

A New Module on the History and Philosophy of Yoga

Having been invited to design and deliver a new module on the History and Philosophy of Yoga for the British Wheel of Yoga I thought I would take this opportunity to share with members something of its flavour. I am profoundly aware that there are many voices in the world of yoga, each of which propagates its own version of 'yoga philosophy' and reconstructs the history of that philosophy in quite different ways. Readers of yoga magazines, online blogs, textbooks and translations of yogic texts frequently encounter statements such as 'Patanjali's Yoga Sutras are the bible of yoga,' 'at its deepest level yoga means union,' 'isvara pranidhana means surrender to God,' 'the first cross cultural exchange between the Vedas and Tantras took place in the Indus Valley civilisation at Harappa and Mohenjodaro' and "the 7 *chakras*, which are simply a more complex version of the 3 simple levels or stages [body, mind and spirit] represent 7 levels of consciousness and energy available to all human beings. (The first three *chakras* – food, sex, and power – are roughly stage 1; *chakras* 4 and 5 – relational heart and communication – are basically stage 2; and *chakras* 6 and 7 – psychic and spiritual – are the epitome of stage 3.).'

What are we to make of claims like these? Are they true? Are they false? Are they somewhere in-between?

Each view has its supporters and critics. In academia we might describe these differences as 'diverse and contested perspectives.' There can be little doubt that this diversity of views and claims can be confusing, and sometimes deeply confusing. It can be tempting, therefore, to simply ignore all the disagreements about history and philosophy and concentrate on asana or pranayama or anatomy or some other aspect of yoga's rich tapestry. In my view, such temptations should be resisted. Without some basic knowledge of yoga's history and the teachings associated with it our appreciation of what we are involved in when we take up yoga is greatly impoverished. Moreover, without that knowledge our ability to evaluate claims made by various

authorities about what is and is not yoga and about who, if anyone, has the right to regulate it will be deficient.

My aims in this module are then, first of all, to share my own understanding of yoga's history and philosophy. Much of that can be found in my book *A Student's Guide to the History and Philosophy of Yoga* (revised edition) Equinox, 2104. To supplement this I will be using a number of film pieces to enliven the presentation and stimulate discussion. I will also be seeking to help you develop your own skills of critical reading and discussion (of my book and others) as well as your presentation skills – during the module each participant will offer a short presentation on a topic of their choice. The tone I will seek to create is exploratory, (with an emphasis on sharing views) and evidence-based (whilst any view may be shared we will expect those who offer them to supply the evidence that makes it credible). Participants will be encouraged to bring whatever translations of yogic texts they have found useful (the merits of these will be discussed in small groups), though acquaintance with original languages is not required. All other materials (handouts, articles and translations of less familiar texts) will be supplied by me. By the end you should be able to: understand where many of the voices in the world of yoga are coming from; make informed judgements about the credibility of those voices, and offer insights and guidance to others on many of the issues that cause controversy in the world of yoga.

If this sounds like your kind of module please watch out for advertisements in *Spectrum*. Yoga Junction in London (<http://www.yogajunction.co.uk>) will be hosting a 'Taster Day' for the module on March 18th 2017. You might also check out the Yoga tab on my website (www.turningpointconsulting.co.uk) to see a selection of my publications. There is also an email link there if you have any questions that you would like to put to me directly.

Peter Connolly.