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Politics beyond the Yoga Mat: Yoga Fundamentalism and the ‘Vedic Way of Life’

Patrick McCartney

ABSTRACT

This article explores an under-appreciated relation between the quotidian practices of Western yoga practitioners and the global agenda of Hindu supremacism. It demonstrates how yoga, or rather, the yoga body, can be a political instrument. I suggest that yoga practitioners, whether they choose to or not, engage in tacit, naive and unwitting support of a Hindu supremacist ideology through the adoption of various yoga-inflected lifestyles within the global yoga consumption-scape.

I first came across the phrase ‘Vedic way of life’ in 2013 during doctoral fieldwork into the global yoga industry. It was during my year of ethnographic fieldwork in the Shanti Mandir ashram in southern Gujarat, India, that I noticed this innocuous phrase on their website (Mandir 2016). I took it for granted that I knew what it meant, and that it was simply an idiosyncratic phrase. However, it is ubiquitous and can be found in different ways across the internet. It is particularly embedded in the marketing rhetoric of the global yoga industry. In this article, I problematise this ‘Vedic way of life’ phrase, and take a phenomenological approach to investigate what exactly people imagine a ‘Vedic way of life’ to be.

The focus of this article is to demonstrate that through our practice of yoga we appropriate and consume various cultural symbols, ideas and practices. While

there are multiple modernities and heterotopic spaces, there is a banal consumption of yoga that includes adopting variants of a ‘Vedic way of life’. The idea of heterotopic spaces builds on the utopian/dystopian binary. It is neither good nor bad, but different. It is a space where ideas or groups have little perceived connections with one another (Mead 1995: 13). The global yoga industry is ostensibly an unregulated, heterogeneous market. While there are many yoga-focused guilds and alliances, there is no global body that governs international best practices, or which has any control over what yoga is or should be defined as. Furthermore, due to this heterotopia, the unrecognised intersection between global yoga and Hindu supremacism allows for a supremacist narrative to be subtly infused within global yoga’s rhetoric. I argue that this can lead to a type of banal nationalism. These

assertions are based on my almost 20 years of working in the global yoga industry, and as an anthropologist who works on the links between the production of desire, the politics of imagination, and the economics of religion.

I assert that through adoption of certain yoga-inflected lifestyles we are (or at least at risk of becoming) unwitting supporters of an imperialist, Hindu supremacist agenda that has global, expansionist aspirations. The broader aim of my research is to explore whether the ontological realities may or may not be commensurable. There are parallel aspirations for an identity that includes the use of similar narratives and textual sources of authority, which are sourced from the Sanskrit episteme, i.e. the justified 'true' beliefs found within the Sanskrit literary canon.

When viewed through a utopian framework, the social, political, religious and economic implications of Hindu supremacism, and its overlapping and intersecting relationship with the discrete, arguably similar, utopian worlds of yoga practitioners urge us to consider many things. This article seeks to assert that there is more to yoga, India and our consumptive practices than what is happening on the yoga mat.

A 'Vedic way of life' is an appeal to tradition, nature, emotion, and authority. It is perceived as being older and, therefore, many consider its intrinsic properties as inherently better (read 'purer') than anything late-stage capitalism and Western culture is supposedly able to offer. According to Darling (2014: 13), the temporality of nationalism, which relates to ideas of a 'Vedic India' allows for affective attachments of collective unity and common purpose to form. These affective bonds rely on narratives of loss, which invoke a sense

of nostalgia for a future-past (similar, perhaps to a future perfect tense, i.e. 'will have') that is potentially more cohesive. It is considered the antithesis of the hyper-consumption and perceived moral vacuity of the West. It is here we find in some ways the source of yoga's popularity and the greatest irony of all. Yoga's popularity is a direct result of the capitalist infrastructure and consumerism to which it is constantly marketed as being antithetical.

Yoga is a key instrument in India's foreign policy, the re-making of 'Brand India' and the rebranding of yoga (Gowen 2014). As Gowen points out, rebranding yoga and India is a counter-hegemonical, post-colonial 'take back' that builds upon centuries of oppression from colonial rulers and frustration at how yoga is commodified and seemingly cut off from its cultural roots without due acknowledgement. For example, there are no royalties paid to the Indian state for the global expansion of yoga.

