
The Spirit and Meaning of Globalized Yoga: a Case Study on the Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centres

Laurah Klepinger-Mathew



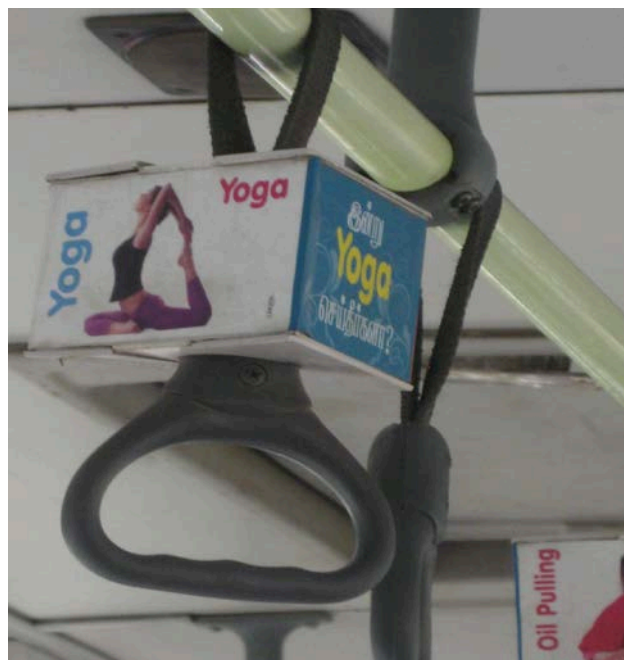
Photo of Laurah Klepinger-Mathew. Laurah is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Anthropology, Syracuse University. She is a certified yoga teacher, since 1997. *(Photo Credits: Author)*

Even if you have only a vague idea what yoga is, most readers will be acquainted with the word. You may have seen yoga classes listed among the program of activities at a local community or fitness center, heard debates in the news about the religious nature of a practice now offered in many schools, or imbibed vocabulary and concepts that stem from philosophical traditions associated with yoga. Have you said “that’s my new mantra,” when referring to a motto or phrase you had recently taken to heart? Have you heard that some new health or fitness celebrity was a guru, implying an esteemed teacher, of his or her trade? Or, have you described a string of bad luck as bad karma?

Even if you have used these phrases and have some idea of their connection to traditions and beliefs in India, the word yoga probably more immediately triggers thoughts of stretching or flexibility. For nearly a century, images of yoga in and outside of India

have evoked the bending and contorting postures called *asanas* that are thought to have psychological – even spiritual – benefits, in addition to their more obvious association with physical wellbeing and flexibility. Indeed, these physical postures, along with breathing exercises and accompanying practices of concentration, are essential to modern conceptions of yoga. But it was not always so.

Here, I describe the processes by which yoga, as such, has come to be recognized as a fully global commodity and the shifts it has undergone as this globalized yoga has been readopted in India. Today, yoga is something shared by a wide variety of participants of different national, class, gender, religious, and ethnic backgrounds. However, ethnographic evidence from my research in the international Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centres (SYVC) organization in India and recent controversies over yoga in schools in the United States both demonstrate that there is not always agreement about the meaning or significance of yoga. Is it religious or merely exercise? Is it an ancient philosophical system from South Asia or a product of transnational exchange between India and the West that heated up in the late nineteenth century? The tension between these two poles of interpretation can be observed in contemporary images of yoga, either those representing yoga teachers and institutions like the SYVC or more abstract products or concepts, such as in the image below, an advertisement for a brand name of sesame oil using yoga to represent a healthy lifestyle. These debates over yoga’s significance as well as disagreements over where and to whom yoga belongs illustrate a broader trend in globalization: globalized culture is neither equally shared, nor universally conceived. Through the story of one organization’s journey from India to North America and back again, this becomes clear. Before turning to this story, I outline the history of Modern Yoga in which this organization plays an important and illustrative role.



