

in some countries (such as Mexico) there are also Casa de Estudios ('Study Residence', also known as Home Study), with a view to reinforcing the practice of *sādhana*, partly through the propagation of interest and study in the Sanskrit language and the Trika philosophy associated to Kashmirian philosopher Abhinavagupta (tenth to eleventh century).

Buddhism has played an important role in spreading meditation. It has also been an appealing item for both sympathisers and academia (albeit in smaller numbers). The presence of Zen and Vipassana groups is notable. Especially significant is the presence of insight and mindfulness meditation, which may very well exemplify general understandings of meditation, Buddhism, Hinduism and yoga. In Latin America, both academic and practical Buddhism is a transplant of North American Buddhism, but it is also received through the filter of exoticist expectations (Gómez Rodríguez 2019: 17). This not only implies Latin American imaginings of 'ancient', 'mysterious' Asia, but also the notion that meditation is *the* key element in all Buddhist schools, something that cannot be proved by factual and textual evidence in Asia throughout history (Gómez Rodríguez 2019: 21–22). Mindfulness in North America bloomed in particular between the 1960s and the 1990s, after a long and interesting history of development, translation and adaptation, until it also became a favourite topic in psychotherapy. This accounts for the pervasive influence of what we may well call 'Anglophone Buddhism'.

Despite this huge influence, there are some Zen/Chan groups in Latin America which aspire to have connections with and transmission from Asian teachers (usually, but not exclusively, Japanese). In the particular case of Mexico, Ezer May May has identified two conjunctions that mark the trajectory of Buddhism: namely, international policies from the nineteenth century, and ecumenical policies from the twentieth (May May 2015). The first is reflected in migrations from China and Japan in 1875 and 1897, respectively, especially in Northern Mexico. Nevertheless, the immigrant impact of Buddhism in Mexico – as in Argentina, and probably in most countries in the region – was rather weak, an issue that lies beyond the scope of this article. The second 'conjunction' depended on a comparative and pragmatist approach. It was partly fuelled (at least in Mexico and Central America) by rationalism, Theosophy, universalism and a dialogical relationship between Buddhism and Christianity. In recent decades, Buddhism has been further popularised by Tibetan Buddhism. The 14th Dalai Lama has paid visits to Mexico, where the Casa Tibet has been operating relentlessly since 1989, more or less. It has become a renowned place for meditation and prayer, and is probably more visible in the media than other Buddhist centres or groups.

Meditation in the region was also boosted by the Transcendental meditation movement founded by Mahesh Prasad Varma, aka Maharishi, in 1955 in Madras. Twenty years later after its foundation, the Maharishi foundation established centres in different locations in Argentina, Brazil, Peru, Mexico and Uruguay (De Oliveira 2015: 1–2), but also paid regular visits to Cuba. Personal development is underpinned through breath control, which is expected to activate inner energies.

Even though some forms of devotional and meditational yoga can be found all over the region, without a doubt it is the more physical forms that prove to be all-pervading nowadays. They have become more popular and are fast growing. The most conventional schools of postural yoga are well established in most Latin American places, as well as some of the newer forms. From a cursory view, it becomes clear that the most popular forms of yoga are hatha yoga, Vinyasa, Iyengar, Ashtanga, Kundalini and Bikram. There are other forms that have gained popularity more recently, namely Anusara, Aeroyoga and Naamyoga, all of which have been non-Indian developments and which often involve Kabbalistic symbolism or terminology, as is the specific case of Naamyoga. These are recognisable asana-based manifestations of yoga.

A common phenomenon is the opening of yoga studios bearing the word 'yoga' in their name (X yoga, N yoga ...). Quite often there is an overlapping of the name with a yoga style,

and the name of the head of said studio. Without a doubt, yoga has become a brand-enhancing label; it definitely helps to boost the impact of a given style or studio. Even when a person has developed a completely different methodology that bears little connection with recognisable forms of yoga (however difficult and disputable this can be), using the label 'yoga' makes the set of techniques derive both epistemological and commercial benefit ('Laughter' or 'Beer yoga', for example). By calling it 'yoga', it is set apart from other practices that are more clearly and undeniably circumscribed in the field of sports, fitness and athletics, including trending ones such as pilates or zumba.