The normative idea of 'yoga' guides India's soft power diplomacy on the global stage through such events as World Yoga Day and International Yoga Day. Prime Minister Modi is fond of asserting that due to India's cultural capital as the 'home of yoga', it is the self-appointed 'world guru' (*viśva-guru*) that has the 'necessary' moral superiority (i.e. *dharma*) that will save the world from consuming itself (Singh 2014). As Reddy (2008: 99) asserts, the Vedic literature used today to interpret Vedic culture is representative of an 'ideal' society. Bowman (2015) points out that this is based on a post-secular (re)turn towards a reconstituted axial age (800-200 BCE), and that as political borders become in some ways increasingly irrelevant, this has given political agency to many religious groups within transnational civil society.

Even though Van der Veer (2016)

warns anthropologists, at least, against using civilisational narratives, the Indian state homogenises core axial ideals to create a civilisational ethos. Examples are found within India's official tourism and health/wellness marketing strategies (Union Ministry of Ayush 2016; Union Ministry of Tourism 2015). An example of its use within the wellness industry is the following:

Welcome to Veda Spa – Veda means ageless, eternal “Science” or “Knowledge” built on Siddhantas and Unchanging Principles. Veda is not just a theory it is a map for how to derive practical benefit from the knowledge. Our mission is to become leader in the segment of wellness spas in India by ensuring a proper balance between aspiration and potential investor so that the spa guests, developer and operator gets benefits from pampering treatments & therapies. (Vedaspas 2016)

‘Vedic’ ideas are involved in how the past, India and yoga are represented within the global consumption-scape, and how they are operationalised to suggest possible, alternative futures through the production of desire. The result is that many western interpretations of a ‘traditional’ Indian yoga lifestyle are consumed based on these official narratives, symbols and fetishised goods. Having then consumed the official narratives, they are often criticised for an ‘insensitive appropriation’ of aspects of Indian culture.

Just like the BDSM community in Weiss’ (2011) work, the yoga community is involved in similar ‘circuits of capital, commodities, and neoliberal ideologies of

gender and race’ (Weiss 2016: 632). As yoga is increasingly normalised, regulated and institutionalised, the battle to control it and its role in the means of persuasion intensify. Engaging a queer epistemology assists in exploring the politics of imagination, the production of desire, the consumption of intangible goods inherent in the commodification of yoga, and the legitimising discourses used to achieve these intertwined aims, which are social, commercial and political.

In 1987 Swami Nityananda Saraswati (1967-) established Shanti Mandir, which means the ‘Temple of Peace’, and of which he continues as the current spiritual head (Mandir 2016). Shanti Mandir is aligned with an older tradition (Sabharathnam et al. 1997). However, it is a result of contentious succession issues that occurred during the mid-80s schism in the Siddha Yoga empire, which was created by the charismatic, entrepreneurial, ‘Tantric godman’ Baba Muktananda (1908-1982) (Jain 2014; Williamson 2005).

Today, Shanti Mandir has a global network of ashrams and allied yoga centres. Its devotees support the organisation through their generous donations of money, time and labour. These investments of different species of capital are essential towards the growth of the organisation and the implementation of its charitable work (Jain 2013; Thursby 1991).

The ashram, which is known as ‘Magod’ is located three hours north of Mumbai on the west coast of India. It is a 20-acre biodynamic mango orchard that was donated by a devotee of Muktananda in the late 1990s, and has since evolved into an *āśrama*, which is a cloistered, intentional

community like the western concept of a monastery. Shanti Mandir describes it as a ‘beautiful and serene natural setting’ (Mandir 2016). Even though Shanti Mandir is a new religious movement and promotes a neo-Advaita/Hindu philosophy,ⁱ it offers an orthodox and Sanskrit form of religious practice and identity, which originated in the Vedic period (1200-500 BCE). This is when the oldest scriptures of Hinduism were composed in the Sanskrit language, which many consider to be the ‘Latin of Asia’ (Times of India 2014). Sanskrit is perceived as having ‘divine’ status as a *deva-bhāṣā* (divine-language). Shanti Mandir provides a glimpse of what this ‘Vedic way of life’ encapsulates on their website:

1. Guiding seekers to the direct experience of divinity through Sanskrit chanting, silent meditation, study of sacred texts, the offering of service, and participation in sacred rituals
2. Continuing the Vedic tradition through teaching the Vedic way of life and the philosophy of Vedanta, performing the ancient sacred rituals of the tradition, and receiving other saints of the tradition
3. Shri Muktananda Sanskrit Mahavidyalaya – a free Sanskrit school that provides a rounded and authentic exposure to Vedic teachings (Mandir 2016)

Sanskrit, particularly Vedic Sanskrit, is an integral part of this community’s religious practice. It is also clear from the second point that the ‘Vedic way of life’ is encapsulated by the ‘philosophy of Vedanta’,

which in this case refers to the non-dualistic (*advaita*) school of thought. Vedānta [‘the end (*anta*) of the *Veda*’] is the later philosophical developments of the Upaniṣad-s. While Vedānta is a philosophy, at its core it is also an epistemology that aims to offer individuals techniques to identify what suffering is through determining ‘right’ or ‘true’ knowledge from ‘false impressions’ (Chatterjee 2003). This refers to the cultivation of self-awareness as an attempt to end false cognitions that the subject and object are the same. However, it also refers to what this epistemic community (i.e. Shanti Mandir as a community of seekers of ‘right knowledge’) consider valid, which is domain-specific, and quite often non-arbitrary, in the sense it is difficult, if not impossible, to verify the subjective truth claims made by members of the community.

