

What is yoga: presentation and classification of its various definitions

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Onesicritus says that he was sent to converse with these sophists; for Alexander had heard that the people always went naked and devoted themselves to endurance, and that they were held in very great honor, and that they did not visit other people when invited, but bade them visit them [...]; and that therefore, such being the case, since to Alexander it did not seem fitting either to visit them [...], he himself was sent; and that he found fifteen men [...] who were in different postures, standing or sitting or lying naked and motionless till evening...
[Strabo, *Geography*, Book 15, 63]¹

1. Introduction

What images does our mind recall when we hear “yoga”? Are we thinking of people who are exercising in special centers or gyms, having put their bodies in apparently simple but in reality, extremely demanding and elaborate positions, like *adho mukha śvānāsana* (downward-facing dog), *vīrabhadrāsana II* (warrior position II) or *sālamba śīrṣāsana* (head-stand)²? Or maybe some others meditating with their eyes closed, seated in the “lotus position” *padmāsana*, having put their hands in the chin (fingers pointing down) or *jñāna mudrā* (fingers pointed up)³?

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1. Strabo, *Geography*, Books 15-16, translated by Horace Leonard Jones, vol. VII, [Loeb Classical Library No. 241], Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1930, p. 109

2. B. K. S. Iyengar, *Light on Yoga. Yoga Dipika*, Schocken Books, New York 1966, pp. 110-111, 72-73, 179-190. See also Gr. Maehle, *Ashtanga Yoga. Practice and Philosophy*, New World Library, California 2006, pp. 30, 62, 120-125.

3. B. K. S. Iyengar, *Light on Yoga, ibid.*, pp. 129-132; Swami Satyananda Saraswati, *Asana*

Whatever might be the case, the fact remains that during the last decades, yoga has represented a major tendency in Western societies – the Greek one included –, attracting sportspeople, advocates of a healthy diet, and ecologists, but also artists, female workers, New Age followers, and elderly people, who all contribute to the creation of “Yogaland”⁴. Indeed, “yoga” has proved to be an extremely popular term; it’s flooding the Greek internet and social media, with endless articles and comments regarding yoga concepts and practices, and voracious internet marketing about products or services related to it. Those scattered and confused opinions about yoga constitute a part of the “Diffused New Religiosity”, as it has been described by Stelios Papalexandropoulos⁵, from the moment that we can discern some of the latter’s basic motives in the ways that yoga is presented on the Greek internet⁶.

Yet, what is the precise meaning of “yoga”, a term used not only in the Greek language but in almost all the others – a truly universal word? From the moment it comes from Sanskrit, it would be prudent to look up to dictionaries to discover its possible meanings.

2. The entry “yoga” in Sanskrit Lexicons

Sir Monier Monier-Williams, in his Sanskrit-English Lexicon, a revised version of it was published in 1899 –the year that he died–, points out that the term derives from the root *yuj*⁷. Then, the lexicographer gives a

Pranayama Mudra Bandha, Yoga Publications Trust, Bihar ¹⁸2009, pp. 98-99, 425; Gr. Maehle, *ibid.*, p. 128.

4. This expression was introduced by Patrick McCartney, who points out that it is an emic term used by many yoga devotees and teachers and denotes the Yoga world community. See P. McCartney, “Spiritual bypass and entanglement in Yogaland: How Neoliberalism, Soft Hindutva and Banal Nationalism Facilitate Yoga Fundamentalism”, *Politics and Religion* 13, 1 (2019), p. 140.

5. St. Papalexandropoulos, «Ἡ Διάχυτη Νέα Θρησκευτικότητα», *Θεολογία / Theologia* 94, 1 (2023), pp. 11-22.

6. In relation with yoga as a form of Diffused New Religiosity, see Loukia Roditou, «Ἡ γιόγκα στὰ διαδικτυακὰ μέσα ἐνημέρωσης ὡς μία μορφή τῆς Διάχυτης Νέας Θρησκευτικότητας», *Θεολογία / Theologia* 94, 1 (2023), pp. 203-232.

7. However, K. S. Joshi, Ian Whicher, and Gerald James Larson claim that “yoga” is a

comprehensive list of the word's different meanings, beginning with the oldest and most widely used and continuing with the more recent and limited ones. Here we list some of them:

the act of yoking, joining, attaching, harnessing, putting to (of horses), a yoke, team, vehicle, conveyance [...], equipping or arraying (of an army) [...], putting on (of armour), a remedy, cure [...], charm, incantation, magical art [...], fraud, deceit, undertaking, business, work, acquisition, gain, profit, wealth, property [...], mixing of various materials, mixture [...], putting together, arrangement [...], (in astron.) conjunction, lucky conjuncture, a constellation, asterism [...], (in arithm.) addition, sum, total, (in gram.) the connection of words together, syntactical dependence of a word [...]⁸.

All the above proves that the term “yoga” was a very common word in Sanskrit, but also that it had multiple uses and meanings. Nevertheless, these definitions are almost useless when we are striving to conceive yoga as a notion within the context of Hinduist philosophical-soteriological thought, as it represents an extremely rich and variegated tradition. What are the meanings of the word “yoga” in the classical Hinduist texts?

noun derived from the root “yujir”, which means “unite” or “combine/link” [see K. S. Joshi, “On the Meaning of Yoga”, *Philosophy East and West* 15, 1 (Jan. 1965), pp. 53-55; I. Whicher, *The Integrity of the Yoga Darśana*, State University of New York Press, New York 1998, pp. 7-9; G. J. Larson, “Introduction to the Philosophy of Yoga”, in: G. J. Larson & R. Sh. Bhattacharya (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies*, vol. XII: Yoga: India's Philosophy of Meditation, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, Delhi 2008, pp. 28-29]. Nevertheless, the three scholars are based on Surendranath Dasgupta, who claims that during the Pāṇini era (6th-4th century BC) the word has already acquired its technical meaning, that is, it was used to describe techniques of mind and the senses stabilization and control. Indeed, Pāṇini distinguished the “*yuj samādhai*” –the root *yuj* meaning concentration– from “*yujir yoge*” – the root *yujir* meaning “connection”. See Surendranath Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, The Syndics of the Cambridge University Press, London 1957, vol. I, p. 226.

8. M. Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English dictionary: Etymologically and philologically arranged with special reference to Cognate Indo-European languages*, The Clarendon Press, Oxford 1899, p. 856.

3. The term “yoga” in South Asia’s classical textual tradition

3.1. Yoga in the *Vedas*

The word appears in the *ṛgveda* – a collection of hymns which, along with the other three Vedas, are the oldest surviving texts written in Sanskrit, or, for that matter, in any other Indo-European language (ca. 1200-900 BC); as Surendranath Dasgupta and Edward Fitzpatrick Crangle note⁹, it had various meanings: 1) accomplishment of something that has not already been attained or that is fairly impossible, 2) connection or combination between different things – a Vedic poet is asking who is aware of the yoga (the connection) between the words of a verse¹⁰, and above all 3) the placement of bridles or yokes to a pack animal, bull, or warrior horse for yoking it to a plow or a chariot.

Nevertheless, as David Gordon White points out in the same text, the word’s semantic field is expanded through the metonymic trope. Thus, “yoga” can refer to a war chariot as a whole or the latter’s “equipment” – the yoke, the bulls, the horse, and the vehicle with its bridles and belts. Furthermore, because such chariots were harnessed (*yukta*) only during wars, an important meaning of “yoga” in the Vedas is “the war period”. Of course, as White mentions below, it was not only the chariot warriors called “*yogas*”. In the Vedic hymns there are also references to gods who are moving around earth and heavens riding *yogas*, as well as to priests that yoke themselves to “to poetic inspiration and so journeying-if only with their mind’s eye or cognitive apparatus-across the metaphorical distance that separated the world of the gods from the words of their hymns”¹¹.

It is also noteworthy that, as K. S. Joshi points out, there is sufficient evidence that the Vedic prophets, *ṛṣis*, were accustomed enough to a series of procedures of various names, such as “*dhyāna*”, “*dīkṣā*”, “*tapas*”, which, when they were faithfully observed, they led to the highest

9. Surendranath Dasgupta, *ibid.*, p. 226; Ed. Fitzpatrick Crangle, *The Origin and Development of Early Indian Contemplative Practices*, Harrassowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden 1994, p. 46.

10. K. S. Joshi, *ibid.*, p. 53.

11. D. G. White, “Yoga, Brief History of an Idea”, in: D. G. White (ed.), *Yoga in Practice*, [Princeton Readings in Religions], Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford 2012, p. 4.

state of being¹². Nevertheless, as E. F. Crangle, Geoffrey Samuel, James Mallinson, and Mark Singleton claim, despite the references to the term “yoking”, it is not possible to be implied in the *R̥g-Veda* the use of yoga practices as a set of advanced psychosomatic techniques from the moment that the Vedic textual corpus does not offer any proof related to the systematic practice of the sort of exercises which the word yoga came to denote¹³.

3.2 Yoga in the Upaniṣads

In *Taittiriya Upaniṣad* (2, 4, 1), which was composed around the 6th century BC, the word *yoga* appeared for the first time; there, it means the conscious control of the mind (*manas*) and the senses (*indriya*), thus denoting the sage’s domination over the body and the senses¹⁴.

Nevertheless, it is in *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, most probably composed during the 3rd century BC, that the term has acquired its contemporary meaning. In the dialogue between Naciketas and Yama, the God of Death, the latter reveals to the young Naciketas the so-called “entire yoga regimen”¹⁵. In the third chapter, we find a picture familiar from the Vedic scriptures, adopted to a soteriology of liberation, where there is a parallelism between the human organism/body and a chariot. The body (*śarīra*) is the chariot; the self (*ātman*) is the rider; the intellect (*buddhi*) is the charioteer; the mind (*manas*) is the reins; the senses (*indriya*) are the horses; the objects of the senses (*viśaya*) are the paths followed by the senses. If someone cannot rein over his or her senses, the result will be his/her rebirth. On the other hand, the persons who exercise firm control over their senses through the mind, as the charioteer bridles his horses, do not rebirth and attain the supreme state of being. Therefore,

12. K. S. Joshi, *ibid.*, p. 55.

13. Ed. F. Crangle, *ibid.*, p. 53; G. Samuel, *The Origins of Yoga and Tantra. Indic Religions to the Thirteenth Century*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2008, p. 8; J. Mallinson & M. Singleton (transl. and ed.), *Roots of Yoga*, Penguin Classics, London 2017, p. 11.

14. I. Whicher, *ibid.*, p. 17. G. Feuerstein, *The Encyclopedia of Yoga and Tantra*, Shambhala, Boston & London 2011, pp. 364 and 416.

15. D. G. White, “Yoga, Brief History of an Idea”, *ibid.*, p. 4. Regarding the dialogue between Naciketas and Yama, see also St. Papalexandropoulos, *Ἀνατολικὲς Θρησκείες*, Gutenberg Publications, Athens 2016, p. 175.

we observe the connection between the term *yoga* with that of a chariot and its metaphorical use, which is self-restraint and temperance; this offers us a secure ground for grasping the word's semantic evolution. A well-bridled mind is a *yoga*¹⁶.

In *Kaṭha*'s Chapter 6, we can nevertheless read a clear definition of *yoga*:

10. When cease the five
[Sense-]knowledges, together with the mind (manas)
And the intellect (buddhi) stirs not
That, they say, is the highest course.
11. This they consider as Yoga
The firm holding back of the senses (sthiraṃ indriya-dhāranām).
Then one becomes undistracted (apramatta).
Yoga, truly, is the origin and the end.

[*Kaṭha* 6, 10-11]

Here, Robert Ernest Hume translates the passage “sthiraṃ indriya-dhā-ranām”, as “the firm holding back of the senses”, while Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan renders it as the steady control of the senses¹⁷. In any case, as K. S. Joshi observes, it becomes clear that the thing to which *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* is referring is a state where the mind is no longer being attracted by the objects of its desire and remains unshakable¹⁸. As Ian Whicher notes, in this work *yoga* means the situation of internal balance or stability, that depends on someone's fixation on a particular point. When the mind is fixated and undistracted, the scrupulous aspirants may discover the “interior” or more subtle dimensions of their existence and the consciousness revealed to them¹⁹.

