

Introductory Notes on the Relationship Between Buddhist and Hindu Yogas

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One of the many ways Insight Meditation (IM) has evolved away from its roots in Southeast Asian Theravāda Buddhism is in its embrace of yoga as a valuable adjunct to the *vipassanā* that forms the heart of its practice system. The yoga most common in the West, known by some scholars as “Modern Postural Yoga” (MPY) to highlight both its physical emphasis and its recent provenance, is a substantial part of the practice regimen of many IM practitioners, but holds an ambiguous role in the formal system of IM practice.¹ Yoga, most often in a gentle style of posture (*āsana*) practice, is offered both in classes and via dedicated space for practice, at many IM centers, but is rarely spoken of in dharma talks, included in the progression of instructions that forms the basis of retreat practice, or included in the collection of primarily Buddhist doctrines that are emphasized and repeated. The reasons for this ambiguity are historical and doctrinal, reflecting the cultural identity of modern practitioners as much as the imagined historical separation of the traditions. Materials from historically more distant traditions, after all, like poems from Rumi, Mary Oliver, or T.S. Eliot, bring Muslim and Christian influences into the room, but are commonly used. Another commonly used source, Japanese Zen, while seemingly related to Theravāda by its Buddhist-ness, is historically and in some ways doctrinally just as distant from Theravāda as most forms of modern Hinduism. As Insight Meditation and yoga practices are interwoven more and more in the bodies of practitioners, I offer this essay as a step toward clarify the relationship between the forms in order to offer a mandala of practices that serves the needs of modern seekers without adding confusion or cognitive dissonance.

This inquiry touches on several interwoven topics, which I broadly divide into history, doctrine, and practice. The historical roots are relevant because some of the contemporary separation arises from ideas about the origins of the various Asian contemplative traditions, a history which reveals more overlap than is often suggested. Further, in addition to the ancient connection between the disciplines, both were substantially reinvented in the 20th century by teachers influenced by European (primarily British) colonial culture, adding ambiguity to our ideas about their provenance and histories. Perhaps the most-cited difference between Yoga

¹ For background on MPY and recent research on what is also now called “transnational yoga”, see the research coming out of the Modern Yoga Research group, and their Hatha Yoga Project: modernyogaresearch.org. The best known texts from this valuable body of work are Elizabeth De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga: Patanjali and Western Esotericism* (NY: Continuum, 2005). and Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (London: Oxford, 2010).

and Buddhism is not based in history, however, but in doctrine, particularly ideas about the nature or existence of the “self” (*attā/ātman*), and the related question of the nature or existence of a personal divinity.² Without understanding the subtlety of the ancient philosophical debate, contemporary practitioners may think there is an absolute gulf between the traditions where in fact there is a broad range of positions on these questions even within Buddhism, and broad agreement between the ancient founders of Buddhism and their proto-Hindu contemporaries on many fundamental aspects of the core existential problem. Lastly, for many contemporary practitioners, both history and doctrine are secondary to personal practice experience, where yoga postures, breath, and movement practices may blend easily with Buddhist meditation, mindfulness, and loving-kindness practices as we understand them. Understanding the many kinds of practice as related contemplative processes, I refer in the plural to “Buddhist and Hindu Yogas” as a way to unbind the word “yoga” from its association as strictly a Hindu referent and use the word more accurately to both its history and current manifestations as practice.³ After a few notes on each of these topics, sketching areas for further exploration, I will suggest some ways to further integrate these ancient sibling traditions.

History

While “yoga” is mostly thought of in relation to Hindu practice now, as a word for contemplative discipline it has long been used in Buddhist, Sikh, and Jain traditions, as well as non-South Asian-originated traditions like Islam.⁴ South Asian contemplative discipline began to be formalized around the time of the Buddha (c. 485-405 BCE), when Seekers (*samaṇa/śramaṇa*) left the new cities of the Gangetic plain to live in the wilderness in a quest for Liberation, called variously *mokṣa* (S), *nibbana/nirvāṇa*, or *kaivalya* (S), from a seemingly endless round of birth and death (*saṃsāra*). These early practitioner-philosophers developed complex analyses of perception, consciousness, and Action (*kamma/karma*) to explain the predicament of suffering that seems to haunt all living

² When using Pāli or Sanskrit doctrinal words, I will put them in parentheses in this order: Pāli/Sanskrit. When just one word is given it is either the same in both languages (like *sangha*) or labelled “P” or “S”. Doctrinal words used more than once are labeled on their first instance, and those that have entered the English lexicon within our communities, like *vipassanā* and *mettā*, are left untranslated, with diacritics. English translations of technical terms are capitalized.