One way to understand a Vedic lifestyle is through the term *vaidika* which relates to the notion that someone knows the Vedas and conforms to the rules prescribed for proper ritual and moral conduct (*vaidikatva*). Central to a ‘Vedic’ identity and lifestyle is the chanting of Vedic (Sanskrit) texts. According to Saraswati (2010: 1), the principle text of such a lifestyle is the *Ṣaṭa Rudrīya*, which is also known as the *Rudrāṣṭādhyāyī* or the *Śrī Rudram*. Recitation is said to have ontological benefits of removing spiritual obstacles and mental-emotional blockages (*citta-naiścalya*). Saraswati (2010: 4) quotes verse 24 of the *Kaivalyopaniṣad* (the Upaniṣad of Beatitude), which asserts that whoever recites the *Rudram* will be freed from various types of sin. Shanti Mandir has published through YouTube a recitation of this text under the title: *Havan with Rudrashtadhyayi-Vedic fire ritual* (Mandir 2015).

As per Shanti Mandir's list above, the act of chanting Sanskrit *mantra*-s is the principal technique employed to guide 'seekers to the direct experience of divinity' and 'invoke the Guru's eternal presence' (Mandir 2014). The *Rudram* is the first text recited every day in Shanti Mandir's ashram. The reason for the primacy of chanting is that its efficacy is said to come from being a type of *nāda-yoga* (union through sound), which includes the following steps from the famous 'eight limbs of yoga' (*aṣṭāṅga-yoga*): sitting in a fixed position (*āsana*); rhythmic breathing (*prāṇāyāma*); withdrawing the senses (*pratyāhara*); leading to focused attention (*ekagrata*), concentration (*dharana*), meditation (*dhyana*) and possibly even the purportedly final, blissful state of *samādhi*.

Apart from worship of the guru (*guru-seva*), chanting forms the base of Shanti Mandir's 'modern yoga' or practical philosophical tools, which it offers from its position within the hyper-competitive global yoga industry. In line with Weber's ideas related to disenchantment and rationalisation, Shanti Mandir asserts that the gap between knowledge (*jñāna*) and wisdom (*viññāna*) can be bridged through their system of yoga, as Shanti Mandir claims to provide an 'ideal environment for seekers to immerse themselves in a traditional way of spiritual life, as passed down from the ancient sages' (Mandir 2016).

Shanti Mandir embeds itself within a narrative built upon an ancient tradition. Presenting itself as a competent alternative to modern secularism, it cultivates desire for a nostalgic return to a pre-modern era, which is an expression of modernity, and not its antithesis. McMahan (2008: 13) explains how this re-enchanting discourse is bound within an ironic self-validating

context related to 'sciences' or 'technologies' of the 'self' or 'spirit'. Shanti Mandir's yoga organisation, namely Shantarasa Yoga employs this rhetorical technique:

The parameters of that model however are way too narrow to verify the expansive view of the yogic science. Yogic science is hard for the westerner to access unless they have direct contact with authentic adepts and teachings. (Pezet and Pezet 2015)

Shanti Mandir's approach to legitimating itself rests on providing the aesthetic experience of 'enjoying quietude and right knowledge' (*śamatha-vipaśyanā-vihārin*). This is built around a 'search for truths about the world that start out from an enchanted, animated, divinized view of nature', which is considered 'as legitimately scientific as the search for truths in modern science. This is the edifice on which the defense of Vedic science rests' (Nanda 2003: 139). Keeping this in mind, the discussion now moves to take a broader look at the concept of 'modern yoga'.

I align my understanding of 'modern yoga' with that which pertains to the last 100 years of a global, transcultural, and increasingly commercial exchange of ideas and practices. Alter (2004) and De Michelis (2005) explain their general concept of 'modern yoga' as that which refers to, but is not limited by, a physically-oriented, gymnastic-inspired, bodily regime of static or sequenced postures (*āsana*-s), which likely includes breathing practices (*prāṇāyāma*) and meditation (*dhyāna*).