16. G. Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, Cambridge University Press, Great Britain 1996, p. 95; J. Mallinson & M. Singleton (transl. and ed.), *ibid.*, p. 12; A. Foxen & Christa Kuberry, *Is This Yoga? Concepts, Histories, and the Complexities*, Routledge, New York 2021, pp. 6, 21.

17. R. E. Hume, *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads. Translated from the Sanskrit*, Oxford University Press, London 1921, pp. 359-360; S. Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upaniṣads*, George Allen & Unwin LTD, London ²1968, p. 645.

18. K. S. Joshi, *ibid.*, p. 56.

19. I. Wischer, *ibid.*, p. 19.

Yoga also appears in Chapter 2 of *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* (ca. 3rd century BC); the text guides the aspirant, as it indicates the appropriate bodily exercises:

Holding the body straight, three parts of it stretched up, causing the senses to enter into the heart by means of the mind, the wise one should cross over all the frightening streams with the help of the raft which is Brahman (8). Having here suppressed his breaths and having brought his movements under control (*yukaceṣṭa*), when his breath has been diminished, he should take breath through his nose. Being careful, the wise one should restrain (*dhārayeta*) his mind like that chariot yoked with vicious horses (9)²⁰.

Thus, it is understandable that, within this context, bodily practices are of central importance. Furthermore, as Gavin Flood observes, this “bridle” of the mind leads to vision and especially to a body sculpted by yoga’s fire. Through this process, the wise man has secured his health, has got rid of life’s sorrows, and has achieved his goal²¹.

The last of the classic *Upaniṣads* that contains references to yoga is *Maitrāyaṇīya* or *Maitrī Upaniṣad* [is listed as number 24 in the Muktika canon of 108 Upanishads] and is presumed to have been compiled during the 3rd or 2nd century BC. Here, King Bṛhadratha strictly follows a certain practice (*tapas*), by looking at the sun for 1000 consecutive days with his hands raised to the sky. He is visited by the prophet Śākayanya, who talks to him about the difference between the elemental self, subjected to karma, and the pure self, which remains unaffected by action. Then, the prophet teaches the king a six-fold yoga practice which includes: 1) *prāṇāyāma* (breath control/regulation), 2) *pratyāhāra* (withdrawal of senses inwards), 3) *dhyāna* (meditation), 4) *dhāraṇā* (concentration of mind on an idea), 5) *tarka* (insight, contemplation of an idea) and 6) *samādhi* (ecstasy, absorption with an idea). Except for *tarka*, all the above terms will be later used to determine five of the eight elements of Patañjali’s *aṣṭāṅgayoga*²².

20. J. Bronkhorst, *The Two Traditions of Meditation in Ancient India*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi 1993, p. 22; *Greater Magadha. Studies in the Culture of Early India*, Brill, Leiden / Boston 2007, p. 26.

21. G. Flood, *ibid.*, p. 95.

22. G. Flood, *ibid.*, p. 95; J. Bronkhorst, *Greater Magadha. Studies in the Culture of Early*

3.3 Yoga in Mahābhārata and Bhagavadgītā

The meaning that yoga has in the *Vedas*, the war chariot and the horses bridled to it, can be found almost unaltered one thousand years later, in *Mahābhārata* (200 B-400 AD). India's "national epic" contains the first laudatory narrated passages about the heroic chariots on the battlefield. As D. G. White points out, according to the epic, the warrior who knew he was going to die was "attached/fastened" to his armor, "yoked to yoga" (*yoga-yukta*) –again, here, "yoga" means chariot"– to move along to a higher path, though this time he didn't manage to reach the higher strata due to his chariot; rather, it was a celestial "yoga", a divine chariot, which transported him with an explosion of life through and towards the sun, as well to the sky where the gods and heroes reside²³.

In *Mahābhārata* we can also find extensive guidance about yoga practices. *Mokṣadharmā*, its 12th Book, possibly contains the oldest systematic presentation of yoga practices.²⁴ In some of the epic's extracts cited by Johannes Bronkhorst, we're reading the following²⁵:

But they say in accordance with the teaching of the sacred books that the highest Yoga-activity among [the different forms of] Yoga is of two kinds: with properties (*saguṇa*) and without properties (*nirguṇa*) (8). [These two are] fixing the mind and restraint of breath (*prāṇāyāma*), o king; restraint of breath is with properties, fixing the mind³⁸ is without properties (9).

[*Mahābhārata* 12, 304, 8-9]

Freed from all attachments, taking little food, having conquered the senses, he should fix his mind on his self in the first and last part of the night (13). Having made his senses firm with his mind, [...], and having made his mind (*manas*) firm with his intellect (*buddhi*), he is motionless like a stone (14). He should be without trembling like a pillar, and motionless like a mountain; the wise who know to follow the precepts then call him 'one engaged in Yoga' (*yukta*) (15). He neither hears nor smells nor tastes nor sees; he notices no touch, nor

India, Brill, Leiden / Boston 2007, p. 26; G. Feuerstein, *ibid.*, pp. 217, 325-326.

23. D. G. White, *Sinister Yogis*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2009, p. 73; "Yoga, Brief History of an Idea", *ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

24. J. Mallinson & M. Singleton (transl. and ed.), *Roots of Yoga*, Penguin Classics, London 2017, pp. 11, 13.

25. J. Bronkhorst, *Greater Magadha*, *ibid.*, pp. 27, 25.

does [his] mind form conceptions (16). Like a piece of wood, he does not desire anything, nor does he notice [anything]. When he has reached the Original Nature (prakṛti), then sages call him ‘engaged in Yoga’ (yukta) (17).

[*Mahābhārata* 12, 294, 13-17]

Bhagavadgītā [“Song of the Lord”] is embedded in one of *Mahābhārata*’s Books –it spans chapters 23-40 of its Book 6– and contains important teachings regarding the yoga practices. As it pursues to attest to Brahman’s truth, it aims to prize yoga away from its initial environment of world renunciation, by teaching its compatibility with worldly activities based on the caste system and the different life-stages²⁶.

Bhagavad Gītā presents the three classical yoga paths [*margas*], through which the candidate can acknowledge the Lord or the supreme god, Kṛṣṇa: the path of action (*karma-yoga*), where someone is getting rid of his/her acts’ selfish intentions, but remains integrated into the society, under Kṛṣṇa’s guidance; the path of knowledge (*jñāna-yoga*), that leads to “liberation” [*moksha*] through the acknowledgment of the self’s and the universe’s true nature; and finally, the path of loving devotion (*bhakti-yoga*), where devotion to Kṛṣṇa [or any other personal deity] releases from worldly woes. In *Gītā* we can also find descriptions of a series of practices exercised by the yogin of that era –for example, the internalization of Vedic ritual in the sacrifice of inhalation (*prāṇa*) within exhalation (*apāna*)– as well as directions for the preparation for *yoga sādhanā*, the withdrawal of senses²⁷. Thus, during the period that *Bhagavad Gītā* was composed, yoga acquired the widely used notion of spiritual discipline²⁸.

3.4 Yoga in *Yoga Sūtra*

Nevertheless, yoga as a complete Indian philosophical system is outlined in *Yoga Sūtra*, a collection of Sanskrit sutras compiled by the sage Patañjali (ca. 350-450 AD), known as *Pātañjalayogaśāstra*, *Pātañjalayogadarśana*, or simply *Pātañjala Yoga*; the latter represents a codification and synthesis

26. J. Mallinson & M. Singleton (transl. and eds.), *ibid.*, p. 13.

27. M. Singleton, *Yoga Body. The Origins of Modern Posture Practice*, Oxford University Press, New York 2010, p. 26.

28. M. Singleton, *ibid.*, p. 26; G. Feuerstein, *ibid.*, p. 416.

of knowledge about yoga that have been accumulated during many past generations²⁹. Of course, even though Patañjali acknowledges that his compilation is a republication and correction (*anuśāsanam*), of existing teachings (sūtra 1, 1), that does not mean that the work lacks originality, as he introduced new concepts and terms demonstrating beyond any doubt the text's autonomous nature³⁰.

As noted, “yoga” was used in Vedic literature in the sense of self-restraint. Nevertheless, in Pātañjala Yoga is used in the sense of partial or complete stabilization of the different mental states; it contains the preparatory stages, where the mind must get used to certain types of graded mental states.

In the first chapter and the second *sūtra*, Patañjali, offers a brief definition of yoga, in just four words: *yogaś citta vṛtti nirodhaḥ* (“Yoga is the restriction of the fluctuations of mind-stuff”). Yoga is a sort of deep concentration, of stillness, where the wandering mind, constantly fed with sensory impressions and memories, is “bridled”³¹. He then exposes the “yoga of eight limbs” (*aṣṭāṅgayoga*), the ascending path that leads to the mind's perfect control. The first five limbs, that are presented in the second chapter, are the “outer” ones; according to Gerald Larson, they are “largely practical, preparatory exercises”. Those are the following: 1) *yama* (“abstinences”, a series of “right living” or ethical rules common in South Asia, 2) *niyama* (“observances”, ritual rules), 3) *āsana* (posture), 4) *prāṇāyāma* (breath control exercises) and 5) *pratyāhāra* (withdrawal exercises). The last three limbs are presented in the third chapter; they are the “inner” parts and are yoga's central part. They are collectively described as *saṃyama* (“comprehensive thought”, “binding”, “integration”), and are the following ones: *dhāraṇā* (concentration), *dhyāna* (meditation), *saṃādhi* (union, absorption)³².

29. G. J. Larson, “Introduction to the Philosophy of Yoga”, *ibid.*, p. 416.

30. G. Feuerstein, *The Yoga-Sūtra of Patañjali. A New Translation and Commentary*, Inner Traditions, U.S.A. 2017, p. 25.

31. G. Flood, *ibid.*, pp. 96-97.

32. G. J. Larson, “Pātañjala Yoga in Practice”, in: D. G. White (ed.), *Yoga in Practice*, Princeton University Press, U.S.A. 2012, pp. 79-80; St. R. Sarbacker, *Tracing the Path of Yoga. The History and Philosophy of Indian Mind-Body Discipline*, SUNY Press, Albany, NY 2021, pp. 13-14. See also G. Flood, *ibid.*, pp. 96-97; G. Feuerstein, *The Encyclopedia*

The diatribe is accompanied by comments between the verses (*bhāṣya*), which are attributed to the legendary Vyāsa and are more or less contemporary with the collection itself³³. Patañjali's commentator equates yoga with *samādhi*, a profound, absorptive contemplation, and equilibrium, that transcends the usual boundaries of our empirical identity or self-consciousness³⁴. Furthermore, I. Whicher notes that, in this context, *samādhi*'s literal meaning is "placement, assembly". What is "placed" or "assembled" is the sense of the self or the subject, along with the object under contemplation – in other words, *samādhi* constitutes the practice or the "technique" of the consciousness's unification, as well as the resulting state of "unification" with the contemplating object³⁵.

Nevertheless, at this point we must avoid a misunderstanding: Yoga should not be regarded as a "union", a definition that, as we shall see later, is very popular among Vedānta's and neo-Vedānta's followers. Bhojadeva (11th century AD), another commentator of Patañjali's collection, declares that yoga means "separation" (*viyoga*) – the separation of *puruṣa* (consciousness, transcendental self, spirit) from *prakṛti* (primeval nature, world, materiality). This approach is based on the dualistic metaphysics of the *Sāṃkhya* philosophical system [one of the six *Darśhanas*, India's orthodox philosophical systems]³⁶.

