



Patrick McCartney

@yogascapesinjapan

Feb 7, 2018

Decolonizing Yoga? Is it going deep enough?



Source: [Decolonizing Yoga](#)

By Patrick McCartney, Phd

The decolonization of yoga is an important project. It has produced a variety of conversations amongst scholars and the average consumer of yoga alike. This is based mostly around the idea of cultural appropriation. As a scholar-practitioner, one thing I am trying to understand is when agitators for decolonizing yoga appear to not really know what they are talking about, which seems to have the potential to derail the project. I say this, because it seems that, instead of decolonizing, in many instances, what happens is more likely a type of enabling. I'll explain what I mean by this below.

I've been thinking about this issue for some time. However, the other day I watched a clip on Youtube about decolonizing yoga, which featured Nisha Ahuja, who seems to know a bit about yoga, and is a self-appointed decolonizer of yoga, as is explained in this interview. However, I take umbrage at some of the assertions that she, like many others make, in their attempts to decolonize

<https://medium.com/@psdmccartney/decolonizing-yoga-is-it-going-deep-enough-51a84560cab9>

yoga. Below, I focus on one statement that she offers early in the interview as a platform to a wider discussion.

To say that, “Yoga is a 5000 year old medicine/spiritual tradition,” leaves little doubt in my mind that there are some huge gaps in Ahuja’s understanding of the historicity of yoga. This might not be apparent to others, who see her clearly earnest attempt to help as something to aspire towards. The problem, at least how I perceive it, is this:

How much decolonizing of yoga can occur if the self-appointed decolonizers have a shaky understanding of the historicity of yoga, and rely upon a shallow, essentialist, static and monolithic understanding of the colonial history and pre-modern history of yoga and South Asia?

This is further complicated by the decolonizing discourse appropriating similar hegemonic narratives that were constructed during the colonial era, if not before. Asserting such an antiquity as 5000 years is quite problematic, mostly because it is relying on the same essentialist narratives that Hindu supremacists, the Indian State and other misinformed consumers of global yoga rely on to present an idea that yoga, and India, are “timeless”, “ancient” and “spiritual”. Does Nisha Ahuja take this date to be factual? If so, where is the evidence beyond an appeal to emotion and authority? Or, is it simply an assertion based on emotion, and deference to something just being really old? I am quite earnest in asking: How does this rhetoric aid the stated aims of decolonizing yoga?

Either way, this is an important point that decolonizers need to make explicit, and come to terms with. Because, really, to stand up and say, “I’m decolonising yoga.” But, to also say, “Yoga is 5000 old,” is simply insufficient.

This is just one example of how the decolonizers of yoga need to improve their game. As, relying on the romantic narratives that are also offered by the Indian state as the legitimate version is another huge issue for decolonizing yoga. [Here is one example](#). The image below is an official advertisement for the Indian government’s tourism ministry and their *Incredible India* tourism campaign.



It is probably not obvious to many people, but this is a disingenuous and false advertisement. It is so, because there is no evidence to support that assertion that these particular postures (*āsana*-s) have a deep antiquity of 5000 years.

It is well known amongst historians, indologists and philologists, whose work focuses on the historical development of yoga, that these postures did not come into being until about the 15–16th centuries of the current era. A good overview is [this chapter](#), by David White. However, the idea that *haṭha yoga* (precursor to modern postural yoga) was systematised over 5000 years ago, is ubiquitous. Like [this website](#), which says:

Hatha yoga is one of the most widely practiced styles of yoga in the United States, according to [livestrong.com](#). It emphasises uniting the body, breath and mind into one entity. The practice originated in Northern India more than 5,000 years ago. At

<https://medium.com/@psdmccartney/decolonizing-yoga-is-it-going-deep-enough-51a84560cab9>

the time, the Brahmins and mystic seers of the civilization taught yoga as an exercise for the mind, rather than the body.

But, then you also find ever grander assertions, like this one, on Yogapedia, which says:

Hatha yoga has been around for thousands and thousands of years. Some people believe the tradition to be 5,000 years old while others think it dates back as many as 10,000 years ago. This great disparity in time is due to the fact that when yoga was first being practiced, there was no written word, no paper, no way of transmission other than the spoken word.

Still, Sadhguru's claim of 15,000 years is difficult to beat, or prove, for that matter.

Another problematic relates to the spiritualised narrative found within the rhetoric of the marketing strategies of the yoga industry and the Indian government's Ministry of Tourism. Take this advertisement as a representative example.

The featured 'yoginī' is Shiva Rea, who, for many years, has been a popular and controversial yoga teacher. In this advertisement, we see quite clearly how the essentialised, romantic, colonial-era, orientalist narratives about yoga and India are reconstituted into a 21st-century context. Which, is manufactured by both the Indian state and the yoga industrial complex, which choose to focus on promoting this sense that India is a land of "magic" that enables the individual to "be transformed".

