, and as well the description made of the yogis by the Greeks soldiers of Alexander the Great which used to call them with the name "Gymnosophists".

So, we really have a lot of material that tells us that yes, Yoga (including Hatha Yoga) is an ancient tradition. And yes, it evolved during the centuries and it still does, but it kept an integrity and a consistency with its fundamental goal which is to bring the human mind to a level of peace and harmonious self-awareness.

And it is probably also for this reason that even science nowadays in our modern times starts to confirm the deeply beneficial effects that many yoga practices give to mind and body. These yoga practices have been tested for thousand of years... if they have survived Buddhist revolutions, Islamic invasions, British colonialism and American fitness it means that many people in the history of humanity found them beneficial and decided that it was worth it to preserve them and to teach them from generation to generation. Datt treyayoga[stra, verses 41a–42b:

"Whether a Brahmin, an ascetic, a Buddhist, a Jain, a Skull-Bearer or a materialist, the wise one who is endowed with faith and constantly devoted to the practice of [hamha] yoga will attain complete success."