Finally, as M. Singleton notes, *Yoga Sūtra*, known as "Classical Yoga", is usually used as the source and point of departure of the modern yoga practices centered on the body's positions and works like those written

of *Yoga and Tantra*, *ibid.*, pp. 44-45; Th. Pantouvas, *Ερμηνευτικό Λεξικό της Ινδικής Φιλοσοφίας και του Γιόγκα*, Kardamitsa Publications, Athens 1989, pp. 119-124; St. Papalexandropoulos, *ibid.*, pp. 251-258; Gr. Ziakas, *Θρησκείες, Κοινωνίες και πολιτισμοί της Ασίας. Ινδουϊσμός, Βουδισμός-Τζαϊνισμός, Κίνη, Θιβέτ και Ταϊβανία*, in: Angeliki Ziaka (ed.), University of Macedonia, Thessaloniki 2016, p. 236; D. Velissaropoulos, *Ιστορία της Ινδικής Φιλοσοφίας. Από τη βεδική ως τη σύγχρονη εποχή*, Dodoni Publications, Athens 2020, pp. 213-216; Ap. Michailidis, *Ινδουισμός. Καταβολές – Ιστορική πορεία – Βασικές αντιλήψεις – Λατρεία*, Institute of the Book – Kardamitsa Athens 2022, pp. 230-238.

33. G. J. Larson, "Introduction to the Philosophy of Yoga", *ibid.*, p. 22; "Pātañjala Yoga in Practice", in: D. G. White (ed.), *Yoga in Practice*, *ibid.*, p. 74.

34. K. S. Joshi, *ibid.*, pp. 57-58; I. Whicher, *ibid.*, p. 28; St. R. Sarbacker, *ibid.*, p. 12.

35. I. Wisher, *ibid.*, p. 28.

36. K. S. Yoshi, *ibid.*, pp. 57-58; I. Wisher, *ibid.*, p. 29.

by B. K. S. Iyengar and Gregor Maehle³⁷, despite the lack of information about *āsana* in the treatise itself. Furthermore, it constitutes the most important text for modern trainees firstly because of the influence exerted by the European academic literature on the subject, and secondly, because of the first ardent supporters of yoga practices, like Swami Vivekananda and Helena Blavatsky, the founder of the Theosophical Society. Nevertheless, contemporary yoga teachers are usually limited to *aṣṭāṅgayoga*, believing that this represents the nucleus –or the totality– of Patañjali’s teachings³⁸.

3.5 Yoga in Tantra

From the 4th century AD onwards, a series of texts appeared in the Indian subcontinent, collectively called Tantra, which is of central importance in the history of yoga. They introduce radical novelties in the theory and the practice of the previous yoga traditions, simultaneously declaring a new variation of the pre-existed soteriology, where the trainee’s ultimate objective is not the liberation from the burden of existence, but self-deification. “Tantra” refers also to a system of rituals or basic instructions”, which included worship, mantra repetition, and yoga, essentially indicating a stock of soteriological knowledge, rites, and customs, which are regarded as special and at the same time more powerful than the Vedic revelation. Therefore, by combining the above observations, we could cite here D. G. White’s remark: “Tantra is the subject matter of works that call themselves ‘Tantras’”³⁹.

Now, the term *yoga* in Tantra covers a broad conceptual spectrum. As J. Mallinson and M. Singleton observe, it may more broadly mean “practice” or “discipline”, related to the means the trainees have at their disposal to achieve their goals. It may also have the more narrow, specific sense of a meditation program as opposed to the ritual practices

37. B. K. S. Iyengar, *Light on Yoga*, *ibid.*; Gr. Maele, *ibid.*

38. M. Singleton, *ibid.* p. 26.

39. D. G. White, *Kiss of the Yoginī. “Tantric Sex” in its South Asian Contexts*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 2003, p. 32; “Yoga, Brief History of an Idea”, *ibid.*, pp. 12-15; A. Padoux, *The Hindu Tantric World. An Overview*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 2017, pp. 7-8.

(*kriyā*) or the knowledge practices (*jñāna*), but it may also refer to the goal itself, that is the “splice”, the “union”, or even the identification with divine consciousness. What is beyond doubt, though, is that the yoga systems do not put great emphasis on the *āsana* (body postures/positions) practice and teach a very limited number of sitting positions⁴⁰.

From a metaphysical point of view, Tantra is an approach revolving around the idea that absolute Reality is bipolar, with the “male” pole representing the principle of transcendental Consciousness/Awareness, defined as Śiva (“Benevolent” [but also “Fearsome”]), and the female pole representing the principle of creativity, defined as Śakti (“Energy”, “Power”)⁴¹.

An innovating aspect of Tantra is that they introduced the concept of a “subtle” or “yogic” body: within the gross body of the human microcosm (*sthūla śārira*) resides a subtle yogic body (*sūkṣma śārira*)⁴². This mystical body is constituted by a myriad of channels or tubes (*nāḍīs*), through which various energies (*prāṇa*) flow. It also contains the seven energy centers (*cakra*) – beginning with *mūlādhāra cakra* and ending with *sahasrāra cakra*.

A second innovation was the introduction of *kuṇḍalinī*, a concept that is absent from *Yoga Sūtra* of Patañjali. This Sanskrit term is used about the feminine divine principle of the universe (*śakti*), which is in a dormant state in all human bodies. Derived from the term *kuṇḍala* (“spire”, “coiled”), *kuṇḍalinī* is perceived in the form of a coiled serpent that is located in the basis of the spine. The goal of yoga practices is to awaken this energy by using various methods, like chanting mantras, regulation of breathing (*prāṇāyāma*), and special meditation techniques (*dhyāna*). As soon as the cosmic power awakens, it rises through the central *Nāḍī*, the *suṣumṇā nāḍī*, and, passing through every *cakra*, it is united with the masculine divine principle (personified as Lord Śiva),

40. J. Mallinson & M. Singleton (transl. and ed.), *ibid.*, pp. 14-15; M. Singleton, *ibid.*, p. 27.

41. G. Feuerstein, *The Encyclopedia of Yoga and Mantra*, *ibid.*, pp. 365-370.

42. D. G. White, *The Alchemical Body. Siddha Traditions in Medieval India*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 1996, p. 18; G. Samuel, & J. Johnston, “General Introduction”, in: G. Samuel & J. Johnston (eds.), *Religion and the Subtle Body in Asia and the West. Between mind and body*, Routledge, London and New York 2013, p. 2.

at the top of the head. The reunion of Śiva with Śakti is perceived as Yoga's ultimate goal, as the bipolarity returns to primeval unity. This internal union results in an unequaled, incomparable bliss (*ānanda*), a radical change of the trainee's consciousness, that erases the sense of individuality, as the atomic Self (*Ātman*), is identified with the absolute Reality (*Brahman*)⁴³.

3.6 Yoga in Haṭha Yoga

In the period spanning the 10th and 11th centuries AD, a new integrated yoga system appeared: Haṭha Yoga. The traditional meaning of the Sanskrit word *haṭha* is “force”, and “power”, but also “oppression”. Therefore, this branch of Yoga sometimes is called “forced” or “dynamic” yoga or a method of “forced meditation” (*haṭha-vidyā*)⁴⁴. As Georg Feuerstein notes, Haṭha Yoga is related to that Yoga branch which “attempts self-transformation and self-transcendence by the arduous means of physical purification and strengthening”⁴⁵. After all, as Mircea Eliade observes, “this is especially the position of Hatha Yoga”, “the will to master the body in order to transmute it into a divine body”⁴⁶.

According to J. Mallinson, there are various texts dating from the 11th to the 15th century, where we can find detailed descriptions of practices classified as *haṭha yoga*, whether they are mentioned or not. Nevertheless, the oldest manual that contains a fully exposed *haṭha yoga* system is the 15th-century *Haṭhapradīpikā* [one of its many different titles]⁴⁷.

43. D. G. White, “Tantra in Practice: Mapping a Tradition”, in: D. G. White (ed.), *Tantra in Practice*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2000, pp. 14-15; *Kiss of the Yoginī*, *ibid.*, pp. 229-242; “Yoga, Brief History of an Idea”, *ibid.*, pp. 12-15; St. Papalexandropoulos, *ibid.*, pp. 268-274; Ap. Michailidis, *ibid.*, pp. 203-210.

44. G. Feuerstein, *The Encyclopedia of Yoga and Tantra*, *ibid.*, p. 146; J. Birch, “The Meaning of *haṭha* in Early Haṭhayoga”, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 131, 4 (2011), p. 527; D. G. White, “Yoga, Brief History of an Idea”, *ibid.*, p. 15; Ap. Michailidis, «Τί είναι ἡ Χάτα Γιόγκα»; *ibid.*, pp. 273-274.

45. G. Feuerstein, *The Shambhala Guide to Yoga*, Shambhala, Boston & London 1996, p. 26.

46. M. Eliade, *Yoga. Immortality and Freedom*, Bollingen Foundation Inc., New York 1958, σ. 228. See also the Greek edition of the work: M. Eliade, *Γιόγκα. Αθανασία και ἐλευθερία*, Greek Translation by Elsi Toutsis, Xatzinikoli Publications, Athens 1980, p. 203.

47. J. Mallinson, “Haṭha Yoga”, in: K. A. Jacobsen (ed.), *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism*,

Haṭhapradīpikā presents the following constitutive elements of Haṭha Yoga: a) techniques of body purification (*śaṭkarma*), which –according to later commentators who sought to impart soteriological value to all Haṭha Yoga practices– could directly lead the yogi to *samādhi*; b) *āsana*, complicated body postures, that for the first time are included among the yoga techniques; c) *kumbhaka*, complex methods of breathing control, activated in both gross and subtle body, permitting *kuṇḍalinī* to rise through the central channel; d) *mudrā*, “seals”, spiritual gestures for the handling of the vital energy, and e) *nāḍānusandhāna*, a sort of concentration in the inner sounds, as a medium for the achievement of *samādhi*. Those methods constitute what is called the “classical *Haṭha Yoga*”⁴⁸.

Haṭha Yoga is nevertheless inconceivable without taking into account the previous development of the pan-Indian Tantra movement; as *kuṇḍalinī-śakti*; awakening is precisely the most essential goal of the esoteric Tantrism, likewise, Haṭha Yoga’s techniques influence *kuṇḍalinī*’s ascent through the central channel (*suṣumnā nāḍī*) towards *amṛta* [one of many synonyms of *soma*], the elixir of immortality located to the head. Then, *Kuṇḍalinī* returns to the place from which it came, the *ādhāra*, the basis [the “support”] of the spine, and overflows the body with *amṛta*, thus rendering it immortal. Yet, although Haṭhayoga’s methods are based on those of Pātañjala and tantric, their innovatory nature lies in the fact that they include all the bodily practices mentioned above, that cannot be found in any of the previous Yoga branches.

Now that we’ve already presented all the data relevant to the term Yoga, as it has appeared in the classical Hinduist texts, let us try to classify the definitions of this particular term.

vol. III: Society, Religious Specialists, Religious Traditions, Philosophy, Brill, Leiden / Boston 2011, p. 772; “Haṭhayoga’s Early History. From Vajrayāna Sexual Restraint to Universal Somatic Soteriology”, in: G. Flood (ed.), *The Oxford History of Hinduism. Hindu Practice*, Oxford University Press, UK 2020, p. 187; J. Mallinson & M. Singleton (transl. and ed.), *ibid.*, pp. 15-16.

48. Th. Pantouvas, *ibid.*, pp. 68-71; J. Mallinson, “Haṭha Yoga”, *ibid.*, pp. 775-778; “Haṭhayoga’s Early History. From Vajrayāna Sexual Restraint to Universal Somatic Soteriology”, *ibid.*, pp. 189-193; Ap. Michailidis, «Τί είναι ἡ Χάτα Γιόγκα;», *ibid.*, pp. 271-306.

4. Classification of yoga definitions based on classical Hinduist texts

4.1. Yoga as a union or connection between different things and yoga as a yoke

As mentioned above, the word *yoga* initially appeared during the Vedic period to denote a union or a combination of various things. From the moment that during that period the most common example of “union” was the one among horses or bulls, but also because those animals were held together with a yoke, this exerted an influence on the word’s semantic field – therefore, *yoga* started to denote “the instrument of the union”, the yoke or bundle. Nevertheless, the analogy between horses and human senses, as well as the fact that the yoke is an instrument that keeps horses under control, resulted in *yoga* denoting the instrument, the method through which the senses, and consequently the mind, can be brought under control⁴⁹.