It is my assumption that many people would view this advertisement and consider that this is a legitimate attempt at a decolonized expression of 'true' and 'authentic' yoga. The question worth asking is: How can we work honestly towards decolonizing yoga, when the current post-colonial and corporate handlers of yoga persist with the same colonial rhetoric, that is serving the same purpose of those 'in the West' who seek to also profit from the commodification of yoga into discrete tourism packages that are consumed by a mix of secular and spiritual tourists?

The point is, decolonizing yoga does not mean the way forward is to blindly accept the post-colonial, insider narrative. Particularly one that is, as the eminent historian, Romila Thapar, explains, supporters and promoters of a Hindu supremacist revision of history, which many

non-Hindu, self-appointed, decolonizers of yoga seem to support, is actually more ‘colonial’ than other options.

Consequently, the creation of a Hindu state is projected as a legitimate objective. The unbroken descent of Hindu ancestry and religion from earliest times, according to this school of thought, legitimises the primacy of Hindus in the present, and takes up from Max Mueller’s construction of a superior Aryan culture and the Aryan foundations of Indian (read Hindu) civilisation. Interestingly, it was the Theosophists, and in particular Colonel Olcott, who first propagated this theory in the late nineteenth century. Olcott argued that the Aryans were indigenous to India and took civilisation from India to the West. This theory is now being promoted by Hindutva, but with no reference to the colonial view where the origins lie.

To further explain this point, another problematic claim is the Indian government’s Ministry of External Affairs’s assertion on the history and development of yoga, which also propagates an ahistorical narrative.

Ministry of External Affairs
Government of India


Home About Us Visits Media Center Overseas Indian Affairs Public Diplomacy E-Citizen/Tende

A Brief History and Development of Yoga:

The practice of Yoga is believed to have started with the very dawn of civilization. The science of yoga has its origin thousands of years ago, long before the first religions or belief systems were born. In the yogic lore, Shiva is seen as the first yogi or Adiyogi, and the first Guru or Adi Guru.

Several Thousand years ago, on the banks of the lake Kantisarovar in the Himalayas, Adiyogi poured his profound knowledge into the legendary Saptarishis or "seven sages". The sages carried this powerful yogic science to different parts of the world, including Asia, the Middle East, Northern Africa and South America. Interestingly, modern scholars have noted and marvelled at the close parallels found between ancient cultures across the globe. However, it was in India that the yogic system found its fullest expression. Agastya, the Saptarishi who travelled across the Indian subcontinent, crafted this culture around a core yogic way of life.

The Number of seals and fossil remains of Indus Saraswati valley civilization with Yogic motives and figures performing Yoga Sadhana suggest the presence of Yoga in ancient India. The phallic symbols, seals of idols of mother Goddess are suggestive of Tantra Yoga. Presence of Yoga is available in folk traditions, Indus valley civilization, Vedic and Upanishadic heritage, Buddhist and Jain traditions, Darshanas, epics of Mahabharat and Ramayana, theistic traditions of Shalvas, Vaishnavas, and Tantric traditions. In addition, there was a primordial or pure Yoga which has been manifested in mystical traditions of South Asia. This was the time when Yoga was being practised under the direct guidance of Guru and its spiritual value was given special importance. It was a part of Upasana and yoga sadhana was inbuilt in their rituals. Sun was given highest importance during the vedic period. The practice of 'Surya namaskara' may have been invented later due to this influence. Pranayama was a part of daily ritual and to offer the oblation. Though Yoga was being practiced in the pre-Vedic period, the great Sage Maharshi Patanjali systematized and codified the then existing practices of Yoga, its meaning and its related knowledge through his Yoga Sutras. After Patanjali, many Sages and Yoga Masters contributed greatly for the preservation and development of the field through their well documented practices and literature.



A number of seals and fossil remains of Indus Saraswati valley civilization with Yogic motives and figures performing yoga indicate the presence of Yoga in India.

There is too much to say about this last article in the short space I have allocated myself. Let me just focus on the image in the picture above, which is the Pashupatinath Seal from the Indus Valley Culture (IVC), which predates the arrival of the Vedic-speaking Aryans into South Asia by several centuries. In a classic, and hypocritical, case of cultural appropriation, this article suggests that because there is an image on this seal of a person sitting cross-legged, that this is evidence of deep antiquity to yoga. This is a colonial narrative, which is propagated *ad nauseum*, by the Indian state and countless yoga schools around the world.