Typologies 2: Latin American yoga

It is no surprise that many yoga trends in Latin America largely continue North American and British schools, or 'Anglophone yoga', a phenomenon labelled in such fashion by some specialists (e.g. Singleton 2010: 9–10; Beatrix Hauser 2013; see also Newcombe and Deslippe, Chapter 24 in this volume). At the same time, apart from regional divergences, there are some more or less detectable traits in Spanish-speaking countries and Brazil, a Portuguese-speaking country. This means that some important actors were influential on either side of the linguistic divide, but usually not simultaneously in both until more recently. Simões (2015) formulates a five-phase scheme to account for the implantation of yoga in Latin America, partly inspired by De Michelis's typologies expounded in her seminal work (2005). According to Simões, the phases are: (1) Mystic-esoteric yoga; (2) Latin American journey to India; (3) Indian yoga settlements in Latin America; (4) Seeking of identity and singularity in Latin American countries; and (5) Strain between 'traditional' and 'hybrid' yoga. Although the scheme is helpful, I am not sure it can provide us with precise insight into the developments and intricacies of the history of Latin American yoga, partly because it presupposes a chronological development, as though in the first phases there was a single understanding of yoga. I do not think that is the case, as is hinted in the earlier section on 'Forerunners and diffusors'. Nonetheless, the scheme may well be used as a reference point for further research.

As elsewhere, most yoga trends in Latin America are not directly linked to traditional yogas in South Asia, but are more or less dependent on North American or European developments. The most obvious exceptions are the Iyengar Yoga and Jois's Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga lineages, which systematically receive visitors with a view to extend formative processes and issue official certifications for the practice and instruction of these yogas. One possible phenomenon, still to be further examined, is the alleged fact that Latin American yoga was somewhat isolated for about eighty years (c. 1900–1980) and remained a spirituality without any legitimation from an Indian figure or group (Simões 2018). In countries such as Argentina, the inception and acceptance of yoga and meditation has had to negotiate with more established religions, notably Christianity. Yoga and meditation also benefited from New Age discourse:

The different price options and ways of practicing it, the appropriation and acceptance among Catholics and physicians, the idea of exercising the body in a delicate way, and the possibility of enjoying its benefits not having to adopt a new lifestyle mark it as a preferential option.

(Saizar 2015: 1)

Roberto Simões speculates that the lack of continuity and homogeneity may have been a result of a linguistic barrier, with the Spanish and Portuguese languages preventing Indian gurus (usually more at ease with English) from possible and frequent visits to the Latin American

continent (Simões 2015: 3) Therefore, the introduction of yoga was undertaken by non-Asians first: people who could handle the two main languages in the region. Understandably, there were some people in Spain and France that could do so (and, to a lesser degree, but due to political and economic interests, in the United States as well). However, it is worth remembering that Paramahansa Yogananda visited Mexico at a rather early stage. This and other visits suggest that some countries in Latin America were seen as promising and potential places to ‘spread the word of yoga’, as it were.

The introduction of physical yoga in the region owes a great deal to the notorious Serge Raynaud de la Ferrière, a French self-styled spiritual leader and philosopher. He claimed to have encountered a Dalai Lama who appointed him as a *bodhisattva* and entrusted him with the mission of becoming a ‘messiah’ of the New Age not in the Old World, but in the New one, specifically the Americas (Gutiérrez Zúñiga 2015: 2). This new era, the Age of Aquarius, allegedly began on 21 March 1948, when he was already in Latin America. De la Ferrière had various interests, among them parapsychology, metaphysics, theology and esotericism. He emphatically promoted vegetarianism, peace-preaching, psycho-physical gymnastics and abstinence from alcohol, tobacco and drugs (Siegel 2014: 344). He planned to found a great non-sectarian congregation, for which purpose he went first to the United States in 1947. However, he soon left for Guatemala and then arrived in Venezuela a year later to found the Gran Fraternidad Universal, or GFU (Great Universal Brotherhood). To this end, the GFU established ashrams so as to encourage both ‘exoteric movement’ and ‘esoteric elevation’ (Gutiérrez Zúñiga 2015: 2). The success of the GFU has been explained as the result of its presence in cultural events and not just within the inner precincts of the group, thus strengthening a strong process of synthesis and fostering a growing interest in the ideas and practices promoted by the GFU (Gutiérrez Zúñiga 2015: 2–3).

