

Cajzoran Ali and Genevieve Stebbins, and Europeans like Dublin-born Mollie Bagot Stack, were the early 20th-century heirs to these traditions of “harmonial movement.” Newly arrived asana-based yoga systems were, naturally, often interpreted through the lens of these preexisting Western gymnastic traditions.

There was little doubt in my mind that many yoga practitioners today are the inheritors of the spiritual gymnastics traditions of their great-grandparents far more than they are of medieval hatha yoga from India. And those two contexts were very, very different. It isn't that the postures of modern yoga derive from Western gymnastics (although this can sometimes be the case). Rather, as syncretic yoga practices were developing in the modern period, they were interpreted through the lens of, say, the American harmonial movement, Danish gymnastics, or physical culture more generally. And this profoundly changed the very meaning of the movements themselves, creating a new tradition of understanding and practice. This is the tradition that many of us have inherited.

CRISIS OF FAITH

Although I never broke off my daily asana practice during this time, I was understandably experiencing something like a crisis of faith. The ground on which my practice had seemed to stand—Patanjali, the Upanishads, the Vedas—was crumbling as I discovered that the real history of the “yoga tradition” was quite different from what I had been taught. If the claims that many modern yoga schools were making about the ancient roots of their practices were not strictly true, were they then fundamentally inauthentic?

Over time, however, it occurred to me that asking whether modern asana traditions were authentic was probably the wrong question. It would be easy to reject contemporary postural practice as illegitimate, on the grounds that it is unfaithful to ancient yoga traditions. But this would not be giving sufficient weight to the variety of yoga's practical adaptations over the millennia, and to modern yoga's place in relation to that immense history.

As a category for thinking about yoga, “authenticity” falls short and says far more about our 21st-century insecurities than it does about the practice of yoga.

One way out of this false debate, I reasoned, was to consider certain modern practices as simply the latest grafts onto the tree of yoga. Our yogas obviously have roots in Indian tradition, but this is far from the whole story. Thinking about yoga this way, as a vast and ancient tree with many roots and branches, is not a betrayal of authentic “tradition,” nor does it encourage an uncritical acceptance of everything that calls itself “yoga,” no matter how absurd. On the contrary, this kind of thinking can encourage us to examine our own practices and beliefs more closely, to see them in relation to our own past as well as to our ancient heritage. It can also give us some clarity as we navigate the sometimes-bewildering contemporary marketplace of yoga.

Learning about our practice's Western cultural and spiritual heritage shows us how we bring our own understandings and misunderstandings, hopes and concerns to our interpretation of tradition, and how myriad influences come together to create something new. It also changes our perspective on our own practice, inviting us to really consider what we're doing when we practice yoga, what its meaning is for us. Like the practice itself, this knowledge can reveal to us both our conditioning and our true identity.

Beyond mere history for history's sake, learning about yoga's recent past gives us a necessary and powerful lens for seeing our relationship with tradition, ancient and modern. At its best, modern yoga scholarship is an expression of today's most urgently needed yogic virtue, *viveka* (“discernment” or “right judgment”). Understanding yoga's history and tangled, ancient roots brings us that much closer to true, clear seeing. It may also help to move us to a more mature phase of yoga practice for the 21st century. ✦

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