“Have you done yoga today?” asks this advertisement for Idhayam brand oil. The ad campaign, pictured here in the city of Madurai, Tamil Nadu in March 2011, presents several images of healthy activities, such as yoga, oil bath, and walking, on one side of a triangular shaped overhead handle on a public bus. On the second side, the question: “Have you done [X] today?” is printed in Tamil. The words yoga, walking, etc.,

which stand in for [X], are printed in English. The third side of the triangle shows the name of the product “Idhayam,” spelled out in English, with the English word “Wealth” printed below. Idhayam capitalizes on the contemporary appeal of traditional activities like yoga and oil bath to imply that its product is likewise healthy and traditional, and at the same time fits in to a cosmopolitan lifestyle. (*Photo Credits: Author*)

Introducing Modern Yoga

For scholars of religion and South Asia, yoga is a word with deep and wide-reaching roots. According to religious historian Mircea Eliade, writing in 1954, “yoga derives from the root yuj, to bind together, ‘hold fast,’ ‘yoke,’” (Eliade1990:4). As one contemporary scholar, Ian Whicher, has observed, yoga, in Eliade’s “broad and very general definition” is “the generic term for various paths of ‘unification,’ Hindu or otherwise...” (1998:6). As such, it can “designate any ascetic technique and any method of meditation” (Eliade 1990:4).

In its proper and philosophical context, however, Yoga refers to South Asian Indian paths of spiritual emancipation, or self-transcendence, that bring about a transmutation of consciousness culminating in liberation from the confines of egoic identity or worldly existence (Whicher 1998:6).

The word yoga has been used since the Vedas (Whicher 1998:7), the ancient hymns understood to constitute the foundational principles of Hinduism, and as such has a long and varied history of use. Yoga can also mean the *state* of “union” achieved through these “paths of ‘unification,’” referring to a union of the individual soul with the absolute (Whicher 1998:27). Today, in communities far from where it began, yoga often refers to a type of physical exercise aimed at reducing stress, improving flexibility, and increasing concentration.

The word Hinduism is a heading given to a broad array of religious and philosophical traditions originating in South Asia. The Vedas, four groups of orally transmitted texts, contain essential elements that are foundational to Hindu beliefs and customs, but there are several other important texts, including the Laws of Manu and two major epics, the Mahabharata and Ramayana, which many draw upon for their sense of religious history and for insights about proper conduct and morality. Practices, worship, and beliefs vary from state to state and region to region across India, a country with twenty-two government recognized languages and at least two-hundred thirty-four “identifiable mother tongues” (<http://www.censusindia.gov.in/>), and elsewhere throughout the region of South Asia. Yoga is one of the six major schools of Hindu philosophy, and in this context Yoga refers to the Raja Yoga of Patanjali, a scholar who lived between the second and third century of the contemporary era (Whicher 1998). But yoga is often used informally, as in Eliade’s definition, to refer to various practices relating to ascetic techniques, methods of meditation, and other paths for bringing the individual in touch with the Absolute.

As recently as the early twentieth century, spokespersons began to present yoga on the global stage, escalating the process of globalization around the dawn of what recent scholars have dubbed Modern Yoga. A useful starting place for considering the globalization of Modern Yoga is the Chicago meeting of the World Parliament of Religions in 1893, an interfaith meeting designed to showcase the world’s diverse religions. Swami Vivekananda, a Hindu monk from Calcutta, now in the Indian state of West Bengal, spoke to the Parliament on behalf of Hindu monasticism. In the process, he succeeded in one of the first endeavors of missionary Hinduism, exporting a necessarily limited vision of Hindu

religious traditions to the West. Among the swami's legacies was his distillation of some of the vast historical and philosophical roots of Hinduism into a four-fold system of methods he called yoga – practices intended to lead human beings to Self-Realization, an awareness or their unity with Brahman, the Absolute, or as often translated, God (De Michelis 2004). Swami Vivekananda, and after him another prominent Hindu missionary Paramahansa Yogananda, who founded the Self-Realization Fellowship in 1920, both referred to their teachings as yoga, but they made little to no reference to the physical practices that now form such a central part of yoga's global image, focusing instead on mind control, meditation, and philosophical introspection.