4.2. Yoga’s dual significance – method and goal

Thus, in texts that teach *yoga*, this word –as I. Whicher has put it– may be referred to as the method that “connects”, but also to the “reined in” situation that is perceived as a “union”. Indeed, from another point of view, it may denote the process, the medium necessary for *ātman*’s liberation from its “caging”, its containment in the material body, as well as the ultimate goal of the liberation (*mokṣa*, *mukti*, *apavarga*) – the identification, the union or the knowledge of *Brahman*⁵⁰.

Likewise –as J. Mallinson, M. Singleton, and Stuart Ray Sarbacker suggest– the term *yoga* may define a practice or a series of practices, but at the same time, it may also define the goal of these practices, the nature of which may vary according to each text’s dogmatic content.⁵¹ Thus, *yoga* as a goal may be understood as a state of binding or union –especially within the context of deistic and non-dualist (*Advaita*) traditions– with

49. K. S. Joshi, *ibid.*, pp. 53-55.

50. I. Whicher, *ibid.*, p. 27. See also St. Papalexandropoulos, *ibid.*, pp. 159, 175, 194; St. R. Sarbacker, *ibid.*, p. 2.

51. J. Mallinson & M. Singleton (transl. and eds.), *ibid.*, p. 29; St. R. Sarbacker, *ibid.*, p. 17.

what exactly to be united depending on the metaphysical systems of these traditions. The union might consequently be perceived either as a union with an element, a “principle of reality” (*tattva*), or as a union with a personal divinity (e.g., Viṣṇu or Śiva), or as a union of the atomic self (*ātman*), with the supreme Self (*paramātman*), an identity that could be equated with *brahman*, the supreme impersonal reality⁵².

4.3. Yoga as *samādhi* and as separation in Pātañjala Yoga

However –concerning yoga having the meaning of a goal– Patañjali’s *Yoga-darśana* and the related texts, contrary to the idea of yoga as a union, equate it with the state of *samādhi*, tending to define yoga in terms of separation, isolation, or disjunction (*viyoga*) of Sāṃkhya’s dualist categories – *puruṣa* (spiritual principle) and *prakṛti* (material nature). Certain commentators ascertain this view, while others tend to reject it, as they argue that “solitude” or “detachment” (*kaivalya*) represents the ultimate goal in Pātañjalayogaśāstra, which is identical to the goal of the atomic self (*jīvātman*) and the supreme self (*paramātman*) in Vedānta⁵³.

4.4. Yoga both as a medium and a goal

According to J. Mallinson and M. Singleton, this concept of yoga –a goal– is by far the most common. It is true, of course, that in certain texts the two concepts –yoga as a medium and as a goal– coexist. In these cases, we encounter composite terms – e.g. *haṭha-yoga* (“dynamic yoga”), *jñāna-yoga* (yoga of the “knowledge” or “wisdom”), *bhakti-yoga* (yoga of “dedication”, “devotion”), *karma-yoga* (yoga of “action”), etc.

52. I. Whicher, *ibid.*, pp. 29-30; Sarah Strauss, *Positioning Yoga. Balancing Acts Across Cultures*, Berg, New York 2005, p. 3; G. Feuerstein, *The Deeper Dimension of Yoga. Theory and Practice*, Shambhala, Boston 2003, p. 3; *The Path of Yoga. An Essential Guide to Its Principles and Practices*, Shambhala, Boston 2011, p. 2; J. S. Alter, *Yoga in Modern India. The Body Between Science and Philosophy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2004, p. 10; D. G. White, *Sinister Yogis*, *ibid.*, pp. 44-45; J. Mallinson & M. Singleton (transl. and eds.), *ibid.*, p. 29; St. R. Sarbacker, *ibid.*, pp. 2, 17; A. Foxen & Christa Kuberry, *ibid.*, pp. 4-5, 13.

53. K. A. Jacobsen, “Introduction: Yoga Traditions”, in: K. A. Jacobsen (ed.), *Theory and Practice of Yoga. Essays in Honour of Gerald James Larson*, Brill, Leiden / Boston 2005, p. 4; G. Feuerstein, *The Path of Yoga*, *ibid.*, p. 2; J. Mallinson & M. Singleton (transl. and eds.), *ibid.*, pp. 29-30; St. R. Sarbacker, *ibid.*, pp. 12, 18.

But, as J. Mallinson and M. Singleton argue, the term *haṭha-yoga*, for example, could be translated as “the yoga state that has been achieved by ‘force’ or ‘violence’ (*haṭha*)”, given the fact that the concept of yoga as a goal (and not as a method/process” has prevailed in the texts⁵⁴.

Let us return, though, to the point of our departure in this essay, which is our contention for the existence of widely circulated disparate ideas about yoga. If we accept that the various Yoga Associations or Centers are Yoga’s official representatives in Greece⁵⁵, how do they define yoga?

5. Yoga definitions according to Greek Yoga Centers and their classification

After our thorough research of the official websites of Yoga Centers in Greece, we found certain common patterns in the way they define Yoga⁵⁶: 1) yoga as a *Science*, Philosophy, or philosophical system⁵⁷; 2) as

54. J. Mallinson & M. Singleton (transl. and eds.), *ibid.*, p. 30.

55. It is worth noting here that according to the current Greek legislation anyone who meets the required building conditions may establish and operate a Yoga Centre (see K.Y.A. 395305/2022 – ΦΕΚ 4503/Β/25-8-2022), without any further person accreditation and certification of professional qualifications, a fact to which the Hellenic Yoga Association is opposed (see «Ἐπίσκεψη στὸν ΓΤΑ γιὰ τὸ πλαῖσιο λειτουργίας τῆς Γιόγκα», 28.5.2020, <https://www.hellenicyogaassociation.gr/nea/epistoligga/> [accessed at 14.9.2023]).

56. Wishing our research to be objective and the conclusion drawn reliable, we’ve taken into account in our study the five existing Yoga Associations, as well as a specimen of 113 Centers (Academies, Institutes, Studios) out of a total of 600, which, as the Hellenic Yoga Association argues, exist in the country. For more details, see Loukia Roditou, *Ἡ προβολή τῆς Γιόγκα στὸν ἐλληνικὸ διαδικτυακὸ χώρο*, Postgraduate Thesis National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Athens 2023 (<https://pergamos.lib.uoa.gr/uoa/dl/object/3315737/file.pdf>).

57. «Τί εἶναι ἡ Γιόγκα», <https://www.hellenicyogaassociation.gr/ti-einai-i-yoga/>. «Τί εἶναι ἡ Γιόγκα τῶν Ἰμαλαΐων», http://himalayanyoga.gr/himalayan_yoga.php. «Ἡ Γιόγκα», <http://www.satyayogacenter.gr/html/yoga.html>. «Γιόγκα», «Σατυάναντα Γιόγκα», <http://www.sitaram.gr/yoga.php>. «Τί εἶναι ἡ Kuṇḍalinī Yoga», <https://kyta.gr/kundalini-yoga/>. “Yoga”, <https://ymca.gr/programmata/yoga-3/>. “Hatha Yoga”, <https://pranayoga.gr/services-yoga/>. «Τί εἶναι ἡ Yoga», <https://www.yogacademy.gr/training/purpose>. «Τί εἶναι ἡ Yoga», <https://aenaonyoga.gr/ti-einai-yoga/>. «Ἡ Γιόγκα καὶ τὰ Ὁφέλη της», <https://www.gingeryoga.gr/whatisyoga.html>. «Οmakoeio Ἀθηνῶν», <https://omakoeio.gr/>

a *union*: of the Individual Self with the Universal or Cosmic Self⁵⁸, of the Superior Self with the Divine Energy⁵⁹, of the individual consciousness with the universal consciousness⁶⁰, of the lower Ego (consciousness) with the higher/superior Ego (superconsciousness-soul)⁶¹, of the human beings' union with the spirit and the omnipresent energy⁶², and finally, as the union with the Infinite Totality⁶³; 3) yoga as *the path that leads to the immediate, unmediated experience of the inner or real self*, to the realization of the Self or self-realization⁶⁴; 4) as a system of *self-knowledge*, self-improvement, development of the consciousness, personal evolution

omakoeio-athi non/ [accessed at 13.9.2023]. «'Ο Σύλλογος "Hellenic Yoga Association"», <https://www.hellenicyogaassociation.gr/>. «Τί είναι ή Γιόγκα των Ίμαλαίων», http://himalayanyoga.gr/himalayan_yoga.php. «'Η Γιόγκα», <http://www.satyayogacenter.gr/html/yoga.html>. "Yoga", <https://ymca.gr/programmata/yoga-3/>. «Τί σās έρχεται στο νοῦ όταν άκοῦτε την λέξη Γιόγκα;», <https://nataraja.gr/yoga-2/%cf%84%ce%b9-%ce%b5%ce%af%ce%bd%ce%b1%ce%b9-yoga/>. «'Η Γιόγκα και τὰ Όφέλη της», <https://www.gingeryoga.gr/whatisyoga.html>. «Ποιοί είμαστε», https://shaktiyogastudio.gr/about_us/. "Ashtanga Yoga", <https://www.ashtangayogathessaloniki.com/ashtangayoga/> [accessed at 13.9.2023].

58. «'Ορισμός της Γιόγκα», <https://www.hellenicyogaassociation.gr/ti-einai-i-yoga/> [accessed at 13.9.2023].

59. «'Ο σκοπός και ή οὐσία της Anusara Yoga», <https://konstantinos.com/anusara-yoga/> [accessed at 13.9.2023].

60. «Τί Είναι Γιόγκα», <https://www.yogatrimurti.gr/ti-einai-giogka-w-18629>. «Τί σās έρχεται στο νοῦ όταν άκοῦτε τη λέξη Γιόγκα;», <https://nataraja.gr/yoga-2/%cf%84%ce%b9-%ce%b5%ce%af%ce%bd%ce%b1%ce%b9-yoga/>. «Τί είναι ή Yoga», <https://www.yoga.cademy.gr/training/purpose>. «Λίγα λόγια για την Yoga», <https://yogafirst.gr/>. «Άσραμ στην Παιανία», <https://satyanandayoga.gr/satyanantasram-ellados/asram-stin-paiania/> [accessed at 13.9.2023].

61. «Ράτζα & Παιδική Γιόγκα για Ένήλικες 2022-2023», <https://omakoio.gr/index.php/mathimata-giogka/ratza-kai-paidiki-giogka> [accessed at 13.9.2023].

62. «Τί είναι ή Σαχάτζα Γιόγκα», <http://www.sahajayoga.gr/en/%CF%83%CE%B1%CF%87%CE%AC%CF%84%CE%B6%CE%B1%CE%B3%CE%B9%CF%8C%CE%B3%CE%BA%CE%B1/%CF%84%CE%B9%CE%B5%CE%AF%CE%BD%CE%B1%CE%B9%CF%83%CE%B1%CF%87%CE%AC%CF%84%CE%B6%CE%B1-%CE%B3%CE%B9%CF%8C%CE%B3%CE%BA%CE%B1.html> [accessed at 13.9.2023].

63. «Σάτ-Τσίτ-Άνάντα», <https://www.hellenicyogaassociation.gr/ti-einai-i-yoga/>. «Τί είναι ή Kuṇḍalinī Yoga», <https://kyta.gr/kundalini-yoga/> [accessed at 13.9.2023].