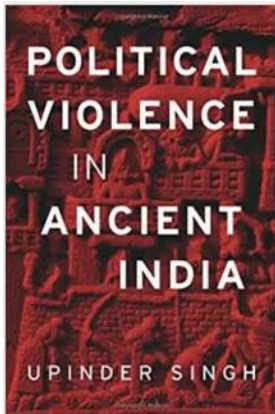
However, just because there is an image on this seal of a person sitting cross-legged does not mean that people were doing *yoga* in the IVC. In logic, this is known as a *Dicto Simpliciter*, or making a hasty generalisation. The point I am trying to make is this. There needs to be more discernment and a deeper enquiry into the historicity of yoga. For instance, there is a common assertion that the Vedic society was all about ‘peace’ and ‘love,’ which is supposedly proven through, more or less, cherry picking particular verses as representative of that entire culture, like: *Lokah samastah sukhino bhavantu*.



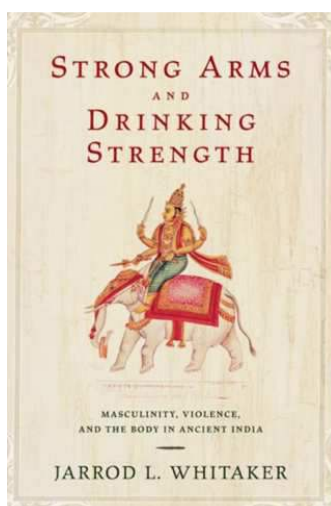
A brochure from Tamisa Yoga, Kyoto, Japan that uses *Lokah samastah sukhino bhavantu*.

<https://medium.com/@psdmccartney/decolonizing-yoga-is-it-going-deep-enough-51a84560cab9>

This statement only gives a very small glimpse into a dynamic and diverse culture. Especially when there is incontrovertible linguistic, textual and archaeological evidence to demonstrate how martially-focused, power hungry, violent and patriarchal the Vedic society also was. In her latest book, which Upinder Singh discusses in [this interview](#), we learn about *Political Violence in Ancient India*, and how religions sanctioned war and aggression.



As a Vedic scholar, [Jarrod Whittaker's work](#) on this topic is worth reading to understand more of the rich complexities of the deeper strata of Indian history. So too, is Kumari Jayawardena and Malathi de Alwis's work on [embodied violence](#), and how women's sexuality is communalised in South Asia.



One thing that is not discussed in this decolonizing discourse is how the Brahmins culturally appropriated aspects of proto-yoga from the groups who started developing these philosophies and

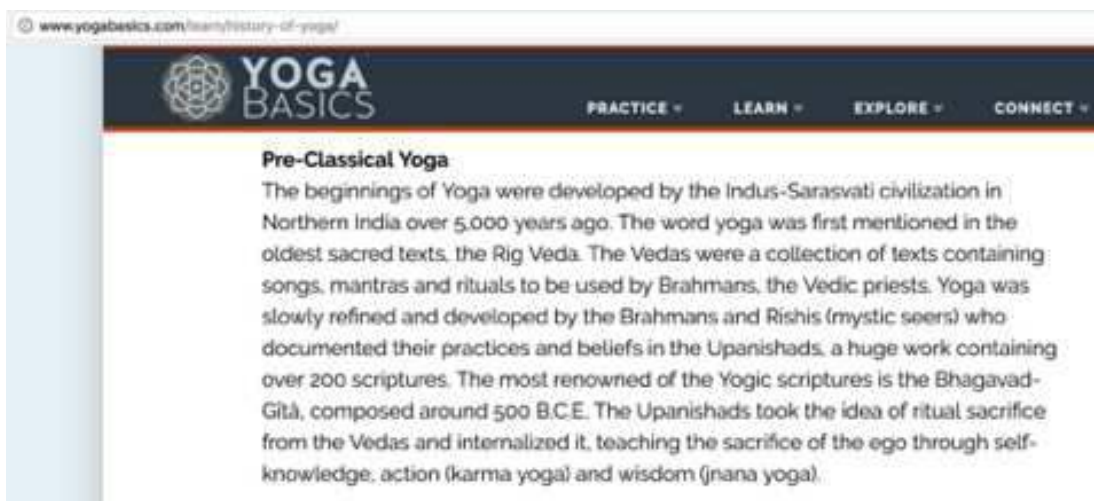
<https://medium.com/@psdmccartney/decolonizing-yoga-is-it-going-deep-enough-51a84560cab9>

practices, like the Ajivikas, Buddhists, and other schools, and incorporated it into their own political theology to create a one-stop-shop yoga treatise, i.e. the Bhagavad Gita. This article by Wendy Doniger about war and peace in the Bhagavad Gita gives a good context to the life of this text. So too, this article by Meera Nanda provides even more context to the history and contemporary politics of the text.

It is worth keeping in mind that this helped create a narrative that the narrow, essentialist, monolithic, Brahminical version of yoga is more legitimate. It completely overrides the historicity of yoga, which is rich and diverse. It is not enough to simply say that this was all part of the zeitgeist of the time, and that many different groups were thinking along similar lines. The Gita was, as it remains to be, part of a culture war and counter-revolution that is justified by philosophical language and poetic metre, which obfuscates the political intentions behind the text. We can see how this operation continues today through the political rhetoric of the Indian state to deny the complicated history of South Asia in preference for simplified narrative that posits a Brahminical origin for yoga.