³ The word “Hindu” began to be used in the 15th century by the Persians to refer to their southern neighbors, following which it was used in self-reference by some residents of the subcontinent, and then solidified by the British as a convenient general marker for their colonial subjects. For an exploration of its ambiguity as a religious, philosophical, or ethnic label, see iep.utm.edu/hindu-ph/. Systems like Saṃkhya, Yoga, Vedānta, and the Vedic tradition that preceded them, all claimed in retrospect by later Hindu writers, may be considered “proto-Hindu.”

⁴ I use the geographical label “South Asian” as opposed to the geopolitical “Indian” for events that precede the use of the word “India,” which began in the 15th century as a Persian attribution referring to the inhabitants of the Indus River basin.

beings, and proposed a variety of pathways to its end. Similar conceptions of the world and suffering were shared by many of the *śramana* sects, including those that came to be known as Buddhism, Jainism, Saṃkhya, Yoga, and Vedānta, among many others, and their solutions to it were largely variations on a similar theme: renunciation, asceticism, sensory seclusion, and meditative inquiry leading to equanimity around changing experience. All of these lineages were part of the same cultural movement, engaging in vigorous debate and sharing patrons, and only later diverged into what we think of as separate “religions.”

The earliest surviving texts to describe individual paths to Liberation are the Sanskrit *Upaniṣads*, particularly the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, and the Pāli discourses of the Buddha. The *Kaṭha* uses some Buddhist terminology, but scholars disagree around whether it precedes or follows the texts of the Pāli Canon, which are dated by the earliest written copies (c. 100 BCE) rather than by the dates of the historical Buddha. Whether the Buddha’s teaching influenced the writer(s) of the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* or Upaniṣadic discourse influenced the Buddha, their relationship is close, and their contemplative practices strikingly similar.⁵ Out of these root sources, the schools of Saṃkhya (“Numbers”) and Yoga developed, both also influenced by Buddhist thought, taking their most well-known form in the *Yoga-sūtra of Patañjali* (YS) (c. 200 CE). The YS became the foundational text of “Yoga” as a distinct philosophical school, and has become the primary text of Modern Postural Yoga, even though the practice it emphasizes, meditative absorption, is not part of most contemporary yoga lineages.

The *Yoga-sūtra*, though related to Saṃkhya and the teachings of the *Upaniṣads*, contains several teachings that have direct Buddhist counterparts, including the 4 *brahmavihāra*, the 5 Spiritual Faculties, and the central meditative practice: deep concentration (*samādhi*), leading to subtle powers (*iddhi/siddhi*), inquiry into the nature of experience, and Liberation through insight into selflessness. The sectarian identity of the *Yoga-sūtra* is in some ways unknown. Its philosophical stance, asserting the essential separation of Awareness (*puruṣa*) and Nature (*prakṛti*), is shared with Saṃkhya, but the *sūtra* itself is written not in Classical Sanskrit but in a variant called Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit, which along with other linguistic, doctrinal, and historical clues has led some scholars to suggest that it may in fact be a Buddhist text.⁶ At the very heart of modern yoga, in other words, is a text that is either Buddhist or very Buddhist-flavored.

⁵ For a hypothesis that Gotama studied at the university at Taxila, where he would have been exposed to the early *Upaniṣads*, see Stephen Batchelor, *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist* (NY: Spiegel & Grau, 2010).

