

Touching the Limits, Assessing Pain: On Language Performativity, Health, and Well-Being in Yoga Classes

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Abstract Transcultural flows are communicated through various channels. For most of them language is instrumental in mediating and resituating cultural meanings. Taking the case of modern Hatha Yoga, this chapter focuses on the ways in which distinct types of tutorials contribute to the cultural translation of this bodily practice. I explore habitual language use in yoga classes in its capacity to shape and reformulate notions on the body, self, and well-being. This analysis focuses on two highly standardized examples of postural yoga, both practiced in Germany: (1) Bikram Yoga, a fairly recent and demanding form of yoga that emphasizes extensive stretching, muscle formation, and balance, performed in a training hall heated to forty degrees Celsius; and (2) *Yoga for Everyone* as promoted by Kareen Zebroff. Her yoga instructions on television and in books can be considered a paradigm for yoga gymnastics that in the 1970s facilitated the popularization of postural yoga in Germany and elsewhere. The comparison clearly shows the contrasts between various types of teaching postural yoga, and also in what respect the approach to yoga as a method of maintaining a healthy body seems to have changed in the last decades. I argue that some of the more recent fashions of Hatha Yoga (again) convey more than physical education; rather they call upon the self as an agent to transgress personal and bodily limits. In a post-secular and liberalized setting these techniques to enhance human flexibility and performance are framed within the health discourse.

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Introduction

This chapter looks at those forms of modern postural yoga that are advertised and practiced as techniques to maintain and achieve a healthy body. This is clearly the most dominant and popular strand in today's transnational yoga world, and associated and identified with Hatha Yoga.¹ However, the notion of yoga as a form of physical education, as a preventive system, a workout to increase body performance, or as mind-body exercise, only evolved in the twentieth century. Recently, Joseph Alter, Elizabeth De Michelis, