

yoga, and thousands of pages of magazines. I studied the "classical" traditions of yoga, particularly hatha yoga, from which my practice was said to derive. I read a swath of commentaries on Patanjali's Yoga Sutra; the Upanishads and the later "Yoga Upanishads"; medieval hatha yoga texts like the Goraksasataka, Hatha Yoga Pradipika, and others; and texts from the Tantric traditions, from which the less complex, and less exclusive, hatha yoga practices had arisen.

Scouring these primary texts, it was obvious to me that asana was rarely, if ever, the primary feature of the significant yoga traditions in India. Postures such as those we know today often figured among the auxiliary practices of yoga systems (particularly in hatha yoga), but they were not the dominant component. They were subordinate to other practices like pranayama (expansion of the vital energy by means of breath), *dhara* (focus, or placement of the mental faculty), and nada (sound), and did not have health and fitness as their chief aim. Not, that is, until the sudden explosion of interest in postural yoga in the 1920s and 1930s, first in India and later in the West.

#### WHEN ASANA WENT WEST

Yoga began to gain popularity in the West at the end of the 19th century. But it was a yoga deeply influenced by Western spiritual and religious ideas, representing in many respects a radical break from the grass-roots yoga lineages of India. The first wave of "export yogis," headed by Swami Vivekananda, largely ignored asana and tended to focus instead on pranayama, meditation, and positive thinking. The English-educated Vivekananda arrived on American shores in 1893 and was an instant success with the high society of the East Coast. While he may have taught some postures, Vivekananda publicly rejected hatha yoga in general and asana in particular. Those who came from India to the United States in his wake were inclined to echo Vivekananda's judgments on asana. This was due partly to long-standing prejudices held by high-caste Indians like Vivekananda against yogins, "fakirs," and low-caste mendicants who performed severe and rigorous postures for money, and partly to the

centuries of hostility and ridicule directed toward these groups by Western colonialists, journalists, and scholars. It was not until the 1920s that a cleaned up version of asana began to gain prominence as a key feature of the modern English language-based yogas emerging from India.

This cleared up some long-standing questions of mine. In the mid-1990s, armed with a copy of B. K. S. Iyengar's *Light on Yoga*, I had spent three years in India for yoga asana instruction and was struck by how hard it was to find. I took classes and workshops all over India from well-known and lesser-known teachers, but these catered mostly to Western yoga pilgrims. Wasn't India the home of yoga? Why weren't more Indians doing asana? And why, no matter how hard I looked, couldn't I find a yoga mat?

#### BUILDING STRONG BODIES

As I continued to delve into yoga's recent past, pieces of the puzzle slowly came together, revealing an ever-larger portion of the whole picture. In the early decades of the 20th century, India—like much of the rest of the world—was gripped by an unprecedented fervor for physical culture, which was closely linked to the struggle for national independence. Building better bodies, people reasoned, would make for a better nation and improve the chances of success in the event of a violent struggle against the colonizers. A wide variety of exercise systems arose that

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