⁶ For the “Yoga Sutra is Buddhist” theory, see David Gordon White, *The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali: A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 2014), 230-34. For an exploration of linguistic details that link the YS to, and differentiate it from, Sarvastivadin Buddhist *abhidharma*, see Philipp Maas, “Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma and the Yoga of Patañjali,” in *Congress of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* (Vienna: academia.edu, 2014).

From these interwoven roots, conversation between the lineages continued for 1000 years. The *Bhagavad Gītā* (c. 200 CE), in some ways the root text of both the specific school of Vedānta and modern Hinduism, shows substantial Buddhist influence, and as Vedānta developed into its mature Nondual (*advaita*) form, it shared many of its core theories, including the important concept of Emptiness (*śūnyatā*), with Buddhism.⁷ Proto-Hindu Yogas in turn influenced the development of Mahāyāna Buddhism, including the lineage called Yogācāra (“Yoga Practice”), which began around the same time as the *Yoga-sūtra* and *Bhagavad Gītā* were committed to writing (c. 200 CE). Yoga was central to the tantric practices that developed in the Himalayas starting in about the 4th century, probably originating in Śaiva (devotional sects oriented around the deity Śiva) lineages from Kashmir and becoming what we now call Tibetan Buddhism around the 9th century. The practices of movement, breath, and energy that would later be called Haṭha (literally “Forceful”) Yoga first appear in an 11th century tantric Buddhist text, the *Amṛtasiddhi*, and are perhaps best known in Buddhism via the practice manual called the “Six Yogas of Naropa,” (c. 1100 CE) from the Tibetan Kagyu tradition.⁸ The roots of Haṭha Yoga, which is Modern Postural Yoga’s most direct South Asian ancestor, are thus in both Hindu and Buddhist lineages.

After a millennium of close contact, Buddhism and Hindu Tantra both were effectively destroyed in India by the Muslim invasions that became the Mughal Empire (1526-1857), which was followed by the British Raj (1858-1947). Because of these colonial disruptions, the development of Haṭha Yoga out of Hindu (mainly Śaiva) Tantra proceeded with less interaction between Hindu and Buddhist traditions than before. In the non-colonized Himalayas, Buddhist yogas developed with less interruption, evolving into modern lineages such as Chögyal Namkhai Norbu’s “Yantra Yoga” and Tarthang Tulku’s “Kum Nye/Tibetan Yoga” practice forms. In the modern era these Tibetan lineages re-absorbed influence from globalized Haṭha Yoga, and so now occupy a hybrid position between the yoga and Buddhist communities in the West. At the same time as Buddhist yoga practices were being transmitted to the West by modern Tibetan teachers, mindfulness and meditation-oriented material from Buddhist lineages was influencing Hindu-lineage yoga practice in the West, particularly as prominent teachers like Ram Dass, and later Tias Little, Sarah Powers, Chip Hartranft, and Frank Jude Boccio studied in both Hindu and Buddhist-based yoga traditions. In many ways, though Hindu-lineage yoga *āsana* (postural practice) and Buddhist-lineage meditation diverged long ago, both their ancient roots and their modern incarnations are deeply interwoven.

⁷ Richard King, *Early Advaita Vedanta and Buddhism: The Mahayana Context of the Gaudapadiya-Karika* (NY: SUNY Press, 1995).

⁸ The term *haṭha* means “Forceful,” and referred until the modern period to breath, energy, and sexual sublimation practices centered around the awakening and channeling of *kuṇḍalinī* or *prāna/śakti*, divine energy conceived as feminine in some systems. In the most well-known Tibetan systems, *prāna* (Wind) is called *lung*, and *kuṇḍalinī* called *tummo*, or Inner Heat. The usage of *haṭha* as an umbrella term for yoga *āsana* practice, and its use as the name of a studio yoga style centered around gentle poses held for many breaths, are both contemporary innovations.

