

A Brief Alternative History of Yoga

by Ramesh Bjonnes

It is time we take fresh look at the history of our yoga practices. The historical view of yoga in the West has been dominated by writers such as Georg Feuerstein and David Frawley. Their version of yogic history, which claims that Archaic Yoga originated in the Vedas, has become the accepted norm in the Western yoga community. In this outline, specially created for the research junkies and philosophers out there, I challenge this view by asserting that yoga is primarily a Tantric path and originated within the ancient Dravidian culture of India.

Steeped in religious dogmas, especially against women and the lower castes, the Vedic ritualistic tradition of India has often held a stranglehold on cultural life. In contrast, Tantra has been a rather liberal path and much less influenced by the dogmas and superstitions of the Vedas. Even though one may find superstitions within the Tantric tradition as well, the inner essence of Tantra, represented by its yogic practices, are subtle arts and sciences, free of dogma and superstition.

Broadly speaking, Tantra and Yoga are the same paths of spiritual practice. The history of Yoga is therefore largely synonymous with the history of Tantra. In the words of Swami Satyananda Saraswati, Tantra “predates all of the world’s existing religions and provides the esoteric basis on which many of these religions were later based. A few thousand years after its creation, Tantra was wedded with the philosophy of Vedanta by the [Vedic] Aryans to form the system of yoga which is quite popular today.”

Tantra: *the path that liberates us from bondage* (etymological meaning); a path of spiritual liberation, the body-mind-spirit science of Yoga, also termed Raja Yoga, Ashtanga Yoga, Kundalini Yoga, or broadly referred to as Shaivism. Practice: meditation, ethics, yoga asanas, chanting. Archetype: the yogi.

Yoga: *to unite* (etymological meaning), *the union of individual consciousness with Cosmic Consciousness* (Shiva’s Tantric definition), *the suspension of mental propensities* (Patanjali’s Yoga definition); the goal of Tantra; the practice of meditation and asanas.

Veda: philosophical and religious scriptures. Practice: rituals and chanting.
Archetype: the priest.

The cultural history of India is the intermarriage of the traditions of Veda and Tantra. These two ancient wisdom paths form the foundation of Indian culture and its many sacred traditions. The earliest Veda, the Rigveda, originated outside India among the Aryans before they began arriving in India around 5000 BCE during the time of Shiva. This migration, which spanned hundreds, if not thousands, of years, has been genetically dated by Dr. Spencer Wells and documented in books by Shri Shri Anandamurti, Dr. Lalan Prasad Singh, N. N. Bhattacharyya, and others. The Atharvaveda, Samaveda, and Yajurveda were composed in India. The Atharvaveda is strongly influenced by Tantra.

Samkhya (oral teaching from 1500 BCE, literature from 200 CE): propounded by Maharishi Kapil, this Tantric philosophy forms the philosophical basis for the practice of Ayurveda and also Asthanga Yoga. Samkhya is also often referred to as Kapilasia Tantra.

Upanishads (7-500 BCE): Often called the Fifth Veda, these scriptures contain the subtle philosophy of the yogis and Vedic priests who practiced Tantra. Thus the Upanishads is an expression of the marriage of Tantra and Veda. Various philosophical schools of Yoga, such as Vedanta and Advaita, are also expressions of this sacred marriage.

Kashmiri Tantra: The oral tradition is at least 4000 years old; the philosophical literature originated during the Middle Ages. An expression of the blend of Veda and Tantra, Kashmiri Tantra is a nondualist tradition, unlike the dualist Samkhya Tantra and Patanjali's Ashtanga Yoga.

Comparison between the yoga cosmologies of Tantra, Samkhya and Vedanta: In Tantra there are three cosmological realities, Brahma (Supreme Consciousness) and its two inherent qualities, Purusha (Cosmic Consciousness, also termed Shiva) and Prakrti (Cosmic Energy, also termed Maya or Shakti). In Samkhya, there is only Purusha and Prakrti and the latter has a dominant role and is the cause of creation. Samkhya is thus dualist. In Vedanta, Brahma is the ultimate reality, while Prakrti (Maya) is unreal.