64. «Τί είναι ή Raja Yoga», http://himalayanyoga.gr/himalayan_yoga.php. «Τί λένε για έμας», https://shaktiyogastudio.gr/about_us/. «Άσραμ στην Παιανία», <https://satyanandayoga.gr/satyanantasram-ellados/asram-stin-paiania/>. «Sahadeva Yoga», <https://www.sahadevayoga.com/>. "Yoga", <https://ymca.gr/programmata/yoga-3/> [accessed at 13.9.2023].

and spiritual development⁶⁵, as a method that leads to the knowledge of man's true nature and to an expanded state of awareness⁶⁶, as a spiritual practice that liberates us from conventional modes of thought⁶⁷, and as a technique ideal for the awakening of our latent potential and the hidden powers of our existence⁶⁸; 5) yoga is a holistic, "well-being" system, that aims to the body's catharsis and the bodily, emotional and mental control⁶⁹, a system that begins with body-discipline and ends to mind-discipline⁷⁰, an holistic system that aims at the harmonization between body, mind and emotions⁷¹, a methodical and integrated system

65. «Ο Σύλλογος "Hellenic Yoga Association"», <https://www.hellenicyogaassociation.gr/>. «Άγνι Γιόγκα», <https://www.agniyogahellas.gr/agni-yoga/>. «Γιατί να κάνεις Γιόγκα», <https://myyoga.gr/%ce%b3%ce%b9%ce%b1%cf%84%ce%af%ce%b3%ce%b9%cf%ce%b3%ce%ba%ce%b1/>. «Yoga για όλους», <https://pratyahara.gr/>. «Πιστεύουμε ότι η γιόγκα είναι για όλους», <https://www.sankalpayogacenter.com/sxetika-me-emas>. "Yoga", <https://www.shantom.gr/mathimata/yoga>. «Λίγα Λόγια για Έμας», <http://himalayanyoga.gr/>. «Γιόγκα για ένηλικες», http://himalayanyoga.gr/yoga_gia_enilikes.php. «Η Γιόγκα και τα Όφέλη της», <https://www.gingeryoga.gr/whatisyoga.html>. «Η σχολή μας», <https://kallioyoga.com/online-live-yoga/> [accessed at 13.9.2023].

66. «Σάτ-Τσίτ-Άνάντα», <https://www.hellenicyogaassociation.gr/ti-einai-i-yoga/>. «Η Γιόγκα: Σατυανάντα Γιόγκα», <http://www.satayogacenter.gr/html/satyananta.html>. «Yoga Trimurti», <https://www.yogatrimurti.gr/>. «Γιόγκα», «Σατυανάντα Γιόγκα», <http://www.sitaram.gr/yoga.php> [accessed at 13.9.2023].

67. «Κάλωσορίσατε στο: Athens Yoga!», <https://athensyoga.gr/?i=portal.el.new-to-yoga>. «Η Γιόγκα κατά τον Παταντζάλι», <https://www.hellenicyogaassociation.gr/i-yoga-kata-ton-patanjali/> [accessed at 13.9.2023].

68. «Γιόγκα», «Σατυανάντα Γιόγκα», <http://www.sitaram.gr/yoga.php> and <https://satyanandayoga.gr/centers/kentro-athinon/>. "Yoga", <https://ymca.gr/programmata/yoga-3/>. "Hatha Yoga", <https://pranayoga.gr/services-yoga/> [accessed at 13.9.2023].

69. «Όρισμός της Γιόγκα», <https://www.hellenicyogaassociation.gr/ti-einai-i-yoga/> [accessed at 13.9.2023].

70. «Ιστορία της Γιόγκα», <https://www.hellenicyogaassociation.gr/ti-einai-i-yoga/> [accessed at 13.9.2023].

71. «Η Γιόγκα: Σατυανάντα Γιόγκα», <http://www.satayogacenter.gr/html/satyananta.html>. «Η μέθοδός μας», <https://www.hotyoga.gr/agni/agni-method.html>. «Τί Είναι Γιόγκα», <https://www.yogatrimurti.gr/ti-einai-giogka-w-18629>. «Έναρμόνιση Νοῦ, Συναισθήματος, Δράσης – Γιόγκα της Σύνθεσης», <https://www.nirvikalpa.gr/enarmonisisonou-synaisthmatos-drasis-giogka-tis-synthesis>. «Τί είναι η Yoga», <https://www.yogacademy.gr/training/purpose>. «Τί είναι η Yoga», <https://aenaonyoga.gr/ti-einai-yoga/>. «Η Γιόγκασάν Έναλλακτική Θεραπεία, της Λίντας Καπετάνιου», <https://www.lotosityoga.gr/yoga-san-enallaktiki-therapeia.html>. «Τί είναι η YOGA», <http://balanceyogacenter.gr/> [accessed at 13.9.2023].

of exercises and therapies, which touches and transforms humans' lives on physical, spiritual and psychological level⁷²; and finally 6) yoga as a *meditation technique-method*, as well as the *state of meditation*⁷³.

Nevertheless, by closely observing the definitions mentioned above, we realize that a serious issue arises: there is a huge gap and discrepancy between the definitions presented by the Greek Yoga Centers and those that can be found in the Hinduist texts and manuals that teach yoga, which we've described in the previous sections of our article. What does this gap consist of? Are we dealing here with a different yoga?

To understand this phenomenon, we must present a historical overview.

6. Genesis and the spread of the *yoga* phenomenon in the Modern Era

6.1. The Historical Context

The 19th century is distinguished par excellence by the triumph of secular modernity; yet this gave rise to phenomena that led in the opposite direction: the revival of apocryphal religions, the rise of new religious movements, like Transcendentalism, New Thought, Christian Science, Theosophy, but also of reform movements in India, like those of Brahmo Samaj and the Ramakrishna Mission, which combined ideas

72. "Yoga", <https://ymca.gr/programmata/yoga-3/>. "YOGA", <https://yamayoga.gr/el/yoga-service/>. "Yoga", <https://www.shantom.gr/mathimata/yoga>. "Ashtanga Yoga", <https://www.ashtangayogathessaloniki.com/ashtangayoga/>. «Τί είναι ή Γιόγκα και ποιά τὰ όφέλη της;», <https://theartofliving.gr/yoga-for-all/>. "YOGA", <https://yamayoga.gr/el/yoga-service/>. «Γιατί Γιόγκα?», <https://www.yogakinisis.com/>. «Yoga για τις όρμόνες», https://holisticyoga.gr/hormone_yoga/ [accessed at 13.10.2023].

73. «Τί είναι ή Σαχάτζα Γιόγκα», <http://www.sahajayoga.gr/en/%CF%83%CE%B1%CF%87%CE%AC%CF%84%CE%B6%CE%B1%CE%B3%CE%B9%CF%8C%CE%B3%CE%BA%CE%B1/%CF%84%CE%B9%CE%B5%CE%AF%CE%BD%CE%B1%CE%B9%CF%83%CE%B1%CF%87%CE%AC%CF%84%CE%B6%CE%B1-%CE%B3%CE%B9%CF%8C%CE%B3%CE%BA%CE%B1.html>. «Γιόγκα σημαίνει "Ένωση"», <https://el.yogavijaya.com/> [accessed at 13.10.2023].

and practices that they have borrowed from Protestantism, modern science and *Yoga*⁷⁴.

It seems that this cultural-religious tendency first appeared in the West around 1849; as Elizabeth De Michelis notes, at this year we have the first registered reference to *yoga* in the writings of Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), the founder of Transcendentalism, who thinks of himself as a *yoga* trainee. Nevertheless, the organizational body that played a seminal role in the dissemination of Eastern thought and religions to the West was the Theosophical Society⁷⁵. In 1881, its founder, Helena Blavatsky (1831-1891), strongly suggests that “that Indian Yoga was and is a true science, endorsed and confirmed by thousands of experimental proofs”, a science that “neither modern Europe nor America had so much as heard of the one thing or the other until the Theosophists began to write and speak”, while, according to her, is “occult transcendentalism”, as it “speaks of spiritual powers enquired by the Yogis”⁷⁶.

In any case, the various metaphysical movements that combine their ideas with *Yoga* practices try to “save” it from the popular orientalist and colonial stereotypes related to it –e.g., that it was a set of radical and antisocial practices–, but also from its connection with magic, as the experiments of the British occultist and ceremonial magician Aleister Crowley (1875-1947) have resulted in Tantric Yoga’s connection by the popular imagination with the sexual magic⁷⁷. Thus, they have been trying to promote it as a philosophical and meditative tradition, erasing those aspects of it that were incompatible with their ideas and perceptions and

74. St. Papalexandropoulos, *Δοκίμια Ιστορίας τῶν Θρησκειῶν*, Hellenika Grammata Publications, Athens ²1997, pp. 148-151; Elizabeth De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga. Patañjali and Western Esotericism*, Continuum, Great Britain ³2008, p. 154; A. R. Jain, *Selling Yoga. From Counterculture to Pop Culture*, Oxford University Press, U.S.A. 2015, p. 28.

75. Elizabeth De Michelis, *ibid.*, pp. 2-3, 81, 162.

76. H. P. Blavatsky, “A Hindu professor’s views on Indian yoga”, in: *The Theosophist*, vol. 2, no. 7, Theosophical Society, Bombay April 1881, p. 158.

77. J. S. Alter, *ibid.*, pp. 7-8; H. B. Urban, *Magia Sexualis. Sex, Magic, and Liberation in Modern Western Esotericism*, University of California Press, U.S.A. 2006, p. 111.

highlighting the elements related to the so-called classical or *rāja yoga*, based on a selective reading of Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras*⁷⁸.

Nevertheless, Europeans and Americans weren't the only ones who rehabilitated the idea that *rāja yoga* can be seen as compatible with modern values. The Indian reformer Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) was just one of the many Hinduists who expressed contempt for *Yoga*'s physical practices, by clearly separating *haṭha*'s bodily exercises from *rāja*'s spiritual ones, perceiving the first as *Yoga*'s inferior aspect⁷⁹. Vivekananda visited the U.S.A. in 1893 to participate in the World's Parliament of Religions hosted by Chicago. There, he made a big impression and was almost overnight turned into a major authority on Hinduism and an ideological leader. He then started giving a series of lectures financed by Christian Science, in which he attested to Hinduism's superiority over all other religions. In 1896, he published his fundamental study, *Rāja Yoga*, which contributed significantly to the formation of the resistance in India against the Christian missionary efforts. As De Michelis observes, the publication date of his study was pivotal, because in this book he outlined a reinterpreted and modernized version of *Vedānta*, and recommended it as the exemplary form of the "World Religion", which was flexible enough to cover the needs of all men. Indeed, by actually advocating that the religious needs can be covered by four different types of "worship", which constitute the model of the spiritual practice, he moved away from the classical *Gītā* system of the three *Yogas*—*karma yoga*, *bhaktiyoga* and *jñānayoga*— to his system of the "four Yogas", by adding *rājayoga*, which he describes as superior to all the other forms⁸⁰.

Rāja Yoga, therefore, represents Vivekananda's effort to understand and interpret Pātañjala *Yoga*, by simultaneously rejecting *haṭha*'s

78. A. R. Jain, *ibid.*, pp. 28-31.

79. M. Singleton, *ibid.*, pp. 70-80.

80. Elizabeth De Michelis, *ibid.*, pp. 3, 111-112, 123-125, 150-154, 178-181; "The Modern Spirit of Yoga. Idioms and Practices", in: G. Flood (ed.), *The Oxford History of Hinduism*, *ibid.*, pp. 426-429. We should note here that the idea about *rājayoga*'s superiority over all the other *Yoga* forms, without being verified by the classical tradition, had already been disseminated by the Theosophical Society, as H. Blavatsky initially distinguished the "inferior" *haṭha yoga* from the "superior" *rājayoga*, and subsequently she identified the latter one with *Patañjalayoga*.

practices and urging the reader to “always use a mental effort, what is usually called “Christian Science”, to keep the body strong”⁸¹. In his work, Swami combines *haṭha* teachings with neo-Vendatic occultism and American mysticism. Vivekananda adopted in this way Hinduist teachings to the contemporary Western preferences, by claiming that they were perfectly compatible with Western science, thus creating a neo-Hinduist pattern, in which, as Wouter Jacobus Hanegraaff observes, Hinduism’s main dogmas and principles “trimmed and refashioned”, to fit with the “New Thought’s” philosophy⁸². As M. Singleton claims, his profoundly adapted message didn’t challenge the prevailing beliefs but fueled the myth that New Thought is a modern regeneration of an ancient tradition⁸³. These ideas were subsequently spread back to India through Vivekananda and the Ramakrishna movement, a phenomenon that many scholars –adopting the term introduced by the anthropologist Agehananda Bharati– called the “pizza effect”⁸⁴, while they were adopted afterward by neo-Vedānta’s Western equivalent – New Age. Thus, the neo-Vedantic ideology became an integral part of Western mysticism, while Western esoteric ideas and traditions were incorporated into neo-Vedānta⁸⁵.