Both Vivekananda and Yogananda founded organizations that continue to thrive today. Vivekananda founded a mission in the name of his teacher, The Ramakrishna Mission: <http://www.belurmath.org/home.htm>. Yogananda's organization is called the Self-Realization Fellowship: http://www.yogananda-srf.org/About_Self-Realization_Fellowship.aspx#_Uf4svGQpZZ8

When Swami Vivekananda made his way from India to North America, yoga already had a place in the global popular imagination, mostly through the long colonial history in India that tended to regard Indian worship styles, beliefs, and associated individuals with suspicion as well as fascination. The *yogin* was one such figure of mysterious but dubious reputation (Singleton 2010:36). *Yogins* were Hindu ascetics who used sometimes extreme physical measures to go beyond the limitations of the human body and mind, contorting their bodies into awkward positions, for example keeping an arm held aloft for months at a time, allowing fingernails to grow into gnarled coils and muscles to atrophy. Foreigners regarded these activities with both fascination and distaste. Swami Vivekananda and other early missionaries who brought yoga to the West wanted to disassociate their interpretations of yoga from these popular images. As such, they tended to ignore the physical body altogether, except where it concerned the postures for sitting. They emphasized the philosophical and mental aspects of yoga and taught students how to meditate. But even though both men left legacies that continue to this day, their teachings are not what would come to mind for most people uninitiated into the subtleties of yoga. As exemplified in the case of yoga for fitness and stress-relief in American schools and in the athletic competitions organized by USA Yoga [link: <http://www.usayoga.org/>], yoga is often stripped of all religious meaning, a fact that separates today's yoga from both the yoga of Vivekananda and from earlier occult asceticism.

Popular images of yoga today can be traced to yet another historical trajectory that includes teachers like BKS Iyengar, Pattabhi Jois, and several disciples of Swami Sivananda, including Swami Vishnudevananda, founder of the Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centres organization, which I highlight in this case study [link <http://www.sivananda.org/>]. In his book, *Yoga Body*, religious scholar Mark Singleton has demonstrated the way that these and other schools of modern postural yoga were influenced by an international physical culture movement and are

the result of a dialogical exchange between para-religious, modern body culture techniques developed in the West and the various discourses of “modern” Hindu yoga that emerged from the time of Vivekananda onward (Singleton 2010:5).

While Iyengar, Jois and Sivananda all left legacies that continue to be associated with their names in international postural yoga today, countless others working in more limited

circles, but influenced by flows of ideas that were every bit as transnational, were a part of a move in India to systematize and to nationalize the physical practices now associated with yoga (Alter 2004). In the early twentieth century, several influential individuals, sometimes with the support of institutions bearing their names, systematized yoga as an Indian science of physical and mental culture. As documented by anthropologist Joseph Alter, this work drew on a wide array of knowledge streams, including Indian wrestling, Hindu philosophy, and the international physical culture movement and were often figured as reinforcing ideas of national health and in particular, masculinity. In India, variations on these forms of therapeutic yoga aimed at improving health and increasing vitality, both on an individual and national level, continue today. Elsewhere, the spiritual and historical connection with India is sometimes emphasized, but more often dropped, as we can observe in celebrity yoga-fitness videos (think Jane Fonda) and in the form-fitting yoga fashions that are now popular both in and outside of India. These new permutations and accoutrements of yoga are a formidable example of the way that globalizing forces can serve to create something entirely new and even eventually move it, almost unrecognizable, back to the place of its supposed origins. In what follows, I tell the story of one organization that underwent such a move but has maintained its relationship with spirituality and with Hinduism in particular, stressing its connection to traditions originating in India.

The SYVC's Global Journey: from India, to North America, and back

One of several yoga organizations that got its start in North America in the 1950s, the SYVC organization was founded in 1959 in Montreal. The SYVC opened its first branch in India in 1978 after expanding throughout North America and beyond. Today, the Indian branches of the SYVC serve as training institutions and retreat centers primarily for international travelers. Residents of India also participate in the SYVC's teachers training courses at the organization's rural Indian ashrams, attend classes at local urban yoga centers, and some join the staff, working under a mostly foreign leadership to teach the supposedly ancient Indian practices of yoga.