If we compare the dualist Samkhya and the nondualist Vedanta to Tantra, the latter creates a cosmology of balance, which we may term nondualist-dualistic-nondualism. In Tantra, creation flows from the Oneness of Brahma into the world of diversity and, through spiritual practice and enlightenment, back to Brahma's Oneness. Tantra does not see the world as unreal and an illusion as in Vedanta (nondualism), nor does it view Nature (Prakrti) as the sole source of creation as in Samkhya (dualism). In Tantra, Brahma is the source and ultimate cause of creation, and through its ever-united expressions, Purusha and Prakriti, the creation of the universe takes place.

According to Tantra, the world is not an illusion but rather a physical expression of the non-physical, absolute and infinite Cosmic Consciousness. Hence, the brilliance of Tantra is that it both transcends and includes dualism in its nondualist-dualistic-nondualism philosophy.

Brief Alternative Outline of the History of Yoga

Proto-Tantra Period (9-5000 BCE)

Rudimentary forms of shamanistic Tantra practiced by Dravidians and Mongolians. Proto-Tantric city complex established at Mehrgarh around 6000 BCE.

Classical Tantra Originates (5000 BCE)

Agama and Nigama, the philosophical and practical teachings, are given by Shiva and his wife Parvati. Shiva introduces concept of Dharma—the path of spirituality and righteousness. He also introduces yogic and Tantric meditation techniques, including asanas, pranayama, dharana, pratyahara, and dhyan. Tantra spreads to other parts of Asia, Europe and the Middle East. Shiva systematizes Ayurvedic and Tantric medicine. Dhanvantari, the mythological god of Ayurveda, was in fact Shiva's main apprentice.

Tantric Civilization Period (5-2000 BCE)

Tantric civilization established in Kota, Rajasthan. Shiva establish city in Kashi (Benares), on the banks of the river Ganges. The Dravidians establish Tantra-oriented civilization in the Indus Valley region. People worship the

Mother Goddess and also the Father God (Pashupati). Tantric yogis understand these expressions as Shakti and Shiva, the dual nature of Brahma. Assimilation between Vedic Aryans and Tantric Dravidians takes place, but not always peacefully.

Tantric Transition Period (2000 BCE)

Shiva Tantra transforms into two branches, the Gaodiya and the Kashmiri Schools. The Gaodiya School was popular in East India and only marginally influenced by the Vedas. The Kashmiri school was more philosophical and Vedic in orientation.

The Tantric and Vedic Period (1500 BCE-500 BCE)

1500 BCE—Krishna Krishna of Mahabharata fame formulates three branches of yoga—action (Karma), devotion (Bhakti) and knowledge (Jyana). His teachings greatly influence the later school of Vaishnava Tantra. Yudhistira, a disciple of Krishna, popularizes the Tantric practice of pranayama, or breathing exercises. Tantric and yogic teachings spread all over the Far East. The Bhagavat Gita, the teachings of Krishna, mentions the Eightfold path of Yoga.

Samkhya 1500-200 BCE Introduced by the world's first philosopher, Maharishi Kapil around 1500 BCE and composed in writing around 200 BCE. Also termed Kapilasa Tantra, after its founder, Samkhya is today widely known as the philosophical basis of Ayurveda, India's ancient healing system.

Upanishads 700-200 BCE The intuitional science of the Upanishads are an expression of the unification of Tantric Yoga and Vedic philosophy and gave birth to many of the fundamental spiritual insights of the Indian wisdom traditions.

Classical Yoga Originates 200 BCE

Inspired by both Tantra and Samkhya philosophy, Patanjali systematizes important aspects of Tantra into the eightfold path of Asthanga Yoga: yama and niyama (ethics), asanas (hatha yoga exercises), pratyahara (withdrawal yoga), dharana (concentration yoga), pranayama (breath yoga) and Samadhi

(spiritual union, the goal of yoga). The idea that Brahma comprises both Shiva and Shakti was now widely accepted and consummated in the Ardha-Narishvara, an idol depicting half a man (Shiva) and half a woman (Shakti).

Tantra Renaissance Period (100-1500 CE)

100 CE—Tirumular Shiva Tantra adept from South India. Proponent of Bhakti Yoga and the author of the famed *Tirumantiram*, considered one of the greatest yogic canons of all time.

400-1200 CE—Tantra Shastras Most of the important Tantric texts based on the oral tradition were written in this period, and thus to many scholars this was the “Tantric era” of Indian spirituality, but in reality the Tantric age started in 5000 BCE and lasted for thousands of years. Such texts include the *Kularnava Tantra* and the *Mahanirvana Tantra* as well as the many works by Kashmir Tantrics.

600 CE—Age of Buddhist, Hindu and Jain Tantra begins. Both Buddha and Mahavira (founder of the Jain religion) were disciples of the Tantric teacher Gosala, and over time, both Buddhism and Jainism were strongly influenced by Tantra. Tantra Shastras are written and influence various schools of Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism. Shiva Tantra evolves into five branches, or Paincha Tantra: 1. Shiva Tantra, 2. Vaishnava Tantra, 3. Shakta Tantra, 4. Ganapatya Tantra, 5. Saora Tantra. Famous Buddhist Tantric yogis from this period and onward include: Naropa, Milarepa, Saraha, Prahevajra, Je Tsong Khapa and Wanchuchuk Dorje.

800 CE—Yoga Vashista This great Tantric yogi returns from China where he had learned the subtle practice of Tantra meditation. (Tantra had migrated to China thousands of years earlier and was termed Taota) His esoteric teachings on Tantric meditation and philosophy are compiled in the book, *Yoga Vashista*.

900 CE—Abinava Gupta This Tantric Renaissance man revives Kashmir Shaivism, lays the foundation of Indian aesthetics, and writes an encyclopedia on nondualist Tantra.

1000 CE—Kularnava Tantra This seventeen chapter work contains over

2000 verses and is considered one of the most important Tantric texts.

1000-1200 CE—The Nathas develop Hatha Yoga. The founder of this movement, Matsyendranath, was a Shiva Tantric whose main disciple, Gorakshanath, systematized and further advanced the practices of Hatha Yoga.

1100 CE—Mahanirvana Tantra. Considered by some as the most important of the Hindu Tantric scriptures, this fourteen- chapter text defines yoga in accordance with Shiva's teachings as the union of individual self (Jivatman) with the Cosmic Self (Paramatman).

1271-1296 CE—Jnaneshvar A genius Renaissance man and Tantric adept, Jnaneshvar composed the *Gitagovinda* at the age of 19, an epic poem reenacting the *Bhagavad Gita*. Merging the Vaisnava movement with Kashmir Shiva Tantra, Jnaneshvar created a popular Bhakti movement in north India. The nineteenth century sage Ramana Maharishi called him the “king of saints.”

1500 CE—Caetanya Mahaprabhu A Tantric adept, Caetanya is undoubtedly the most well known and celebrated Bhakti yogis of India.

Modern Tantra and Yoga Period 1800-2000 CE

1800-2000 CE Teachers Influenced by Tantra While all teachers of Yoga are influenced by Tantra, these teachers have a direct tie to this ancient tradition: Paramahansa Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda, Swami Shivananda, Ananda Moi Ma, Nityananda Avadhuta, Swami Laksman Joo, Swami Ram Thiirtha, and Swami Muktananda. Contemporary Buddhist Tantric teachers include HH Dali Lama, Lama Yeshe, Tulku Rgyen Rinpoche, and Jamyang Khyentse Chokyi Lodro.

1914 CE John Woodroffe The seminal book *The Principles of Tantra* is first published. Woodroffe's second classic on Tantra, *The Serpent Power*, was published in 1918.

(1888-1988 CE Krishnamacarya) Revived and reinvented Hatha Yoga and influenced the dynamic yoga series of Pattabhi Jois, the refined

alignments of B.K.S. Iyengar, the classical postures of Indra Devi, the customized vinyasa of Viniyoga, and many other styles.

(1918- CE B.K.S. Iyengar) A student of Krishnamacarya, Iyengar published the seminal book *Light on Yoga* in 1966, which has inspired and educated hatha yogis all over the world. His teachings has greatly influenced the yoga fitness culture in the West and given birth to many styles of yoga.

1921-1990 CE— Shrii Shrii Anandamurtii. Anandamurtii synthesized the main features of Shiva's and Krishna's original Tantric teachings, which incorporates Ashtanga Yoga, Rahadhiraja Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, and the essence of the Five Schools of Tantra. He developed a comprehensive system and philosophy of Tantra Yoga for the current era outlined in traditional Tantric sutras called *Ananda Sutram*. His philosophy epitomizes the most sublime aspects of Tantric Yoga with the best of the Vedas—a synthesis of the practice of Tantric Yoga with the philosophy of the Upanishads.

*Many dates are approximate. Moreover, the list of teachers and written sources gives only a brief and selective outline of the vast history of Tantra and Yoga.

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