6.2. Modern Yoga’s Definition

Thus, from the 19th century onwards, Yoga was “deconstructed” and “reconstructed” both inside and outside of South Asia, leading to the appearance of a new, international, and multicultural tradition, which is now called “Modern Yoga”, a conceptual term introduced by De Michelis in her groundbreaking study *A History of Modern Yoga. Patanjali*

81. Swami Vivekananda, *Raja Yoga*, Celephaïs Press, Leeds, England 2003, p. 18. See also, Σουάμι Βιβεκανάντα, *Γόγχα*, Divris Publications, Athens 1983, p. 48.

82. W. J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture. Esotericism in the mirror of secular thought*, E. J. Brill, Netherlands 1996, p. 461.

83. M. Singleton, “Suggestive Therapeutics: New Thought’s Relationship to Modern Yoga”, *Asian Medicine. Tradition and Modernity* 3 (2007), p. 70.

84. Agehananda Bharati, “The Hindu Renaissance and its Apologetic Patterns”, *The Journal of Asian Studies* 29, 2 (Feb. 1970), p. 273; G. Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, *ibid.*, pp. 272-273; S. Strauss, *ibid.*, pp. 8-11; Elisabeth De Michelis, “The Modern Spirit of Yoga. Idioms and Practices”, *ibid.*, pp. 429-430; A. Foxen & Christa Kuberly, *ibid.*, p. 147.

85. Elisabeth De Michelis, *ibid.*, pp. 110-120, 150.

and *Western Esotericism*, which has become dominant in the literature about contemporary, international yoga.

According to De Michelis, “Modern Yoga” is used as a technical term to denote those branches, schools, or types of Yoga that are nowadays taught throughout the Western world, as well as certain contemporary approaches to yoga in India. These versions began to develop from the end of the 19th century, mainly via the interaction between Westerners keenly interested in the religions of the Indian subcontinent and certain Indians, whose thoughts and means of expression had been influenced by their Western counterparts – a crosscutting between tradition and modernity. Modern Yoga’s cultural roots can be traced to South Asia and the classical Hinduist tradition, from which conceptual models, subject matter, terminology, and symbolism were drawn. Thus, according to De Michelis, the final product can be defined as “the graft of a Western branch onto the Indian tree of yoga”⁸⁶.

As M. Singleton points out, it must be understood that Modern Yoga is neither a particular Yoga branch nor it refers to a single and undisputable body of practices. It is a conceptual category, a useful theoretical tool that showcases the particularities of Yoga’s global development in recent years and contributes to the formation of a historical phenomenon. It relates to heterogeneous systems which represent a synthesis of the Western esoteric philosophy, popular psychology, bodily exercise, and science with Hinduism and Buddhism, involving various and often disparate methods of “self-realization”, psychotherapy, and physical condition⁸⁷. Andrea Jain defines those systems as “a collection of complex data made up of a congeries of figures, institutions, ideas, and practical

86. Elizabeth De Michelis, “Yoga, Modern”, in: P. B. Clarke (ed.), *Encyclopedia of New Religious Movements*, Routledge, U.S.A. and Canada 2006, pp. 700-702; “A Preliminary Survey of Modern Yoga Studies”, in: *Asian Medicine, Tradition and Modernity*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2007), pp. 2-3; *History of Modern Yoga...*, *ibid.*, pp. 2, 9; “Modern Yoga History and Forms”, in: M. Singleton & Jean Byrne (eds.), *Yoga in the Modern World Contemporary Perspectives*, Routledge, U.S.A. & Canada 2008, pp. 19-20.

87. M. Singleton, “Modern Yoga”, in: Denise Cush, Catherine Robinson, & M. York (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, Routledge, London and New York 2008, pp. 1033-1038; “Transnational Exchange and the Genesis of Modern Postural Yoga”, in: Beatrix Hauser (ed.), *Yoga Traveling: Bodily Practice in Transcultural Perspective*, Springer, New York – Dordrecht London 2013, p. 38.

paths”, which reveals the desire for the perceived imbalance of “body-mind-soul” to be fixed⁸⁸.

In addition to that, M. Singleton, referring in particular to the Yoga systems oriented to body postures –which to a great degree draw up a lot of theories and practices from *hatha yoga*–, claims that they appeared as “a hybridized product of colonial India’s dialogical encounter with the worldwide physical culture movement” and constitute a “cultural successor” of established stretching and relaxation methods, already common in Western Europe and the U.S.A.⁸⁹. Anya Foxen and Christa Kuberry also agree on this, by saying that modern global yoga, as it is defined by them, looks more like a hybrid creation, a product of coalescing with other ideas and practices that seem similar to it but their cultural roots are different⁹⁰.

Furthermore, as A. Jain, J. Mallinson, and M. Singleton claim, the modern Yoga systems did not develop as an answer to the “transplant” of a religious movement from the Indian context to the Western one, or as a result of “cultural negotiation” between the Indian and the Western civilization, but as an answer to the processes of globalization and modernization⁹¹. Therefore, the term “modern”, apart from the fact that it may refer to a historical period, is also related to a whole complex of the socioeconomic, religious, and political conditions that constitute and define Modernity⁹². Indeed, Sarah Strauss suggests that Vivekananda’s reinterpretation resulted in the shift of Yoga’s center of gravity to the promotion of two values, indicative of their “modernity”: health and individual freedom⁹³. In his turn, Joseph S. Alter points out that, within the context of Modernity, “Yoga in all of its manifestations is directly linked to Indian modernity”, and it is defined “through religious reform movements, research centers, clinics, and retreats such as the Divine

88. A. R. Jain, *ibid.*, p. 172.

89. M. Singleton, *Yoga body*, *ibid.*, pp. 81, 154.

90. A. Foxen & Christa Kuberry, *ibid.*, p. 9.

91. A. R. Jain, *ibid.*, pp. 21, 46-47; J. Mallinson & M. Singleton (transl. and ed.), *ibid.*, p. 16.

92. M. Singleton & Jean Byrne, “Introduction”, in: M. Singleton & Jean Byrne (eds.), *Yoga in the Modern World. Contemporary Perspectives*, Routledge, New York 2008, pp. 6-7.

93. S. Strauss, *ibid.*, p. 5.

Life Society, the Himalayan Institute, Yoga Niketan Trust, and the Yoga Institute”⁹⁴.

In light of the aforementioned reasons, we believe that the most correct equivalent in Greek for Modern Yoga –which is used with slight variations in formulation by all the scholars to describe a new international tradition–⁹⁵, is «Νεώτερη Γιόγκα».

Having presented the historical context that explains why the Yoga systems or branches that have been developed from the 19th century onwards are entirely different from those that preceded them, we could now ask ourselves two questions, following J. Alter: a) If the classical Yoga textual tradition offers a model to evaluate the authenticity of various Yoga-related practices, then which contemporary texts can be perceived as valid enough⁹⁶? b) How do these texts describe Yoga?

7. Yoga-related contemporary bibliography

Regarding the first question –which contemporary texts can be perceived as valid– we think that, at the moment, we cannot give a clear answer, because the study of Yoga is relatively recent, therefore the whole matter is open to discussion. As far as the second question is concerned, we may indicatively see how Yoga is presented in some contemporary texts⁹⁷.

Theos Bernard, a characteristic representative of the Physical Culture movement supporters who helped the alignment of the Yoga concepts with Western notions of athletics and exercise, has been a pupil and trainee of different gurus in India and Tibet.

94. J. S. Alter, *ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

95. As we’ve mentioned before, Anya Foxen and Christa Kuberly use the expression “modern global yoga”. Mark Singleton uses the term “transnational anglophone yoga” to define the same concept. See M. Singleton, *Yoga Body...*, *ibid.*, pp. 9-10; “Transnational Exchange and the Genesis of Modern Postural Yoga”, *ibid.*, p. 38.

96. J. S. Alter, *ibid.*, pp. 18-19.

97. In the works presented below, we didn’t include the esoteric manuals written and published in the U.S.A. during the first two decades of the 20th century (ca. 1903-1917) by Yogi Ramacharaka [pseudonym, in all likelihood, of the Chicago-based lawyer William Walker Atkinson (1862-1932), a supporter of the New Thought movement].

When he returned to the U.S.A., he published in 1947 his work *Hindu Philosophy*, in which the term Yoga denotes the union of the individual spirit (*jīvātman*) with the universal one (*paramātman*). According to him, the “art of Yoga” represents a cultural system aiming at the “perfecting human efficiency”, which cures all the illnesses, enhances intelligence and reveals the knowledge of the Self. For him, Yoga is also a Philosophy striving for the individual’s evolution, which is achieved via the non-attachment to the world, the purification of consciousness, and the absolute union of the individual soul with the universal one, a state of mind called *samādhi*, Yoga’s final and supreme goal⁹⁸. In another study of his, *Hatha Yoga: The Report of a Personal Experience*, which was used as a practical manual and point of reference by many trainees, he again calls Yoga an “art”, while at the same time, he defines *haṭha* as a form of discipline, which includes the body’s and mind’s control, achieved through breathing regulation. Furthermore, he claims that the result of all these procedures is *samādhi*, which can be experienced subjectively and observed objectively⁹⁹.

In the Indian subcontinent, from the middle-19th century onwards, various educational institutes appeared, from the moment that physical culture was establishing itself as a modern version of the *haṭha* tradition. In 1918, Shri Yogendra (1897-1989) was the first who establish in the Bombay suburb Santacruz “The Yoga Institute”, wanting to scientifically validate Yoga’s benefits for health, but also creating simplified *āsana* lessons for the wider public, marking in this way the Yoga version which dominates the world today¹⁰⁰. In his book *Yoga Āsanās Simplified*, he defines Yoga as an art, following T. Bernard, and as an integrated practical system of self-cultivation, which “through” through interchangeable harmonious development of one’s body, mind and psychic potencies ultimately leads to physical well-being, mental harmony, moral elevation

98. B. Theos, *Hindu Philosophy*, Philosophical Library, New York 1947, pp. 86-87.

99. B. Theos, *Hatha Yoga. The Report of a Personal Experience*, Rider & Company, London 1958, pp. 12, 15.

100. M. Singleton, *Yoga Body...*, *ibid.*, pp. 116-122; E. Goldberg, *The Path of Modern Yoga. The History of an Embodied Spiritual Practice*, Inner Traditions, Toronto 2016, pp. 2-73. Regarding The Yoga Institute, see also its official website: <https://theyogainstitute.org/> [accessed at 27.9.2023].

and habituation to spiritual consciousness; he also asserts that it is an ecumenical science, a philosophy and an undogmatic way of life –from the moment that is overtly rational–, and open to all races, genders, nationalities, religions and faiths. Furthermore, for someone to study it, they do not need to denounce their religion or spiritual inheritance¹⁰¹.

A few years later, in 1924, the pioneer researcher Swami Kuvalayananda (1883-1966) began his first experiments in Lonavala focusing on changes in blood pressure and heart rate during the execution of various *āsana* and *prāṇāyāma* exercises. In his book *Āsanās*, he claimed that when the human body's different systems are cooperating, their harmonious function, that is health, is secured, while when this harmony is disturbed, the result is an illness. By establishing the human body's natural harmony, Yoga aims at the avoidance of sicknesses and the safeguarding of health¹⁰². As J. Alter notes, Kuvalayananda's experiments and research were aimed at the empirical understanding of the material manifestation of a Cosmic Principle, comparable with Physics' natural laws, a principle on which Yoga is based and was perceived as the "theory" of absolute freedom. Indeed, although Kuvalayananda didn't invent the internationally spread Modern Yoga, nevertheless his research made possible its invention¹⁰³.