A prolific writer, De la Ferrière authored many books on religion and his own views on Freemasonry, Buddhism and other traditions. He was especially famous for his *Yug, yoga, yoghismo* (1969), his personal take on the yoga path and psychology. In fact, he called himself ‘Mahatma Chandra Bala’, the pen-name he used to author this volume. Like De la Ferrière himself, most elders in GFU are known as *maestres* (masters) and dress all in white. Critical and reliable information about De la Ferrière’s study of yoga, Indian philosophy and other fields is rather scanty; even De la Ferrière’s wife did not seem to have any recollection of her husband’s alleged intense study of Indian traditions (Siegel 2014: 39, 280, 287). This did not prevent him from becoming a successful forerunner in Latin America. As with Tingley, Costet de Mascheville and Della Rosa, De la Ferrière’s yoga was of an esoteric type, yet in most GFU branches there has been a constant and increasing offer of other forms of yoga, such as hatha or prenatal yoga.

The GFU was very successful and soon established roots in other countries, significantly Mexico and Costa Rica, where Nicaraguan Adaluz de Lake spread De la Ferrière’s ideas as well as yoga practice. Many followers also authored sundry books, such as the Venezuelan José Rafael Estrada, who wrote *Enseñanzas de la Nueva Era (Teachings of the New Age)*, where he spoke on behalf of the fraternity among all Latin American peoples, itself the axis of the New Age of Aquarius. The book deals with yoga, meditation, kung-fu, breath control, gymnastics and nutrition (Siegel 2014: 262). Another publication, by Antonio Renato Henriques, explains some key concepts from Vedic cosmology, the caste system and classical Indian philosophy, as well as yoga and psychoanalysis. It also provides some information on Brazilian yoga schools (Siegel 2014: 266). Despite the fact that the GFU has managed to thrive in the region, it has also experienced various schisms, mainly emanating from Mexico, Colombia and Venezuela (Siegel 2014; Gutiérrez Zúñiga 2015).

As in other regions of the globe, yoga is present in both independent and semi-corporate contexts. There are a vast number of instructors and practitioners not easy to include in a census.

There are also some organisations and/or associations that seek to represent and account for the diverse varieties of yoga within regional boundaries. Although there are representations of transnational corporations and/or branches (Iyengar Yoga, Yoga Alliance, Bikram Yoga, etc.) in most Latin American cities, there are also regional associations, such as the International Association of Yoga and Yoghism, the Mexican Federation of Yoga, the Mexican Institute of Yoga, the Argentinian Yoga Association, the Argentinian Federation of Yoga, the Latin American Union of Yoga, the Venezuelan Association of Yoga, AsoYoga–Costa Rican Association of Yoga Teachers and the Colombian Association of Yoga. As can be deduced from this list, there is at least one national yoga association for each country. Also, there is vast array of places that offer retreats for yoga training. Many of these places of retreat are located in touristic and idyllic scenarios, most notably on appealing beaches or in well-preserved forests.

In an ongoing survey, I collected some basic statistics worth mentioning. So far, sixty-nine people have responded to the survey: forty-seven females and twenty-seven males. Forty-three of the respondents are from Mexico; the remaining twenty-six are resident in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Nicaragua, Peru and Venezuela. The survey attempted to identify the most practised forms of yoga; respondents had to choose from twenty-one options, including an ‘Other’ option. Many respondents adhered to more than one form of yoga. According to the responses, the most practised varieties are: Hatha Yoga (62.3%), Vinyasa (39.1%), Iyengar (36.2%) and Ashtanga (34.7%). Power Yoga and Kundalini Yoga tied for fifth place (11.5%), well below the other four varieties. Acroyoga, Aeroyoga, Anusara, Bikram, ISKCON’s *bhaktiyoga*, Jivamukti, Kripalu, Shadow, Siddha Yoga and Yogananda’s Yogoda were each reflected in a very small number of adherents (7.2% or less). However, these figures may change as data is collected from a larger number of people. It will be helpful to mention some data in order to supplement my current statistics. According to Saizar (2015: 2), Hatha yoga is the most widespread form of yoga in Argentina, although it remains unclear whether she makes a distinction between Ashtanga, hatha and other postural modalities. May May states that the Buddhist population in Mexico is predominantly female and middle-class, presumably because the practice ‘enables them to modulate their economic life’ (2015: 1, 4).