This is seen, quite clearly, in this reconstitution of the essentialist narrative, in the image below. Yoga Basics creates a flat, static and ultimately ahistorical link between the Indus-Sarasvati civilization (another term for the IVC) and the ‘Rig Veda’. This website suggests that the IVC and the Vedic culture are one and the same. This is not correct.

This is a globalized derivative of a post-colonial narrative favoured by the Indian state that originated in the imagination of the colonial masters. This is one example of what Romila Thapar discusses in relation to the Hindu nationalists being more ‘colonial’ than their antagonists.



The Buddhist scholar, Geoffrey Samuel, explains how, even though there was an underlying cultural field, the Vedic religion developed in parallel to the development of the heretical *sramana* traditions of the Buddhists, Jainas and Ajivikas, which we can understand as the proto-yogins, who favoured a meditation, ascetic lifestyles and technologies aiming for liberation. As Andrea Jain qualifies in her book, *Selling Yoga*:

In the sense of a systematic set of techniques, Samuel and Johannes Bronkhorst both suggest that yoga developed in the context of a non-Vedic religious culture, the *śramana* culture of "Greater Magadha" (Bronkhorst 2007: 1–9), also known as the "Central Gangetic region" (Samuel 2008: 8). The *śramana* culture was primarily composed of Buddhist, Jain, and Ajivika renouncers (circa the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E.), those who rejected Brahmanical orthodoxy and whose axiological focus was salvation from the conventional and ordinary world, a goal that required ascetic practices.

Jain (2015, p. 6)

The Vedic religion was considered the orthodox religion, which focused on an external fire ritual and the paying off of ancestral debt. It was not ascetic. However, there is a certain type of deep historical cultural appropriation, which continues today, that posits that the methods and ideas of the aforementioned groups is also 'Vedic'. This rhetorical obfuscation blurs the history and reinforces a colonial-inspired narrative. As, even though the Brahmins might have been the first to use the term 'yoga', they took these underlying practices from the other groups.

As Giovanni Verardi explains, the history of South Asia is complex and dynamic. This is why it is important to not to fall for the seductive, and easier path of, simplification. We need to explore all the nooks and crannies and not rely on some centralised, grand, civilisational narrative. Not least one that is soaked in right-wing ideology. There are reasons the Buddhists left South Asia. While it might be more comfortable to suggest that ancient South Asia was a land of religious tolerance, the Brahmanical sources themselves, combined with the archaeological record, testify to the destruction

<https://medium.com/@psdmccartney/decolonizing-yoga-is-it-going-deep-enough-51a84560cab9>
of monasteries and the creation of special militias, which were created to intimidate and murder Buddhists. This later led to Buddhists being killed, exiled, or obliged to convert.

This counter-reformational project was the will of nascent Brahmins, who were, after centuries of disenfranchisement, reclaiming their previous position as the symbolic elite. There is an often unspoken bloody history of religious violence in ancient India, which many people, from the upper echelons of the Indian state, its tourism board, and apparent decolonizers of yoga, either choose to ignore, explain away, obfuscate, or don't actually know too much, if anything, about. Here is a short reading list, if the reader feels inclined to maybe burst that bubble a bit more, and actually move beyond shallow attempts at decolonizing yoga.

Finally, I ask, with deep sincerity, how far back do we have to go to actually get to 'true yoga' (assuming such a thing really exists) in order to really decolonize it? As, I do not think that staying in the shallow pond of the past 2–3 centuries is really enough. Without a much deeper, and fuller, account of the intersecting histories, our analysis will remain opaque, our aims to decolonize limited, and our enabling of colonialism will continue.



Patrick McCartney, PhD is a JSPS Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Graduate School of Global Environmental Studies, Kyoto University, Japan; a Research Associate at Nanzan Anthropological Institute, Nanzan University, Japan; and a Visiting Fellow at the South and South-East Asian Studies Department, Australian National University, Australia.

<https://medium.com/@psdmccartney/decolonizing-yoga-is-it-going-deep-enough-51a84560cab9>

Building upon an anthropological premise, Patrick's work intersects the commodification of desire and consumption of yoga-inflected lifestyles. It explores the consumption of global yoga through the politics of imagination and the sociology of spirituality. Patrick's current project focuses specifically on the Japanese yoga industry, which includes understanding the aspirations of Japanese yoga consumers and how modern yoga is reconstituted in unique ways into Japanese culture. You can follow this project at [Yogascapes in Japan](#), and also find his articles and films there too.



Patrick McCartney

Medium member since Feb
2018

[@yogascapesinjapan](#)