Doctrine

Central to some modern Western practitioners' sense that Yoga and Buddhism are incompatible are doctrinal differences between Hindu and Buddhist systems that were given substantial emphasis in South Asian philosophical debates through the first centuries of the Common Era. These debates codified a variety of positions around the existence and nature of what we now commonly translate as Self (*ātman*) and God (*brahman*).⁹ The differences among the positions are much more complex than a simplistic conceptual opposition in which the Hindus say there is a Self and the Buddhists say there isn't, but this ancient debate still directly affects the psychology of practitioners in the West, sometimes in very painful ways. Western convert Buddhists often discuss Not-Self (*anattā/anātman*) as if it implies the non-existence, or illusory nature, of the aspect of ourselves we call the personality, with its individual narrative, preferences, loves, and goals. This implication is often challenging for practitioners, who may hear in it a dismissal of their sense of being (or desire to feel like) a real, valuable, unique individual. In the framework of early philosophies about the *ātman*, however, this interpretation of the doctrine may be a misunderstanding: a mistake in translation and interpretation that has led to very real suffering. Understanding the basic philosophical contours of the ancient debate may serve teachers who endeavor to present this challenging teaching in ways that are helpful,

⁹ The translation “self” for *ātman* (S) became normative through the 1879 *Upaniṣad* translations that formed the first volume in F. Max Müller’s massive *Sacred Books of the East* series. Müller reported choosing “self” over “soul” because it “is a subject only, and can never become a predicate.” Müller’s translation of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (700+ BCE) in Volume 15 of *Sacred Books of the East* glosses the term as “the ruler within, the immortal,” indicating a permanent internal entity, and asserting *ātman* as a/the transcendental subject. See N.J. Girardot, “Max Müller’s “Sacred Books” and the Nineteenth-Century Production of the Comparative Science of Religions,” *History of Religions* 41, no. 3 (2002): 60. While the Early Buddhist teaching of *anattā* clearly rejects this ontology in favor of a phenomenology of transient experience, it does not reject as non-existent the mental factors (*sankhāra*) we call personality and relative identity. It simply recognizes them as transient and conditioned. In this sense, “Soul” may be a more accurate translation for *attā/ātman*.

In addition to the resolution offered by a reconsidered translation, the destabilization of the transcendental subject in modern philosophy offers a pathway out of the bind Müller placed the word in, suggesting that “self,” which is always already constituted through discourse, can indeed be a predicate. A common teaching device in the Western Buddhist lineage of Insight Meditation is to turn the term into a verb: “selfing,” highlighting it as activity or process over stable psychological essence. This highlights the conditioned nature of the sense of self, and may be most accurately a teaching of Dependent Origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) with Selfing as a translation of the link commonly translated as Becoming (*bhavana*). I address this issue more fully in my doctoral dissertation: Sean Feit Oakes, ““This Very Body Is the Bodhi Tree”: the Performance of Contemplative States in the Western Jhāna Revival & Contemporary Movement Theater” (UC Davis, 2016), 19.

liberating, and not psychologically disrupting, as well as practitioners wrestling with the implications of teachings they have taken to heart.

The ancient debate, a parallel to the search for archetypal and irreducible Forms among the early Greek philosophers, centered around whether phenomena can be said to have an essential, unchangeable identity to them, with our experience of ourselves as an important example. Most of the South Asian schools' positions, including the Early Buddhist/Theravāda, do not assert that selves do not exist in an ontological (which refers to theories about *existence*) sense, but simply that we mischaracterize phenomena like the sense of being a separate individual as permanent when they are impermanent, and ultimately satisfying when they cannot be. Though the distinction is subtle, an ontological claim about the self is profoundly different from a phenomenological (about *direct experience* rather than *existence*) one. Separating the two makes it possible to affirm the “real-ness” of the personality/self without contradicting the teaching that it is, like everything else, a product of conditions, and thus impersonal and impermanent. In later Mahāyāna expressions of this understanding, the Emptiness (*śūnyatā*) of the Self points similarly to its Interdependent nature, not its non-existence. Similarly, the Vedānta teaching at the core of Hinduism that the individual self (small “s”, *ātman*) and the divine Self (big “S”, meaning God, or *brahman*) are not different or separate means not that the individual is permanent, but that the sense of being a separate individual was always an illusion.