Concluding remarks

When dealing with yoga and yoga-related systems in Latin America, it must be stressed that they reflect modern forms and transmissions. It is not possible to claim that they are continuous with or equal to the methods and soteriologies practised in South Asia 500 or 1,000 years ago (Muñoz 2018). In general, we can observe that modern yoga ‘seeks its legitimacy as spiritual path under the aegis of scientific rationality and new religious movements in the West’ (Simões 2015: 1). As in the rest of the world, yoga and meditation systems are modern expressions. All of them were developed or mediated by western agents, interested in Indian religions from around the mid-nineteenth century and mainly situated in urban contexts (De Michelis 2005: 2). If there is one successful globalised cultural item, it is indeed yoga. As Beatrix Hauser writes:

If one considers globalization in terms of cultural flows rather than economic markets, yoga provides rich source materials for understanding the process of knowledge transfer – preached, exported, translated, appropriated, touted, assimilated, and modified at various stages along its world-wide journey.

(Hauser 2013: 2)

The forms of yoga and meditation that we encounter in Latin America nowadays are the product of a rich combination of factors. It has been impossible to summarise them all in this text, but suffice it to say that this mixture involves a blend of aspirations, ideals, idealisations, projections, misrepresentations and adaptations. It is especially noteworthy that the Latin American expressions of yoga and meditation are largely, yet not exclusively, an inheritance of the developments in North America and Europe. As a result of this influence, many varieties of these systems greatly emphasise the refinement of bodily postures. Additionally, there are a great number of centres and styles that prescribe meditation and ethical behaviour above other aspects. Finally, there are some schools that foreground devotion; Patañjali is usually venerated and, in like manner, both classic and modern gurus are revered. Their role as guides in different yogic paths is understood as essential.

Nevertheless, the European and North American influence has not ruled out regional innovations, such as syncretic forms of yoga, meditation and pre-Hispanic purificatory rituals in places such as Mexico, Brazil or Peru. New Age thought has been an undeniable agent in spreading meditational and yogic ideas in the region. This has been far more than just an inheritance from the Anglophone world after the second half of the twentieth century. On the contrary, a great number of Theosophists, Freemasons, Rosicrucians, Spiritualists and the like have come to countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Cuba and Mexico since the nineteenth century with a view to implementing the realisation of a New Age promise for the betterment of the world in the New World; this was later reinforced by the counter-cultural movements in the 1960s and 1970s (Gutiérrez Zúñiga 2018: 425). The New Age sensibility has then allowed for a revaluation of indigenous practices. Popular traditions and Latin American ethnicities have become special hybrid entities for New Age movements, while at the same time offering a fresh, promising environment for a global spirituality (Gutiérrez Zúñiga 2018: 466). To aptly sketch this map of transcultural flow will require much archival research and field work. Yet, it is hoped that this critical overview has offered a compact prospect of the history and modern developments of yoga and meditation in the region. Indeed, there is a broad scope for future research and investigation into the Latin American avatars of yoga – do they reinforce, negate or complement other stories of yoga in the modern world?

Notes

- 1 In general, I use lower case for generic modes of yoga and uppercase for branded forms.
- 2 My translation. I am quoting from an Argentinian edition.
- 3 However, it is worth noting that the primarily meditation-focused tradition of Siddha Yoga is also visible in Mexico (although now clearly less popular than postural yoga). These practitioners also refer to themselves as 'yogis' after undertaking a formal initiation from an authorised guru of their tradition.
- 4 The Mexican revolution was a major armed struggle that spanned more than a decade (roughly, 1910–1920). It brought about significant changes in politics, culture, economy and education.

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