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Investigating the Roots of Yoga

By Michelle Valentino

As the popularity of hatha yoga has increased, there has been increasing interest in exploring the origins and history of the practices of hatha yoga. The most significant effort is the Haṭha Yoga Project (HYP), a five-year research project funded by the European Research Council and based at [SOAS](#) (The School of Oriental and African Studies) at the University of London. The project aims to chart the history of physical yoga practice using both a philosophical and ethnographic approach, so it includes the study of texts on yoga as well as fieldwork among ascetic practitioners of yoga living in India. Professor Alexis Sanderson is on the advisory board, as are Professor Dominic Goodall and Professor Harunaga Isaacson, two other pre-eminent Sanskritists who studied with Professor Sanderson at Oxford.

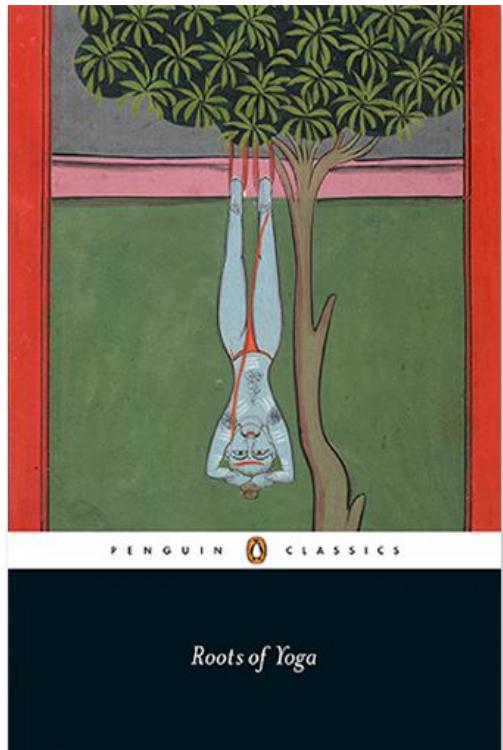


The Hatha Yoga Project team is led by Dr. James Mallinson, who did his PhD at Oxford under the direction of Professor Sanderson. The team is working on critical editions and annotated translations of ten Sanskrit texts on haṭha yoga, four monographs, and a range of journal articles, book chapters and encyclopedia entries. This month, a workshop for scholars working on critical editions of Sanskrit texts on yoga is being held at SOAS. Professor Sanderson has been invited to give a lecture, and his topic is “A Hidden Yogic

Tradition: Karaṇa and Mudrā as Means of Enlightenment in Vidyāpīṭha Śaivism.” Two other conferences, one on yogis, the other on yoga, will be held at SOAS in September 2017 and September 2019 respectively.

The primary output of the project will be four monographs. The first, by Dr. James Mallinson, will analyze haṭha yoga and its practitioners in the period in which it was formalized, the 11th to 15th centuries CE. The second, by Dr. Jason Birch, who also wrote his PhD at Oxford under the direction of Professor Sanderson, will document its subsequent proliferation and development, and identify what constituted yoga practice in India on the eve of colonialism. The third, by Dr. Mark Singleton, will focus on haṭha yoga’s physical techniques in order to chart their history and identify continuities with and differences from the practices of modern globalized yoga. The fourth, by Daniela Bevilacqua, will

describe Indian ascetics' practice and perception of haṭha yoga by comparing those of past and present ascetics, and those of ascetics and lay practitioners.



Another major product of the Hatha Yoga Project will be *The Roots of Yoga*, a book that includes material from a variety of source texts in different languages dating from 1000 BC to the nineteenth century CE. The book is targeted for a general audience to enhance understanding of hatha yoga's historical contexts in South Asia and the range of practices that it includes.

The material in the book is drawn from over a hundred texts, many of which are not well known, and which date from about 1000 BC to the nineteenth century CE: a period of almost three thousand years. Although most of the texts included are in Sanskrit, there is also material from Tibetan, Arabic, Persian, Bengali, Tamil, Pali, Old Kashmiri, Old Marathi, Avadhi and Braj Bhasha (late-medieval precursors of Hindi), and English. The texts in the book include such a broad range of time periods and languages to reveal patterns and continuities that contribute to a better understanding of yoga's development within and across practice traditions. The texts are being translated, introduced and annotated by Dr. Mallinson and Dr. Singleton. *The Roots of Yoga* is scheduled for publication in the spring of 2017.

If you are interested in reading more about the Hatha Yoga Project, visit <http://hyp.soas.ac.uk/>

Namaste



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