

Roots & Branches of Yoga: From Ancient India to Contemporary Global Practices

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Syllabus

We collected books, articles, and films to deepen your knowledge beyond what we have time to cover during our time together. Read/view “required” titles before or after each class, and save “optional” titles for a future date, perhaps next year, when they will reinforce what you are learning now.

Course 3 - The Modern Yoga Period (1800 C.E. until today, including Vivekananda’s arrival in the US, Krishnamacharya’s invention of modern postural yoga, and the popular yoga revolution)

We will address the following topics from this period: The influential Indian sage Ramakrishna and his famous disciple Vivekananda who became the first Westernized Indian yogi. Following in these footsteps, Yogananda arrived in the West and taught an integral yet modernized form of yoga incorporating both meditation and posture yoga. Next is Krishnamacharya, who invented modern posture practice, and his disciples, including Pattabhi Jois and B. K. S. Iyengar, who popularized these practices in yet newer forms in the West. We will discuss whether Krishnamacharya drew on older asana teachings or invented new postures. We will then explore the difference between the traditional, largely soteriological paths of yoga, and how that overlaps and contrasts with modern yoga as a fitness, spiritual, holistic lifestyle practice. The many cultural, psychological and even political issues surrounding modern yoga will be explored, such as appropriation vs. appreciation, commercialism, fame and abuse, the pros and cons of gurus, and the growing post-lineage yoga movement. Finally, we will discuss what the future of yoga may hold—will it become largely Westernized and self-empowerment oriented, or will it herald a new bridge, a global, universal, cross-cultural search for health, happiness, meaning and enlightenment? Or will it blossom into something entirely different?

Module 1

The transition into the Modern Era occurred during Islamic and then British colonial rule in India. We will discuss these outside influences on the development of yoga and look at particular figures such as Ramakrishna and his disciple, Vivekananda, who was the first Westernized Indian yogi. Following in his footsteps, Yogananda arrived in the West and taught an integral yet modernized form of yoga. Krishnamacharya invented modern posture practice, and his students B. K. S. Iyengar, Pattabhi Jois, Desikachar, and Indra Devi popularized these practices in yet newer forms in the West. We will discuss whether Krishnamacharya drew from older asana teachings or invented new postures.

Module 2

We will explore the global reach of yoga by looking at its influence in the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman, and also its effect on Mahatma Gandhi's and Martin Luther King Jr's political movements. It's a testament to yoga's global reach that there are more teachers to discuss than what time allows for, though we will mention Maharishi Mahesh Yoga, Yogi Bhanan, Krishnamurti, Swami Muktananda, and others.

Module 3

We will continue to explore the many influential teachers who popularized yoga worldwide. A focus will be the difference between traditional, largely soteriological paths of yoga, and how that overlaps and contrasts with modern yoga that can be a fitness, spiritual, holistic lifestyle practice. The many social, psychological, and political issues surrounding modern yoga will be addressed, such as cultural appropriation vs. appreciation, commercialization, fame and abuse, pros and cons of gurus, and the growing post-lineage yoga movement.

Module 4

In this final class we will ask and answer big questions: What is yoga's history? Is yoga Hindu, Buddhist, both, or neither? Is yoga religion? What legal issues and lawsuits have arisen? What teacher/student boundary issues have developed? What does the future of yoga hold? Will it herald a new bridge as a global, universal, cross-cultural search for health, happiness, meaning, and enlightenment? Or will it blossom into something entirely different? And what role will you play in this unfolding history and the stories told about it?

Readings/Viewings

Required

- Brooks (2018)—[“A Note about Cultural Appropriation Since Nearly Forever”](#)
- Gandhi (2013)—Film, [“Kumare: The True Story of a False Prophet”](#)
- Leitsinger (2018)—[“#metoo Unmasks the Open Secret of Sexual Abuse in Yoga”](#)
- White (2014)—[The “Yoga Sutra of Patanjali”: A Biography](#), Chps. 1, 7, 12
- Wildcroft (2004)—[“Post-lineage Yoga: From Guru to #MeToo”](#) Zutshi (2019)—[“India Syndrome,” and the strange side of Americans’ obsession with Hindu spirituality”](#)

Optional

- Goldberg (2013)—[American Veda: From Emerson and the Beatles to Yoga and Meditation, How Indian Spirituality Changed the West](#)
- Jain (2014)—[Selling Yoga: From Counterculture to Pop Culture](#)
- Singleton (2010)—[Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Yoga](#)