What we understand as ‘modern yoga’ is not an exclusively ‘Indian’ phenomenon. Instead, modern yoga contains cultural elements of both Europe and India (Singleton 2010), which have formed through cultural and temporal bricolages (Altglas 2014; Critchley 2001: 8).

Yoga and Hindu religious nationalism are linked through a general idea of a greener, more sustainable and holistic worldview. This is presupposed by a transcendental idealist philosophical position. The metaphysical and epistemological doctrine of non-dualist (*advaita*) *Vedānta* asserts that an idea, namely *Brahma*, is the fundamental component of reality, and that while an objective, external reality does exist, *Brahma* is the supra-sensible reality beyond these categories. Kitiarsa (2008) and Halter (2000) explain how the commodification and merchandising of Indian cultural practices creates a cultural process that relies upon the marketing of ethnicity. In comparison, Sinha (2011) expands on how this process of Hinduisation effects both the domestic and international images of the Indian state. Whether we consider our understanding of ‘Vedic’ to be a 1:1 representation or not, our consumption of yogic lifestyles impacts on how we perceive India and yoga, and how India perceives and markets itself.

Nanda (2003) explains that the forces of the global market are turning India, or commodifying India, into a *Hindu-ised* market, which relies heavily on the priority claims of the ‘scientific Vedas’ for legitimacy (Nanda 2015: 43). In a coup for the Indian government, UNESCO announced yoga’s inclusion on its list of intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO 2015). This is partly due to the Government of India introducing the Union Ministry of

Ayush and giving it independent status in 2014 (Union Ministry of Ayush 2015). The mandate of this ministry includes rebranding and promoting yoga in what is a battle to reclaim yoga as something distinctively Indian. The aim is to increase India’s cultural pride and its share in a multi-billion dollar spiritual-health tourism market. As Gowen (2014) explains, ‘Indian officials have begun efforts to reclaim yoga for the home team, making plans for a broad expansion of the wellness practice into all facets of civic life’.

The packaging of yoga-related spiritual tourism compounds a romanticisation of India and yoga through the symbols, images and narratives used to create an essentialised, ‘othering’ gaze of the Orient. This process exacerbates the transposability of yoga onto other spaces and into different cultures. This is clear through the possibility of booking a ‘yoga holiday’ in over 120 countries, across five continents, through one website (Book Yoga Retreats 2016).

Vitebsky (1995: 183-184) asserts that the forces of modernisation are responsible for homogenising local cultural practices and knowledge, which are subsumed by global forces. This creates flexible and ambiguous boundaries, particularly between ideas of ‘authenticity’ and what was/is considered ‘traditional’ and ‘new’. Technology allows us to imagine, consume and travel to translocated places to experience ambiguously ‘traditional’ yet syncretic forms of yoga, which are transposed and intermingled with local knowledge traditions.

Nanda (2009) explores issues related to how global processes of trade, marketing and commodification are homogenising ‘Brand India’ into a ‘Hindu India’. Interestingly, in a recent conversation with a yoga teacher in Sydney, Australia, this idea

became clearer when they explained the following: ‘I didn’t realise there were Muslims in India. I thought they were all Hindu, and maybe some Buddhists as well’. Below, Remski explains how the Hindu supremacist forces (known as *Hindutvavādin-s*) seek to homogenise all things yogic into a narrow vision of India’s heritage:

There is rising Hindutva discourse that seeks to reclaim all things yogic into a homogenized vision of Indian heritage. It is motivated by just grievances against colonial humiliation, the white privilege and racism of early Indology, and the postcolonial disempowerment of a global wealth inequality against which asana has emerged as a royalty-free multi-billion-dollar cultural export. But the loudest part of this discourse is twisted by saffronisation, the belief that the terms as polysemic as “yoga” can be defined (let alone owned) by cultures as diverse as global Hinduism, and the false assumption that global academic Indology hasn’t changed in a century. (Remski 2015)

Jain (2014) explains that the multi-directional transplantation of cultural wares intertwines us all in the same cultural processes. This ‘distant-led’ cosmopolitan commodification of knowledge has, at its core, a contest over yoga’s narrative power to link the past, present and future (cf. Vitebsky 1995: 182, 191). Like anything seen from a distance, it is the close-up details that are generally elided. In this case, it is the intertwining of people, spaces, and

ideas that creates an obfuscated sense of ‘tradition’ through the banal and naive enculturation into various yoga lifestyles by practitioners across the globe.