For all members of the institution, whether foreign or Indian, the organization's integral approach and connection to Indian philosophy and Hindu rituals are an important and distinguishing aspect of the SYVC in the context of the wider frame of globalized yoga. Yet, based on my ethnographic research in SYVC branches in South India, while foreigners often conceive of the SYVC as explicitly traditional and emphasize the ancient origins of the practices and principles of the organization, most Indian teachers speak of the organization as one with a distinctly Western orientation and feel. Indeed, since most senior teaching staff are non-Indian, even Indian teachers and experts derive their authority in part from training under foreign leadership, creating a complicated nexus of investments, allegiances, and conceptions among teachers and staff of SYVC yoga in India. In what follows I outline the SYVC's journey from India to North America and back.



The main altar at the urban SYVC center in Trivandrum, the capital of Kerala in South India, is shown here, decorated for the first anniversary celebration of the center's new building, on February 20th, 2010. The sculpture in the center embodies the dancing figure of the god Siva, known as Nataraj, and the large photographs on the left and right of the picture show the organization's gurus, Swami Sivananda and Swami Vishnudevananda. The flower offerings, lamps, and the images themselves all identify SYVC practice with Hindu Indian traditions. *(Photo Credits: Author)*

Humble Beginnings: 1947-1957

The visionary and instrument behind the SYVC was Swami Vishnudevanda, of Kerala, South India (Swami Vishnu for short). Swami Vishnu established the SYVC in the name of his guru, Swami Sivananda, and always acknowledged Sivananda as the source and inspiration of his teaching, so any history of the SYVC must begin with Sivananda himself. Born in 1887, in Tamil Nadu, Swami Sivananda was a well-known ascetic and part of the Neo-Vedanta movement in global Hinduism, originally framed by Swami Vivekananda (De Michelis 2005). After a brief career as a medical doctor in Malaysia, Sivananda returned to India to become a monk and later a recognized saint, based out of his Rishikesh ashram in the Himalayan foothills, under the rubric of his association, the Divine Life Society (DLS) [link: <http://www.dlshq.org/>]. Swami Sivananda taught a set of ideas he called "integral yoga" (drawn from Vivekananda's formulation around the turn of the 20th century), which is based on the integration of practices from each of four paths: Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Raja Yoga, and Jnana Yoga. These are, respectively: the path of work or action, the path of devotion, the path of discipline based on the eight-fold philosophical system attributed to Patanjali, and the path of knowledge or wisdom.

Drawn to his teacher because of his practical approach to spiritual life, Swami Vishnudevananda joined Sivananda's ashram just after leaving the Indian army in September of 1947. Swami Vishnu went on to become the first Professor of Hatha Yoga at the DLS ashram, claiming he obtained his bodily knowledge when his "Master touched [him] and opened [his] intuitive eye" (SYVC 1977:10). His experiences teaching to thousands of both Indian and foreign students at Sivananda's ashram over the course of the next ten years prepared him for his future work abroad. The contacts he established with

students from abroad also paved the way for his first trip to North America, which was sponsored by a Divine Life Society student from Montreal (SYVC 1977:24).

Growing Up in America: 1957-1977

Swami Vishnu left Rishikesh to establish Sivananda's teachings in the United States in 1957 (Krishna 1995:xvi) and was one of three disciples Sivananda sent to the West (Strauss 2002:235). As legend has it, Swamiji was sent by his teacher with the phrase "People are waiting" (SYVC 1977:23). It seems people were indeed ready for what he had to offer; Swami Vishnu found students wherever he went. After two years teaching in California and then New York, he founded the Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centres (SYVC) organization in 1959 in Montreal. Then, in 1963, realizing that student numbers in the Montreal center declined over the weekends when people wanted to escape the city, he established an *ashram* (retreat, literally monastery) about an hour away, in the Laurentian foothills of Val Morin, Quebec, where he designed a program he called a "Yoga Vacation."