It may be more linguistically precise in modern English to characterize the debate as around the nature of the Soul rather than the existence of the Self, which we associate so fully with the personal psychological being, or to use the Platonic terminology of Forms, Ideals, or Essences. Removing the Western concept of the eternal Soul from our ideas about who we are may be not only a more accurate translation of *anattā* but a less psychologically dissonant insight for practitioners to integrate. This reframing of the doctrine of Not-Self also then softens the sense of absolute difference between the Buddhist and Hindu models, both of which conceive the isolated, individual person to be Empty of unique substance, whether simply a product of conditions in the Buddhist model or an expression of divinity (*brahman*) in the Hindu. Hindu Yoga is based in the idea that the individual self is a manifestation of divine reality, while Buddhist Yoga is based in the idea that all of reality is interdependent and impersonal. What if these two ideas, when you have an insight into them in deep meditative stillness, actually *feel* pretty much the same?

In the end, the difference between the Self and Not-Self models may be only a rhetorical difference, with the direct experience of practitioners of each system being quite similar. David Loy has persuasively suggested that states of meditative attainment may be phenomenologically indistinguishable whether they are based in theistic or non-theistic ontologies. His study comparing non-dual traditions notes parallels between classical rhetorics of Liberation, including Buddhist, Vedāntic/Hindu, Christian, and other systems that cultivate

“unitive states” as the heart of their practice. Whether a practitioner feels that they are merging with an Absolute Being/Self or realizing Absolute Emptiness/Non-self, the experience may be described similarly and perhaps felt similarly.¹⁰ In practice, the doctrinal differences between philosophies of Self and Not-Self may turn out to be irrelevant, reflecting sectarian rhetoric used to describe subtle or transformative experience, but not indicating a fundamental difference in the nature or efficacy of the experience. Whether a practitioner feels that they dissolved into Emptiness, or into God, or into Unconditional Love, the transformation of the heart and unbinding of clinging may be essentially the same. Resonating with this perspective, many practitioners who cultivate both yoga *āsana* and Buddhist meditation do not perceive their core doctrines as incompatible.

Practice

Both contemporary Buddhist meditation and contemporary posture-based yoga can be understood as embodiment-centered practice systems. In both cases, the idea that “embodiment” could be part of a liberation path is the result of long evolution in South Asian philosophy, taking form substantially in the 20th century West, where teachings on social engagement, imminence, and health/well-being have flowered in the ancient soil of renunciation and transcendence-oriented systems. Embodiment as a practice orientation helps to integrate *vipassanā*-based meditation and *āsana*-based yoga with daily life, and with each other as formal systems: both now propose that bringing awareness to body sensations and to the physical aspects of emotions and energetic states supports the cultivation of concentration, energetic vitality, and transformative insight.

Many Insight Meditation (IM) teachers emphasize embodiment, or embodied awareness, through teachings that cultivate continuity of mindfulness, feeling emotion and energy in the body, comfort and non-effort in sitting meditation, and awareness of trauma as a physiological condition that strongly impacts meditation and inner growth. *Vipassanā* instructions on mindfulness are rooted in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the first section of which teaches awareness of the body in movement, which is often emphasized on IM retreats along with encouragement to slow down.¹¹ The interpretation of this instruction in the form of noting every physical gesture and sense experience while moving slowly through the retreat day comes from the modern Burmese *vipassanā* style popularized by Mahasi Sayadaw, and now bearing his name. This system was one of the root lineages of IM, but has declined in popularity in recent decades. As the Mahasi style, which also valorized physical pain as a concentration and energy-cultivating experience, waned in centrality within IM, an emphasis

¹⁰ David Loy, *Nonduality: A Study in Comparative Philosophy* (Amherst: Humanities Press, 1997).

¹¹ (MN 10) Bhikkhu Bodhi and Bhikkhu Ñānamoli, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom, 1995), 145.

on comfort and ease in sitting became more common in IM instructions. As comfort and ease grew as ideals in the body of IM teachings, partly through a reevaluation of the usefulness, for most practitioners, of sitting through intense pain, yoga *āsana* and *qi gong* became common offerings on silent retreats. If comfort and ease are skillful preconditions for deepening in meditation, physical movement is clearly one of the most supportive practices to integrate into Insight Meditation practice.