An example is the growth in ‘Christian Yoga’, which further nuances our understanding of the globalising processes related to ‘classical’ and ‘modern’ yoga(s) (Green 2016). This example demonstrates how a ‘yoga narrative’ is used in an alternative way to the layer of interpretation I am suggesting, and how it does not have to necessarily draw on the same narratives as Hindu supremacists or the dominant narrative within the yoga industry, which is typically ensconced in a Hindu idiom. However interesting Christian yoga is as a new, alternative expression of the yoga idiom, it is not representative of the Hindu-oriented ontology inherent in ‘modern yoga’, which is the dominant form present within the transglobal yoga industry.

While some yoga studios do not explicitly promote any spirituality or religion for fear of either offending someone, or because they believe yoga is not part of religion, many yoga business owners do install statues of various Hindu deities, have murals painted on studio walls, or include particular Hindu and Buddhist symbols on websites.



Śiva-natarāja in corner of a yoga studio

Source: (Absoluteyoga 2016)

I have taught yoga in various studios across the world for the past twenty years. For more than one year I have been an active participant observer using a

cyber-ethnographic methodology in a variety of closed and public forums related to yoga. My use of a cyber-ethnographic method is an evolving process. I have focused my attention on the closed Yoga Teachers' group on Facebook, which has more than 19,000 global members. I have permission from the moderators to conduct research, and I frequently disclose my position as an academic. I also post relevant information about my personal experience as a yoga teacher and practitioner, and share my ideas and yoga-related news with this community like other members do. There are some very active members who form a core group of regular posters and responders. There is also a wide range of ideas regarding the history, roles, purposes, and legitimacy of various yogic practices and identities. The poll below was created by another member. It demonstrates the level of affiliation with Yoga Alliance, which has over 81,000 registered teachers and schools.

Just curious... Please pick one from 1-7 and one from 8-10.
SO FAR 64% ARE CURRENTLY REGISTERED WITH YOGA ALLIANCE and 87% of the teacher-trainers have YA approved programs.
NOTE: Oops! There are a few mistakes that can not be edited and fixed, so look in the first comment for the corrected list in the correct order!

<input type="checkbox"/>	4) Registered with YA as an RYT-200	+59
<input type="checkbox"/>	2) Never registered with YA, but met their requirements	+53
<input type="checkbox"/>	7) Registered with YA as an E-RYT-500	+23
<input type="checkbox"/>	10) I run/teach at a YA registered YTT (RYS)	+24
<input type="checkbox"/>	3) Previously registered with YA, but not now	+21
<input type="checkbox"/>	Registered with YA as an E-RYT 200.	+18
<input type="checkbox"/>	8) I am not currently teaching at YTT	+17
<input type="checkbox"/>	6) Registered with YA as an E-RYT-200+RYT-500	+13
<input type="checkbox"/>	5) Registered with YA as an E-RYT-500	+10
<input type="checkbox"/>	108. Just a bhakta yogi, loving life.	+3
<input type="checkbox"/>	8) I run/teach at a non-YA registered YTT	+3
<input type="checkbox"/>	1) Never registered with YA, don't meet requirements	+2
<input type="checkbox"/>	108. auspicious yoga	+1
<input type="checkbox"/>	+ Add an option...	

An example of a poll created in the Yoga Teachers' group
Source: (Yoga Teachers 2017)

I quite often engage in discussions raised by other members of the group. Some examples include discussions around what

our favourite music is for playing in classes. This discussion was interesting, as it quickly moved into the ethical issues around licensing, distribution, and playing of copyrighted material for commercial purposes. It sparked a stimulating conversation driven by yoga teachers who are also professional musicians. Other topics include what might be the best type of insurance for a sole trader or business, how to market a new class more effectively, what other yoga teachers do to de-stress, how to deal with our own injuries, or how to deal with problematic students.

A fascinating conversation focused on how to recognise and facilitate safe spaces for people with mental illness and victims of domestic or sexual violence who attend our classes. This is an important issue for yoga teachers as most are not trained counsellors. However, yoga classes are often marketed as a place for the healing of emotional trauma. The argument is that, through movement, a form of somatic therapy allows for the release of emotional baggage, and a postural practice can become a mode of healing (Brahinsky 2007).

A very topical issue is the most appropriate ways to verbally cue postures or make a physical assist. Just like in a BDSM context, consent is important, and it is also important to be mindful of verbal and physical 'triggers'. However, the most passionate discussions generally focus on the ontological possibility of metaphysical bodies and the 'history' of 'real', 'serious' or 'traditional' yoga.