The four paths of Sivananda's *integral yoga* – Jnana, Raja, Bhakti, and Karma Yoga – each have their place in the daily life of the organization to varying degrees. Jnana Yoga is incorporated through lectures on philosophy and through individual study. While *asana* (postures) and *pranayama* (breath control) are only two of the eight limbs of Raja Yoga, they make up an important part of the daily practice of yoga in the SYVC. The other limbs, particularly the ethical principles, are an important part of the organization's teachings and ideally the day-to-day governing of behavior, both by official rule and in personal practice. Bhakti Yoga is practiced through the daily recitation of *kirtan* (devotional chants), prayer, and other formal devotional practices. Karma Yoga, or the yoga of selfless service, arguably occupies the most important place of all four paths in the SYVC. The SYVC's rural ashrams and urban yoga centers throughout the world are run almost entirely through volunteer labor, as a matter of spiritual principle. Karma yogis serve the organization as part of the discipline of yoga, performing all duties, including teaching classes, cooking meals, cleaning and maintaining SYVC facilities, and administration. One important exception to this is the significant number of paid cooking and cleaning workers in the Indian branches of the SYVC, a population that was the focus of my dissertation research.

Overlaying the four paths of Sivananda's integral yoga, Swami Vishnudevananda created a 5-point system to simplify yoga for students in the West: 1). proper exercise, 2). proper breathing, 3). proper relaxation, 4). proper diet, and 5). positive thinking and meditation. He emphasized yoga's status as a set of practices that can be scientifically verified, setting up a formal research center at his first ashram in Val Morin, where meditators and other practitioners would be hooked up to monitoring machines, their heart rates measured and recorded to determine the effects of yoga on the body. At the same time, he promoted his teaching based on notions of tradition and adherence to an ancient *gurukula* system, a system wherein students live in the ashram or literally home (*kula*) of the teacher (*guru*) for the purposes of extended personal tutelage. Swamiji felt his adherence to tradition was an important part of what he had to offer, and he publicly argued with the teachings and practices of his contemporaries for what he felt were excesses of commodification, such as charging large sums money for mantra initiation. But as we shall

see, his own innovations both contributed and enlarged the field of transnational modern yoga.

In 1967, Swamiji established the second SYVC ashram on Paradise Island in the Bahamas. Two years later, in 1969, he founded the Teachers' Training Course (TTC) and the institution behind it, his True World Order (TWO). TWO "is aimed at promoting peace and understanding," (SYVC 1977:38). An "outgrowth of this," the TTC aims to train the future leaders and responsible citizens of the world in Yogic disciplines... [because] True Brotherhood and Peace can only exist where there are strong and self-controlled leaders to set an example for the masses... Not until men have inner peace can they hope to establish global peace (SYVC 1977:38)

With the TTC, Swamiji began what is today a multi-national program of training yoga teachers in a month-long intensive residential program and the heart of the organization's activities and income. While the TTC covers many aspects of yoga philosophy as expressed in the four paths and five points above, the principal focus is to give trainees practical skills to teach yoga *asana* (posture) and *pranayama* (breath control) classes, a fact which situates SYVC yoga squarely in the realm of globalized modern postural yoga, even as its integral focus reflects Vivekananda's legacy.



Certified SYVC yoga teachers may participate in the organization's *Sadhana Intensive* course, a two-week program emphasizing individual practice with restricted diet and daily periods of group study. In this photo, *Sadhana Intensive* participants at the Madurai ashram in January 2011 gather with their teacher on simple straw mats under the shade of a thatched roof. Though this group included students from throughout India and from several other countries, it was much smaller than the Teachers Training Courses, which tend to enroll as many as two hundred students, especially in the larger Kerala ashram. The teaching format in the small *Sadhana Intensive* course thus seems, and indeed intends, to more closely resemble images of a traditional gurukula system. (Photo Credits: Author)

When Swamiji began teaching the TTC regularly, he increased his following. The initiation of new teachers also allowed the SYVC organization to spread to new cities and countries. All international SYVC centers were closely overseen by Swamiji, who sent his senior disciples abroad just as he had been sent by his own teacher. Between 1969 and 1976, centers were opened throughout the United States and in London, Toronto, Vienna, New Zealand, Munich, Geneva, Madrid and Montevideo (Krishna 1995:xvi). Next, Swamiji opened the first ashram in India, outside the capital city of his home state of Kerala in the far south, bringing this globalized yoga institution, along with staff and eventually a continuous flow of students from outside of India, into a rural village that had no electricity or telephone service and certainly had never seen much international traffic (SYVC senior staff, personal communication, March 12, 2010).



Students and ashram guests in the audience for the inauguration of an international Teachers Training Course at the SYVC ashram in Neyyar Dam, Kerala, in November 2010. SYVC courses and programs typically present lectures and discourses from a stage at the front of a long hall, with student participants seated in rows on the floor below, as shown here. *(Photo Credits: Author)*



A staff member gives an afternoon lecture to ashram guests from the stage in the main hall at the SYVC ashram in Neyyar Dam, Kerala, March 2011. (Photo Credits: Author)

The Return to India and the Globalized Present: 1978-Today

The SYVC's return migration to India marked a new phase in a now thoroughly globalized life. Today, there are two additional ashrams in India. A small ashram located in Uttar Kashi in the Himalayan foothills was founded in 1991 and is open only part of the year. Another ashram opened in the South Indian city of Madurai, Tamil Nadu in 2005. In addition to these ashram-retreats, which are the sites for courses, workshops, and the SYVC's signature "Yoga Vacations," there are urban yoga centers in several major cities. The centers offer daily drop-in classes, courses, and worship services to local residents and thus have had a major part in introducing Indian people, especially English-speaking members of the middle class, to a new version of something they nonetheless strongly associate with their own religious traditions and cultural background. Adding to the complex global identity of SYVC yoga, today the international organization, including branches in India, operates primarily under the direction of non-Indian leadership.

Before he passed away in 1993, Swami Vishnudevananda left the organization in the care of seven of his close disciples, named as Executive Board Members (EBM), each heading up his or her own region of the organization's operations. Because Swami Vishnu spent most of his teaching years in North America, all of these board members are non-Indian, a fact which is probably incidental, since at the time of his passing, most of his senior disciples were North Americans or Europeans. Yet the foreign leadership of the SYVC is a fact that stands out to Indian members of the organization and also likely limits the organization's ability to reach the local population.

The organization's Indian branches, especially the oldest and most established ashram in Kerala run by an Italian man who has been at the ashram since 1979, consistently draw a large foreign enrollment. In part, this is due to the accessibility offered by a foreign

English-speaking staff, but it no doubt is also due to the lingering mystique of “spiritual India,” which draws people to experience yoga in what a recent promotional film put out by the SYVC ashram in Kerala calls “the land of its origin” (link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AJuipHyAUo0>). However, as scholarship on the modern history of yoga attests, the origin of today’s yoga is not so simple. Although the word yoga can be traced to ancient India, the contemporary globalized entity is not so easily placed. Both the postural influences of the international physical culture movement, including Western gymnastics and even early modern dance (Singleton 2010) and the experimental influence of globalized scientific discourse (Alter 2004) had some impact on the earliest developments of modern postural yoga. As Elizabeth De Michelis (2005) has argued, Western Theosophy also played a role in the framing of the philosophical traditions of Vivekananda and Yogananda. Even more, since both modern postural yoga and meditative yoga have been heavily propagated outside of India, many non-Indian heirs to these practices have become innovators in their own right, and have changed the course and character of globalized yoga, for better or worse. Thus while organizations like the SYVC harken back to ancient Indian origins in their self-promotion, the yoga to be found in SYVC ashrams and centers in India has an explicitly transnational history that has changed the course of its future and adapted it for easy translation to non-Indians, in the process making it foreign and thus inaccessible to many Indian people.