Among the many kinds of movement practice that can be helpful for contemporary practitioners, modern yoga *āsana* is among the most easily integrated into the Insight Meditation framework. It can be taught as a very gentle movement practice, accessible to most bodies, and can be substantially modified without losing its essential contours. It blends well with silence, focused attention, mindfulness, heart practice, and the cultivation of ease and energy in the body. When undertaken as a support for the physical aspect of sitting, yoga's stretches, gentle repetitive movement patterns, and strengthening of the structural musculature around the spine all contribute to reduced pain and greater comfort in meditation postures. When undertaken with the aim to cultivate and channel subtle energy, which appears historically to have been its most prominent purpose, it can mobilize channels of vitality in the body that meditating in stillness does not as easily access. Both *vipassanā* and yoga *āsana* practice are supported by the inner skills of focused attention and stabilization of the mind/heart: the core meditative concentration known as *samādhi* that was the heart of both early Buddhist and proto-Hindu Yogas.

In addition to its physical and energetic benefits, yoga *āsana* can play a valuable role in the meditative process for practitioners working with trauma. Trauma, or ongoing nervous system dysregulation connected with past wounding, is one of the most impactful conditions that shapes the experience of meditators, and can make the otherwise wholesome conditions of retreat or silent practice profoundly triggering or even psychologically dangerous. Awareness of trauma has grown in IM culture in recent decades, leading to the current recommendation that all IM teachers have some training in working with it. As a nervous system condition, trauma is essentially physiological rather than psychological, and its symptoms can be framed around the inability of the body to release the activation associated with the fight, flight, and freeze self-protective and survival reflexes. The process of inviting the body to deactivate and return to a restful equilibrium requires the initial conditions of physical and social safety, connection with the external world through the senses, and sustained contact with pleasurable experience. Yoga can provide easeful access to all of these, where sitting meditation can sometimes deny them through the standard instructions that emphasize solitude, stillness, and inwardness.

Gentle movement with eyes open connects awareness to the body inhabiting space, including the integrative social interaction of joining other bodies in movement, but not speech. Steady, slow movement or moving

through briefly held postures helps to unbind the freeze response from the musculature, suggesting to the animal body that it is awake, alive, capable, and strong enough to fight or flee from threat. And yoga *āsana* often simply feels good! It can offer reliable contact with safe, embodied pleasure that is not dependent on substances, sexuality, or complex social interactions. IM practitioners who find sitting meditation emotionally intense or triggering of childhood attachment wounding can sometimes find an ease of heart and steadiness of mind in yoga practice that grows into the ability to tolerate the greater intensity of sitting meditation.

Conclusion

As one of the most prominent and progressive lineages of Western convert Buddhism, Insight Meditation is uniquely poised to develop a truly integrated path of contemplative practice that holds meditation and yoga as harmoniously interwoven tools for modern seekers. Our Western identity allows us to forge a path that respects our Asian source lineages without being limited by belonging to a single one, and can make alliances between ancient systems where there have in the past been disagreements, or simple unawareness of each other's existence. The path we walk in reinventing Asian practices is complex, haunted by the ghosts of the very successes that led to our privileged global position: colonialism, genocide, resource extraction, cultural appropriation, racism/xenophobia, militarized neoliberal capitalism, patriarchy. It is our task to be humble, and to preserve the purity of ancient systems just as much as it is our nature to remix them in the service of the unique conditions we find ourselves in.

The contemporary remix of integrating yoga *āsana* and when appropriate, breathwork (*prānāyāma*), with Insight Meditation can support practitioners to go deeper more easefully, not just those with trauma or pain in sitting, but anyone who finds the basic mindfulness and concentration instructions challenging or meditative skill slow to develop. As we grow the next generation of Buddhist- and Hindu-lineage yoga and meditation teachers, we have the opportunity to integrate these ancient paths in ways that have not happened for 500 years. It is our responsibility to undertake this integration carefully and respectfully, guided by deep study in each lineage we work from, sincerity and dedication to our own practice, and compassion for modern people with our very modern suffering. May our practice and creativity be of benefit to beings of all kinds.

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