There is also a strong anti-intellectual ethos amongst many yoga teachers. This is countered by an active core of atheists, rationalists and sceptics who provide counter arguments to the logical fallacies that are often proposed by individuals who have a lower level of scientific literacy.

Scientific literacy, epistemological relativism, pseudo-science and what constitutes ‘valid knowledge’ are some of the most common topics of discussion.

Based on my own observations in yoga studios and in online forums, the most common deities found in yoga studios are: *Śiva-natarāja* (the dancer), *Kṛṣṇa* (the flute player), *Hanumāna* (the monkey) and *Gaṇeśa* (the elephant). Interestingly, *Buddha* is also quite popular. One respondent believes that this is because *Buddha* statues are easier to get and possibly less confronting than some Hindu statues. Another popular approach includes honouring one’s lineage with life-size photos of gurus, like the ‘pioneers’ of modern yoga, such as T. Krishnamacharya, B.K.S. Iyengar, Pattabhi Jois, and T.K.V. Desikachar (Goldberg 2016). These are hung on the walls in yoga studios (McCartney 2016a).



Pictures of Iyengar performing various yoga postures

Source: (YogaTrail 2016)

Phrases like the ‘Vedic Way of Life’ or the ‘Vedic Lifestyle’ seem quite innocuous and appear to have little consequence. Yet, I argue this imagined ‘world’ forms the cornerstone of essentially all variants of a ‘yoga lifestyle’ that manifest globally as

representations of a perceived, ‘authentic’ yoga tradition. This is regardless of whether yoga practitioners are cognisant in any way of when the Vedic period is posited to have occurred, or what the normative, idealistic texts from this period prescribe the Vedic lifestyle or identity to be.

I assert that the quotidian, ‘traditional’ practice of (modern) yoga is promoted as a ‘legitimate’ representative of a much older, ‘eternal’ (*sanātana*) cultural idea, and that the cosmopolitan yoga practitioner has very little appreciation of the historicity of several premodern periods. The fact that a ‘Vedic world’ is located so far back in an ancient past, and does represent what many people consider an ‘eternal’ past, allows mention of it to be transposed in an uncritical way into discussions of yoga in cosmopolitan yoga studios around the world. For example, another yoga teacher from Sydney, Australia explains how:

Yoga teacher-training courses are expensive. They compress so much information into intensives. There is no way that a graduate will know everything at the end of the course. The idea of the Vedas is just too abstract for people that it doesn’t seem to mean anything. Yet, it is splashed across marketing stuff all the time. But people talk about the Vedas as if they just bumped into them down the street. So, it’s interesting how it is at the same time everywhere, but at the same time nowhere. I would like to know more about Vedic stuff, but where do I begin. It seems like such a huge topic, and if I wanted to do it properly I think I’d have to go to India. But I’m not interested in that.

Another set of examples comes from asking questions on the Yoga Teachers' Facebook page. The following replies to my questions regarding people's attitudes towards a 'Vedic lifestyle' demonstrate a variety of syncretic and ambivalent positions: 'Vedic would mean following the Vedas, i.e. [b]eing Hindu'; 'It's 2016. Why does anyone want to follow something thousands of years old? Shits [*sic*] whack' (McCartney 2016c). What we know of the Vedic past from archaeological and linguistic records demonstrates, quite convincingly, that this culture was not vegetarian (Rosen 2011). However, a third example demonstrates that one teacher's understanding of 'Veda' apparently comes from attending Grateful Dead concerts:

I'd say a majority of the Grateful Dead subculture is all about Veda. [...] It made me think of my days touring with the Grateful Dead and how that hippie like subculture shaped my farm girl thinking...I don't think I'd ever met a vegetarian or even heard of yoga until I broadened my experiences in that Deadhead lifestyle – that's what I meant by the majority of the Grateful Dead subculture is probably living this Veda ideal. (McCartney 2016c)

Critiques of globalisation are necessary, as it privileges Eurocentric perspectives and cultural practices while undermining local and ethnic thought-worlds. However, globalisation also makes possible greater trans-cultural exchanges and understanding. This is what we see happening with the continued rise in the popularity of yoga. What separates the Western yoga

practitioner or yoga teacher/trainee from the Hindu supremacist? If the same episteme and texts, language, and cultural practices are invoked and glorified by both groups, how do their imagined communities, future worlds, and ontologies differ?