An initiation ceremony at the start of a Teachers Training Course at the SYVC’s Kerala ashram in November 2010 involved both Western and Indian teaching staff in the initiation of course participants. Staff applied consecrated powders to the foreheads of course initiates to sanctify their study and initiate them into the *gurukula* lineage under SYVC founder Swami Vishnudevananda, whose image hangs on the wall above. (Photo Credits: Author)

Indians in the SYVC find themselves in the strange position of knowing both more and less about this yoga than their counterparts from abroad. For example, the mantras chanted at the beginning and end of each class may be familiar but sung in a pronounced tune extracted some time back from the Indian melodic system. Indian people singing along in group chanting often sound out of tune to a Western ear, while Indians often contain their laughter when hearing foreigners mispronounce the names of deities, sometimes to hilarious effect. One long term staff told me that when he first heard foreigners chanting what was supposed to be reverence to the world teacher, or *jagad guru*, it sounded instead like they were saluting the jackfruit seed, pronounced “*chacka kuru*” in Malayalam, the language spoken in the location of the SYVC’s oldest ashram in Kerala.

There are other more subtle differences. While some elements of conduct in SYVC centers and ashrams both in India and abroad clearly owe to Hindu Indian influences, such as the lighting of lamps, the recitation of Sanskrit mantras, and the vegetarian diet, the structure of discourse often adheres more to Western expectations. For example, students are expected to boldly answer questions posed by the leader of a spiritual talk, and strongly articulate even contrary opinions for the benefit of all members of the listening audience. These kinds of structures often fail to make sense to Indian students, who have been socialized to regard teachers and spiritual leaders with deference and humility. These constructs can lead to further alienation, as only the few foreigners present or else those Indians most fluent in English and in Western teaching methods will feel comfortable answering. Often structures like these, inherent in globalized yoga, obstruct the very conversations that are necessary to mutual understanding. But the fact that such diverse participants are brought into conversation at all is an exciting outcome of yoga’s globalization, and Swami Vishnu himself would probably approve of the way his mission has played out.

Concluding Thoughts

If you had an idea of yoga earlier, hopefully it has been given some depth and dimension in the course of this reading. Or perhaps you are more confused than when you began. Just in case, let us return to two questions about yoga raised in the introduction: Is it religious or merely exercise? And is it an ancient philosophical system from South Asia or a product of transnational exchange between India and the West? As I hope the SYVC’s history makes clear, the answer to both of these questions is “yes, but...” Yoga is in some instances religious but in some instances exercise alone. Yoga does have roots in South Asia, but its recent history involves a long and extensive conversation between ideas and individuals from both India and abroad. This conversation has affected the practices of yoga exported to the West and those developed in modern India, as well as the more recent import of globalized forms like that taught in the SYVC back into India.

A recent legal case pertaining to yoga in San Diego, California testifies to the complicated and middling status of yoga in our time. The case put on trial the question of whether or not yoga is religious. Some parents of students enrolled in San Diego public schools were concerned that yoga’s presence as a component of physical education offerings compromises the separation of church and state. In a telling verdict, the court found both that yoga is and that it is not religious. “Yoga is a religious practice, but not the way that it is taught by the Encinitas Union School District at its nine campuses, San Diego

Superior Court Judge John S. Meyer said in Monday's ruling" (<http://losangeles.cbslocal.com/2013/07/01/judge-to-rule-on-whether-yoga-tied-to-religion/#.Uec2DPQiMWQ.facebook>). In the same article, school superintendent Timothy B. Baird reportedly told The Associated Press "We teach a very mainstream physical fitness program that happens to incorporate yoga into it."