In the early 1930s, though, the city of Rishikesh in Northern India had become a major hub for the practice of Yoga; that was because of Swami Sivananda Saraswati (1887-1963). Sivananda in his book *Health and Hatha Yoga* defines Yoga as a science, a practical system of self-cultivation, through the practice of which the harmonious development of body, mind, and soul is being achieved. The trainee enjoys health, longevity, vigor, and energy, acquires absolute control over nature, achieves moral perfection and absolute concentration of the mind, unfolds various psychic powers, and unlocks the realm of utter bliss¹⁰⁴. Sivananda formalized his activities by establishing in 1936 the Divine

101. Sri Yogendra, *Yoga Āsanās Simplified*, The Yoga Institute, Santa Cruz Bombay 1954, pp. 20, 25, 26.

102. Swami Kuvalayānanda, *Āsanās. Part One*, Kaivalyadhāma Lonavala, Bombay 1933, p. 34.

103. J. S. Alter, *ibid.*, pp. 30-34, 77; E. Goldberg, *ibid.*, pp. 75-141.

104. Swami Sivananda, *Health and Hatha Yoga*, The Divine Life Society, Tehri-Garhwal, Uttarakhand, Himalayas 2007, p. 93.

Life Society, while his pupil Swami Vishnudevananda (1927-1993) subsequently created around the world many Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centers and ashrams¹⁰⁵.

Vishnudevananda in his work *The Complete Illustrated Book of Yoga*, which, as Theos Bernard's book mentioned above, was used as a practical manual, perceives Yoga as a science that offers an experiential method aiming at finding truth in religion. This truth, he claims, is none other than the identification of the individual soul with the supreme one, the ecumenic consciousness. According to Vishnudevananda, therefore, yoga is a scientific vehicle through which the modifications of the mind and the vital breath are gradually brought under control; thus, humans' evolution is achieved, and that paves the way to the last stage—the superconsciousness—, where duality is eliminated. The knower, the knowledge, and the object of the knowledge are merged into the Supreme I/Self or God. Indeed, in the preface he wrote in 1988 for a new edition of his book, he added that Yoga represents a complete science of self-discipline and self-development, which brings balance and harmony to the trainee's body, mind, and soul, by showing the way to perfect health and piece with the Self, the world, the nature, and God¹⁰⁶.

In 1969, another pupil of Sivananda, Swami Satyananda Saraswati (1923-2009), founder of the Satyananda Yoga System, in his study *Asana Pranayama Mudra Bandha*, points out that the word *yoga* denotes “unity”, and can be described in spiritual terms as the union of the individual consciousness with the universal one. By calling Yoga a science, he suggests that, on a practical level, it represents a medium for the harmonization between body, mind, and soul; this can be achieved by the use of certain techniques: *āsana*, *prāṇāyāma*, *mudrā*, *bandha*, *ṣaṭkarma*, and meditation. Furthermore, he claims that, although Yoga's central theme is the achievement of the highest goal in the spiritual path, what makes it especially effective is that it serves the holistic principles of harmony and unity¹⁰⁷.

105. A. R. Jain, *ibid.*, pp. 39-40, 67-68.

106. Swami Vishnu-Sivananda, *The Complete Illustrated Book of Yoga*, Tree Rivers Press, New York 1960, pp. 3, 5, 7-8, 13-14.

107. Swami Satyananda Saraswati, *Asana*, *ibid.*, pp. 1-5.

Apart from Rishikesh at the foothills of the Himalayas, till the early 1930s, the city of Mysore in South India became a pan-Indian hub of the physical culture revival, wherein the physical education school programs the conceptual merger of *āsana* and exercises have been put on a firm footing. In this city, Tirumalai Krishnamacharya (1888-1989) created the Jaganmohan Palace School *yogaśālā*, teaching there from 1930 till the early 1950s.¹⁰⁸ His method, as Norman Sjoman suggests, was mostly based on a pre-existent manual, which was a mixture of English gymnastics and Indian bodybuilding, wrestling, and the use of weapons. Yet, even though the dominant physical exercises did not coincide with any Yoga definition before this period, Krishnamacharya called his system “yoga”¹⁰⁹.

T. K. V. Desikachar, Krishnamacharya’s son, in his book *The Heart of Yoga. Developing a Personal Practice*, offers the following definition of Yoga: “to attain what was previously unattainable”, “coming together”, “bringing together”, “to tie the strands of the mind together”, “to be one with the divine”. He believes that Yoga creates a situation in which we are constantly present in all our actions, committed to them, while at the same time, we are in harmony with the superior force, the spiritual source¹¹⁰.

As De Michelis notes, apart from the works mentioned above, the book that represents a milestone for Modern Yoga’s development and became a point of reference for the *āsana* practices all over the world is *Light on Yoga*, written by B. K. S. Iyengar, a Krishnamacharya’s pupil¹¹¹. Iyengar argues in this book that Yoga is one of the six major Indian philosophical systems; he characterizes it as a science of religions, but also as a diachronic rational science that at its epicenter lies humankind’s physical, ethical, mental, and spiritual well-being. Indeed, from the moment that the word *yoga* is derived from the Sanskrit root *yuj* which

108. M. Singleton, *ibid.*, pp. 175-184.

109. N. E. Sjoman, *The Yoga Tradition of the Mysore Palace*, Abhinav Publications, New Delhi 1999, pp. 53-56.

110. T. K. V. Desikachar, *The Heart of Yoga. Developing a Personal Practice*, Inner Traditions International, Rochester, Vermont 1995, pp. 5-7, 79.

111. Elizabeth De Michelis, *A history of Modern Yoga*, *ibid.*, pp. 198-199.

means “bind” and “unite”, it denotes the union of the trainee’s will with the divine one, but also the means through which *jīvātmā* can be united or be in communion with *Paramātmā*, thus securing liberation (*mokṣa*). He also argues that God as *Antarātmā* (the inner Self) resides within man, and the Yoga’s three last stages (*dhāraṇā*, *dhyāna*, and *samādhi*) keep the trainee in harmony with himself and his Creator. *Samādhi* is a state where the trainee has departed from the material world and has been absorbed from the Infinite/Eternal, having succeeded the true Yoga, realizing himself (*Ātman*) as part of the Supreme Soul residing inside him¹¹².

Having examined the theoretical foundations of Yoga’s definitions as they appear in books and studies of 20th-century writers, who also teach it, let us try to present a critical overview of the relevant definitions, as they are presented by Greek Yoga Centers.

8. Critical overview of Yoga’s definitions, as they are presented by Greek Yoga Centers

The great majority of Greek Yoga centers present yoga as a “union”, that is a state, a goal to be achieved. Nevertheless, in most cases, this approach is rather vague, i.e. it is not specified which “union” it is about. They occasionally referred to the union of the individual self (*ātman*) with the supreme self (*paramātman*), following that of contemporary writers like T. Bernard, Vishnudevananda, Desikachar, Iyengar, and Satyananda, but they fail to analyze or further specify how they perceive the notions of the individual and the supreme self, given the fact that the public they are targeting does not possess any knowledge of the Hinduist religion and philosophy, therefore it is not in a position to take for granted all those ideas. Furthermore, let us note here, that, on these definitions, they are occasionally entered elements derived from Transcendentalism,¹¹³ either on behalf of the Centers or certain modern

112. B. K. S. Iyengar, *Light on Yoga, ibid.*, pp. 13, 19, 21, 22, 39, 41.

113. As De Michelis argues Transcendentalism’s central conviction is that every person possesses, apart from the conscious self, an inner ability that renders it receptive to a

writers, like Vishnudevananda and Iyengar – as they are talking about superconsciousness or Supreme I/Ego and Supreme Soul respectively¹¹⁴.

The definition of Yoga as “science”, though, as it is often presented from the various Yoga centers and, as we’ve seen before, is supported by all the contemporary writers, is absent from the Hinduist or Buddhist classical texts. It is a view firstly expounded by Blavatsky and subsequently adopted by Vivekananda and Yogi Ramacharaka, a writer connected with the New Thought movement, who defined Yoga as “Science of Breath” or “Science of Being” an expression used later by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, but also as “Philosophy”¹¹⁵.

As far as another definition of Yoga –“*the path that leads to the direct experience of our inner Self*”–, to the realization of the Self or self-realization, again its source is none other than Vivekananda. Of course, the term “God-realization” – a widespread Anglo-Indian neologism which can be interpreted as “completion of the religious experience”– but also the term “self-realization”, where fundamental concepts of the neo-Vedantic occultism; yet, according to Vivekananda, the notion of “realization” has a predominantly experiential and personal character, an approach that has been adopted by almost all the Yoga Centers in Greece¹¹⁶.

There are also some other relatively relevant definitions of Yoga –“*self-improvement system*”, “*personal development*”, “*development of consciousness*”,

superior force or Super-Soul. The person’s spirituality is not related to any established religion but to the Universe’s fundamental laws. See Elizabeth De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, *ibid.*, p. 115.

114. Iyengar is particularly vague, from the moment that he is referring to his book as a divine being, which is variously characterized as Supreme Universal Spirit, Paramātmā, God, Antarātmā or Inner Self, Maker, Supreme Soul, Universal Spirit. B. K. S. Iyengar, *Light on Yoga*, *ibid.*, pp. 19, 21, 22, 41, 44.

115. H. P. Blavatsky, “A Hindu professor’s views on Indian yoga”, *ibid.*, p. 158; *The Theosophist*, vol. 2, no. 8, Theosophical Society, Bombay May 1881, p. 180; Swami Vivekananda, *ibid.*, pp. 5-7, 12, 37, 65, 111; Yogi Ramacharaka, *Hatha Yoga or the Yogi Philosophy of Physical Well-Being*, The Yogi Publication Society 1904, pp. 8, 71-80; *The Hindu-Yogi Science of Breath*, CreateSpace 2009, pp. 4-11; *Lessons in Gnani Yoga (The Yoga of Wisdom)*, Dodo Press, p. 1; *Advanced Course in Yogi Philosophy and Oriental Occultism*, The Yogi Publication Society, Masonic Temple, Chicago 1904, pp. 14, 113-168.

116. Swami Vivekananda, *ibid.*, pp. 120, 149, 153-154, 188. See also Elizabeth De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, *ibid.*, pp. 123-126, 140-146, 173-177.

“state of expanded awareness”, “awakening of latent potential”–, proposed by T. Bernard, Yogendra, Vishnudevananda, Sivananda, and Iyengar, which nevertheless are derived from the New Age movement. De Michelis points out that, as Modern Yoga and New Age were developed in parallel and often in an interrelated way, this resulted in some concepts of the New Age movement being of primary importance for most of the Modern Yoga versions¹¹⁷.

Regarding the Yoga definitions as a “holistic system” aiming at “the harmony of the levels of existence, physical-spiritual-mental” or the “physical purification and physical, emotional and mental control”, we notice that they are derived from the Harmonious Religion¹¹⁸ and the New Thought Movement¹¹⁹ respectively. In any case, the references to a “holistic system” could be equally perceived as deriving from the New Age movement, as within the latter, and for the “personal development” to be achieved, it is imperative to resort to alternative therapeutical and meditation techniques¹²⁰.

9. Etic approach to Yoga definitions and their classification

We have generally observed that the researchers avoid offering a definite and unified way of defining yoga, mainly because this is considered rather impossible. There is no unified and homogenous Yoga tradition, or one and only, undisputable Yoga definition, as the latter cannot be confined within a particular system of thought and practice; both are constantly changing and evolving as they interact with the surrounding culture.

117. Elizabeth De Michelis, *ibid.*, pp. 123-126, 140-146, 173-177, 185-186, 192-194, 200-204.

118. S. E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, Yale University Press, New Haven & London 1972, p. 1019.

119. M. Singleton, “Suggestive Therapeutics: New Thought’s Relationship to Modern Yoga”, *ibid.*, pp. 76-77.

120. St. Papalexandropoulos, «Νέα Ἐποχή. Ἡ θρησκευτολογικὴ ταυτότητα ἐνὸς κινήματος», *Ἐξοδος* 6 (1991), pp. 17-29 and 7 (1992), pp. 41-61; W. J. Hanegraaff, *ibid.*, pp. 44, 46; P. B. Clarke, “New Age Movement (NAM)”, in: P. B. Clarke (ed.), *Encyclopedia of New Religious Movements*, Routledge, U.S.A. & Canada 2006, pp. 442-446.