Yoga is political. Whenever we consume either tangible or intangible things like buying clothes or have (spiritual) travel experiences, we are involved in political acts of consumption. Any assertions otherwise demonstrate a lack of understanding of how our desires affect the social domain. A lot of people consider themselves and yoga to be thoroughly apolitical. Just about every yoga teacher-training course outline explains the centrality of the *Bhagavadgītā* to the yogic thought-world. The following explanation comes from the Sivananda Yoga teacher-training curriculum. It explains how the *Bhagavadgītā* is:

Considered one of the greatest spiritual texts of the world, the Bhagavad Gita contains subtle and profound teachings and has a universality which embraces every aspect of human actions. It symbolises the solution of the eternal struggle between the spiritual and the material in every human being'. (Sivananda Yoga 2016)

This text is also central to the Vishva Hindu Parishad's (VHP; World Hindu Council) politico-religious identity (VHP 2016). Both the VHP's patriarch, Ashok Singhal, and India's Foreign Minister, Sushma Swaraj have made repeated calls for

the *Bhagavadgītā* to be enshrined as the nation's 'holy book'; however, in counterpoint, it is argued that India's Constitution is already the nation's holy book (Roy 2014). Sushma Swaraj believes that the *Bhagavadgītā* should be made mandatory reading in all government schools because it will help 'purify minds' (Press Trust of India 2015). This is regardless of the fact that the Union Territories of India, as per the 42nd Amendment, comprise a constitutionally socialist and secular nation that does not have an official state religion (Government of India 2007).

Central to the Hindutva concept of ethno-nationalism is a Hindu majoritarian identity, a Hindu nation, and the concept of *sanātana dharma* ('eternal moral principles') (Hindu Janajagruti Samiti (HJS; Hindu Awakening Society) 2016d). An example of how this manifests in discourse is in the rhetoric of the HJS, which asserts that 'the strength of the unrighteous and traitors to Dharma is on the rise' and that the Hindu nation should be established on the 'guru principle' (HJS 2016c).

The principle of Hindu *dharma* is used as a counterpoint to secularism. It is the core of the Hindu nationalist identity and the globalist agenda. *Dharma* is also central to many yogic concepts and dialectic discourses. This is regardless of whether one considers themselves a 'modern' or 'traditional' yoga practitioner. Power Living Australia is arguably the most successful yoga business in Australia. The ways it evokes nostalgic ideas like *dharma* are witnessed in the following two examples:

500HR TEACHER TRAINING
PATHWAY | BYRON BAY |
MARCH 2016
Join Master Facilitator Keenan

Crisp and his guest, Duncan Peak on a transformational, week-long journey. We will be studying the Ramayana, a book which is steeped in traditional yogic philosophy and the virtues of devotion, duty, dharma and karma. (Power Living Australia 2015)

In a response to a question about *dharma* that I posed to the founder of Power Living Australia, Duncan Peak wrote that:

Our understanding of Dharma is one of moral duty or the nature/essence of a thing, pending on how it is used? We relate it to the Purusha Artha's that are the four aims of a human life. We believe from these teachings we should try to understand and live our dharma. Better to live our own dharma then try to succeed in someone else's [sic], as the Gita teaches. We try to encourage people to discover their dharma and feel comfortable with prosperity as long as it is through the eyes of dharma. We hold a retreat 'Being of Purpose' where we take student [sic] through a week of understanding their signature strength and how they can serve the greater good in an attempt to get them clear on their own dharma. It definitely blends modern teachings but is inspired by vedic [sic] wisdom. (Power Living Australia 2016)

The following excerpts show how HJS invokes this term, and what its thoughts are on 'modern' yoga:

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Are those, who remove ‘Om’ and ‘Surya-namaskar’ from ‘Yoga’, thinking that they have more knowledge than our Sages and Seers? ‘Yogasana’ is not just physical exercise but it is also spiritual exercise. ‘Dharma-drohis’ working at psychological level are not remembered either for their work or even by their names; whereas what is advised by Sages remains eternal as there is un-manifest power of ‘Om’ in them. (HJS 2016b)

HJS wishes all Hindu Dharmabhimanis a Blissful New Year! Let us resolve to Strive with all our Strength for Re-establishing Ramrajya again. (HJS 2016a)

These statements are qualified by the following excerpts from responses to a question I posed on the Yoga Teachers’ Facebook page. Note how I have included the number of ‘likes’ these comments received. This is an attempt to show how the community responded and identifies with the comments of others:

What you said about Dharma resonates truthfully. It is an important part of teaching yoga to bring the world into balance as this effects our Karma. When it comes to world peace, disasters in the world [sic] to ignore these things for me is ignoring some of the deeper things of yoga. (McCartney 2016b) [Number of ‘likes’ = 18]

Most of the comments on the thread have redeemed my faith in

the yoga community. Those of you who use the word “politics” so frivolously, consider that word as a place holder for “human rights”, “student safety and well-being”, “freedom” etc etc. if [sic] you are ***privileged*** enough to consider those ideas, and what is happening right now as mere politics, perhaps you should check yourself and read up on allyship, and take a good long meditation to think about the things you are able to disregard, ignore, or forget because of that privilege.