While this verdict may be unsettling to the parents who oppose yoga's presence in public schools (indeed, it seems they plan to appeal), it successfully acknowledges the complex place of yoga in the American cultural milieu, where it has come to be just one among many means of attaining physical fitness. Some practitioners draw inspiration and meaning from the philosophical roots and meditative practices associated with yoga. Others, such as one yoga teacher also based in San Diego, California, whom I interviewed in 2008, say yoga is a practice that deepens the connection with their own non-Hindu religion. This teacher described herself as an evangelical Christian and told me about her experiences in an organization called Yahwe Yoga, whose website invites practitioners to "get centered with Christ." Yahwe Yoga's mission is in part to: "empower men and women to de-stress, to grow in their relationship with Jesus Christ and to improve their mind, body and spirit" (<http://yahweyoga.com/about/mission-vision/>). For Christians who embrace it, yoga need not be devoid of spiritual meaning. Instead, the focus of mind brought about through the practice of *asana* and *pranayama* is used to cultivate a devotional focus on Jesus. Yet for others raised in non-Hindu religious traditions or with no religion at all, learning yoga involves a change in understanding and belief about the cause and meaning of life, and an explicit shift to a Hindu-influenced faith.

Organizations like the SYVC, which teaches an integral yoga, embedding the physical exercises of yoga in a larger system including selfless service, devotional chanting, ritualized worship, meditation and philosophical study, offer students and practitioners an opportunity to learn about and worship Hindu deities. At the same time, it is possible for SYVC participants to maintain their own non-Hindu religious traditions and faith in the context of this officially non-sectarian organization. Most SYVC altars display images of Jesus, Buddha, and the founder of Sikhism, Guru Nanak, in addition to numerous Hindu deities. Many SYVC branches celebrate both Jewish and Christian religious holidays – for example the SYVC ashram in the Bahamas, which has several staff members from Israel, typically celebrates a formal Passover Seder as well as Easter Sunday. In my research with SYVC members, some participants adamantly denied any religious connotation to yoga and others emphasized the traditional Hindu religious context in which the SYVC is embedded, setting the SYVC apart from what they conceived of as inauthentic adaptations of globalized modern yoga.

Whether through the practice of Christian yoga in institutions like Yahwe Yoga or through the integral yoga of SYVC with its strong Hindu influences, yoga clearly has the potential to invoke and heighten spiritual experience. Spiritual pursuit has been a part of yoga's aim and context throughout its long history. Yet, through the secular yoga of celebrity workout videos, the competitive yoga of organizations like USA Yoga, and public school yoga as physical fitness, it is also evident that yoga can be successfully stripped of religious meaning and practiced as exercise alone. Indeed, as Mark Singleton has shown, the very origins of modern postural yoga stem in part from "modern body culture techniques developed in the West" (2010:5), so it is not so much that contemporary versions of yoga have evolved away from their South Asian roots as that the roots of modern yoga themselves were never singularly planted in Hindu religious traditions in the

first place. Like all globalized culture, yoga is neither equally shared, nor universally conceived. Disputes about where and to whom yoga belongs are bound to continue, both in official court cases and among practitioners of varying national, class, gender, religious, and ethnic backgrounds. A word with such deep and wide-reaching roots cannot be limited to a simple or one-dimensional meaning but will continue to intone with multiple resonances, as a sacred mantra pronounced with the knowledge acquired over generations, or a secular phrase newly taken to heart abroad.

References

- Alter, Joseph
2004 *Yoga in Modern India: The Body between Science and Philosophy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Centers, Sivananda Yoga Vedanta
1977 *Vishnu Swami*: Om Lotus Publishing Company.
- De Michelis, Elizabeth
2004 *A history of modern yoga : Patañjali and Western esotericism*. London; New York: Continuum.
- Eliade, Mircea
1990 *Yoga : immortality and freedom*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Krishna, Gopala
1995 *The Yogi: Portraits of Swami Vishnu-devananda*. St. Paul, MN: Yes International Publishers.
- Singleton, Mark
2010 *Yoga body : the origins of modern posture practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Strauss, Sarah
2002 *The Master's Narrative: Swami Sivananda and the Transnational Production of Yoga*. *Journal of folklore research*. 39(2):217.
- Whicher, Ian
1998 *The integrity of the yoga darsana a reconsideration of classical yoga*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.