Nevertheless, we've discerned some common motives in etic approaches to Yoga definitions¹²¹, in the “academic”, and scientific definitions that we will present below, trying also to classify them.

9.1. Yoga as Union

The Vedic notion of Yoga as “union”, appears in the writings of the archeologist Sir John Marshall, who, although he reflects the orientalist stereotypes of his era, by saying that Yoga constitutes “ the means of acquiring miraculous powers, and hence in course of time the yogi came to be regarded as a magician, miracle-monger, and charlatan”, he states that the purpose of Yoga is the union with God via the intellectual discipline and concentration of mind¹²².

G. Feuerstein also points out that *yoga* can have two main meanings –“union” and “discipline”– and in most cases, those two meanings co-exist. Thus, he argues that, for example, *dhyāna-yoga* denotes the unitive discipline of meditation, *karma-yoga* the unitive discipline of self-transcending action, *bhakti-yoga* the unitive discipline of love and devotion to the Divine, etc. Furthermore, he explains that through the unifying discipline, the trainee does not experience internal conflict, he or she realizes his/her true nature, that is Self (*ātman*), the ultimate Reality, and is in a position to live in harmony with the world, as he/she is consciously unified with it¹²³.

Kimberly J. Lau describes yoga as being the different paths that lead to “self-unification” and to the “transformation of consciousness” which is necessary for this union to be realized¹²⁴.

121. As W. J. Hanegraaff points out, the scientific discourse related to religion is not emic, but etic and includes theories and interpretative models which are considered suitable for the scholars in their terms. See W. J. Hanegraaff, *ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

122. J. Marshall, *Mohenjo-Daro, and the Indus Civilization*, vol. I, Stephen Austin and Sons LTD., Hertford 1931, pp. 53-54. Sir John Marshall (1876-1958) was Director General of The Archaeological Survey of India (1902-1928) and oversaw the excavations of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappā in the Panjāb area of the present-day Pakistan (1922-1927).

123. G. Feuerstein, *The Path of Yoga*, *ibid.* p. 2.

124. K. J. Lau, *New Age Capitalism. Making Money East of Eden*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 2000, p. 96.

Finally, S. R. Sarbacker argues that the secularized traditions of Modern Yoga, that put emphasis on the body postures and are strongly sport-oriented, can “frame yoga as a “union” of the more mundane factors of body and breath, or of body, senses, and mind in a manner distinct from the language of devotion, theism, or transcendence”¹²⁵.

9.2. Yoga as Method

The majority of the researchers give special importance to practice – they define Yoga as a method, a medium, and a discipline, not as a state. M. Eliade, in his classic study *Yoga. Immortality and Freedom* outlined Yoga as “The means of attaining to Being”, as an appropriate method to achieving redemption (*mokṣa*, *mukti*), and he defines it as “any ascetic technique and any method of meditation”¹²⁶.

A few years later, K. S. Joshi argued that, regarding the use of the term *Yoga*, it would be more correct if its use were restricted only to the method because the latter and the practices’ ultimate goal is the personality’s transformation, a state that has been called “liberation” (*kaivalya*), or “isolation” (*Mukti*)¹²⁷.

G. Flood and I. Whicher define yoga as the different paths towards spiritual liberation or as various technologies and branches of asceticism and meditation that lead to a spiritual experience or bring about the transformation of the consciousness, leading it to the absolute peak – the spiritual salvation (*mokṣa*), the liberation from worldly existence, and the experience of the Self’s true identity (*ātman*, *puruṣa*)¹²⁸.

G. Samuel and S. R. Sarbacker define yoga as a set of disciplined and systematic techniques of mind-body education and control, that they aim to reshape human consciousness for it to achieve some higher goal. Sarbacker describes this goal as either the trainee’s transformation into a more perfect, powerful being, or as liberation from worldly afflictions¹²⁹. Likewise, Gerald James Larson believes that yoga in a more general

125. St. R. Sarbacker, *ibid.*, p. 18.

126. M. Eliade, *Yoga*, *ibid.*, pp. 4, 5.

127. K. S. Joshi, *ibid.*, pp. 55-56.

128. G. Flood, *ibid.*, p. 94; I. Whicher, *ibid.*, pp. 6, 28.

129. G. Samuel, *ibid.*, p. 2; R. Sarbacker, *ibid.*, p. 34.

sense can be translated as “disciplined meditation”, which focuses on one or more of the many levels of ordinary awareness. In a more specific sense, as the concrete system of thought (*śāstra*) that is referred to in Pātañjala Yoga¹³⁰.

Finally, J. Alter argues that the concept of yoga must be understood as non-transcendental, as it is related to the world of grounded human experience, and he defines it as a set of practices that include mental education, meditation, and strict ethical standards, adding also the intense bodily training. The ultimate goal of all these is to lead to “paradoxical end”¹³¹. Likewise, Peter Connolly relates yoga with physical exercises and bodily postures that are defined not as a form of physical discipline, but as a spiritual one¹³².

9.3. Yoga as practice-discipline and as a goal

I. Whicher and David Carpenter argue that the term *yoga* is rather ambiguous, from the moment that it can mean both the purification and illumination process and the outcome of “liberation” or “detachment/solitude” (*kaivalya*)¹³³. Likewise, Knut A. Jacobsen, as well as Anya Foxen and Christa Kuberry, are of the view that yoga refers to the traditions of mental and bodily discipline, that is the techniques of mind and body control, but also to the goal to be achieved via those practices/methods, and in the achieved state of consciousness or existence¹³⁴.

It is interesting to note that the last researchers further analyze the term, by distinguishing three sub-categories: 1) “Yoga of going” – a spiritual practice which is based on the idea of a literal voyage, having as its destination a higher level of reality; this idea is derived from the “yoga” of the dying Vedic warriors, that has already been mentioned. 2)

130. G. J. Larson, “Introduction to the Philosophy of Yoga”, *ibid.*, pp. 28-30.

131. J. S. Alter, *ibid.*, p. 11.

132. P. Connolly, *A Student's Guide to the History and Philosophy of Yoga*, Equinox Publishing Ltd., South Yorkshire 2014, p. 1.

133. I. Whicher & D. Carpenter, “Introduction”, in: I. Whicher and D. Carpenter (eds.), *Yoga. The Indian tradition*, Routledge, London and New York 2003, p. 67. In one of his previous studies, though, I. Whicher had defined *yoga* as a state of consciousness which definitely surpasses the usual boundaries of our empirical identity or self-consciousness. See I. Whicher, *ibid.*, p. 28.

134. K. A. Jacobsen, “Introduction: Yoga traditions”, *ibid.*, p. 4.

“Yoga of knowing” – a practice which is based on the transformation of consciousness, that is on an inner passage; this is an idea derived from the *Upanishads*, based on the concept of the correspondence between the human body (microcosm) and the universe (macrocosm); so, journeys to other realms become less literal and more visionary. 3) “Yoga of doing” – body and mind techniques that have been developed among the world-deniers ascetics, who were seeking to control the body, having as their ultimate goal the latter’s immobilization, so that afterward to be able to also immobilize their mind and thus escape from *saṃsāra*, the vicious cycle of rebirths¹³⁵.

In addition to that, I. Whicher and D. Carpenter argue that the emphasis in the Western world is nowadays given to the practices, at the expense of Yoga’s theoretical-philosophical reception and understanding. Indeed, the various practices are perceived as a superior activity, with the Ego, hoping and struggling for spiritual illumination, pursues through it its well-being; yet, at the end of the day, the means become an end in itself¹³⁶, or, as Anya Foxen and Christa Kuberry have put it, the practice turns into the goal¹³⁷.

9.4. Yoga as “spirituality”

Finally, we see that yoga is characterized as “spirituality”, as it is the case with M. Eliade: “yogadarśana is not solely a ‘system of philosophy’; it sets its mark, so to speak, on a very considerable number of pan-Indian practices, beliefs, and aspirations [...]. Naturally, this protean Yoga does not always resemble the ‘classic’ system of Patañjali; rather, we find it in the form of traditional clichés, to which, during the course of the centuries, an increasing number of ‘popular’ beliefs and practices has been added. To such a degree is this true that Yoga has ended by becoming a characteristic dimension of Indian spirituality”¹³⁸.

Later, the same view was expounded by G. Feuerstein, when, in his classic study, he defined Yoga as “India’s particular brand of spirituality”;

135. A. Foxen & Christa Kuberry, *ibid.*, pp. 11-13.

136. I. Whicher & D. Carpenter, “Introduction”, *ibid.*, p. 67.

137. A. Foxen & Christa Kuberry, *ibid.*, p. 13.

138. M. Eliade, *Yoga*, *ibid.*, p. 101.

its different branches and “Schools” are connected with a basic stock of practices whose ultimate goal is the “Self-realization” or liberation (*mokṣa*, *mukti*, *apavarga*, *kaivalya*). In another book of his, he even argues that Yoga is the equivalent of Christian mysticism, Muslim Sufism, and Jewish Kabbala, from the moment that it traditionally strives to deeply transform the individual, through the Ego’s transcendence and the realizing of the Transcendental Reality itself¹³⁹.

10. Conclusion

Concluding our discussion and looking back at the data we presented above, we could conclude that the semantic field of the term “yoga” is so wide and its different meanings so diverse that, as many scholars have argued, it can be transformed into any practice and procedure one wishes¹⁴⁰.

So, epigrammatically, without the risk of being led to some misleading generalization, we can mention, that, when we are talking about Yoga as a union or as a method-practice-discipline, we are referring to Yoga as it is described by the different systems that they had been developed in South Asia before the 19th century, but when we further define Yoga as a science or a path that leads to self-realization, as a system or self-improvement and personal development or as a holistic system aiming at the harmony of the levels of existence, we are referring to Yoga as it has been described from 19th century onward from a new, multicultural tradition; a Yoga which has very little in common with *Yoga Sūtra* and other related ancient treatises, a particular historical phenomenon that cannot be directly identified with the various pre-19th century manifestations of Yoga and has been influenced from various, religious or otherwise, movements¹⁴¹.

139. G. Feuerstein, *The Path of Yoga*, *ibid.*, pp. 4-5; *The Deeper Dimension of Yoga*, *ibid.*, p. 3.

140. D. G. White, “Yoga, Brief History of an Idea”, *ibid.*, p. 2; A. R. Jain, *ibid.*, p. 159; Elizabeth De Michelis, “The Modern Spirit of Yoga. Idioma and Practices”, *ibid.*, p. 432.

141. M. Singleton, “Modern Yoga”, *ibid.*, p. 1033; D. G. White, “Yoga, Brief History of an

Whichever might be the case, though, the core of both Yoga forms –pre-19th century and Modern ones–, remains the same, because of the soteriological nature of their main goal – either being a soteriology of the liberation from the afflictions of existence or self-deification, or identification with the divine consciousness and acquirement of the *samādhi* state. The same goes also in the case that the practice of Yoga forms part of the “self-development”, a key theme in Modern Yoga – a notion that, as A. Jain points out, is based on the Protestant concept of individual salvation¹⁴². Likewise, W. Hanegraaff argues that “personal development” is understood as the precise form taken by religious salvation within the New Age context, from which, as we’ve repeatedly mentioned above, globalized Yoga was heavily influenced¹⁴³. Lastly, let us not forget the close connection between personal development, that is salvation, and therapy, a connection that Iyengar highlights with the following emblematic phrase: “Health is religious. Ill health is irreligious”¹⁴⁴.

Idea”, *ibid.*, p. 2; A. R. Jain, *ibid.*, σ. 160; Elizabeth De Michelis, “The Modern Spirit of Yoga. Idioms and Practices”, *ibid.*, p. 427.

142. A. R. Jain, *ibid.*, p. 46.

143. W. J. Hanegraaff, *ibid.*, pp. 44, 46.

144. B. K. S. Iyengar, *The Tree of Yoga. Yoga Vrkṣa*, in: D. Rivers-Moore (ed.), Shambhala, Boston 1989, p. 11.