(McCartney 2016b) [Number of ‘likes’ = 21]

Regardless of such pro-social, activist attitudes like the representative samples above, the overwhelmingly ‘liked’ comment shows that many yoga practitioners are deeply ambivalent (and ignorant) of yoga-related politics, and how it is involved in *glocal* processes of exploitation and consumption.

Yoga and politics DON’T mix!!
Like at all!! Stop trying to impose your feelings onto others! We aren’t all upset about it like you may be! (McCartney 2016b)
[Number of ‘likes’ = 124]

The support for this type of response demonstrates a central point related to my overall assertion that the general ambivalence many western yoga practitioners have toward *glocal* politics helps facilitate the assimilationist processes of an expansionist, Hindu agenda, which directly incorporates the soft power of yoga into broadening the sphere of cultural, political and economic influence of the Indian state. This occurs through the yoga

practitioners' uncritical consumption of a homogenised cultural practice like yoga, which is central to both the emic and etic perceptions of Hindu supremacist legitimacy. If the cosmopolitan yoga practitioner does not value cultivating a more expansive view beyond the edge of their yoga mat, then there is little reason to assume that a critical perspective will result. Yoga plays an important part in the soft power initiatives of the Indian state. However, 'modern yoga' also relies on the same textual corpus for inspiration, identity, answers, guidance, and moral certitude that Hindu supremacists do. Therefore, we must seek clarity through an ethnographic and historical sociological comparison of the ontological nature of these proposed metaphysical bodies, so that we can determine the commensurability between the utopian future of global yoga and nation-state of Hindu supremacism (cf. van der Veer 2016: 54).

Within Shanti Mandir's ashram my transgressive discussions with residents and visitors alike regarding politics and yoga were often met with derision. An example of a typical response makes it clear: 'I haven't come here [to the ashram] to discuss politics with you. I am here to deepen my [yoga] practice and my relationship with my guru'. It is interesting, however, that this was the typical response of most western devotees. In contrast, several of the Indian devotees were generally quite happy to talk about politics. This shows a gap in how politics is valued within different global yoga cultures, and more importantly within discrete yoga communities.

While some Western yoga practitioners understand the political currents that yoga is involved in, or at least appreciate that a yoga practice does not necessarily preclude social activism, many Western yoga practitioners have very little desire to know about the domestic politics of India, yoga's historicity as opposed to its 'history', the political history of yoga as a cultural reformation against Brahminical hegemony, its role in the Hindu expansionist agenda, or the semantic power of overlapping worlds and memes in which they stretch, breathe, meditate, consume, and imagine. I argue that our unwitting involvement with overlapping ideas does not preclude participation in or support for worlds we might not be aware of or feel comfortable being associated with. Yoga has a lot to offer humanity. Just how authentically 'Vedic' we imagine ourselves, our communities, and nations to be is something we must explore more.



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ⁱ Malinar (2009) describes the concept of inclusivism, which refers to the inclusion of other religious systems within the hierarchy of one’s own theological perspective. The neo-Hindu proselyte Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) suggests in an inclusivistic manner that while all religions are equal, Hinduism, and in particular, *Advaita Vedānta*, just happens to be a better alternative (Vivekananda 2006). The term ‘neo-Hindu’ reveals quite tender spots in the collective Hindu-Yoga imagination. It is considered by some to be a colonial construction that has a pejorative application that is used to undermine the credibility and temporal longevity of Hinduism (Morales 2016). However, the term specifically refers to the reformation of particular Hindu philosophies and subsequent identities, which occurred at the colonial intersection with Christianity, and was an attempt to create national, cultural and political unity in defense of a burgeoning national identity (Sharma 1999). The promotion of the concept of *jīvanmukta* is one reason for Advaita Vedānta’s philosophical prestige, as it promotes the possibility of attaining liberation in this very life. However, there are very few people that have apparently achieved this state (Sharma, 1999). The neo-Hindu concept of *jīvanmukta* differs from Śaṅkara’s ninth-century interpretation due to the emphasis of an ‘ideal’ identity that includes visible elements of social activism (Srivastava 1990). The emphasis on charitable works is one reason why organisations like Shanti Mandir can be considered a neo-Hindu organisation (Mandir 2015). This focus on a broader concept of charity is also part of a cultural bricolage that formed during the colonial period (Hatcher 2007).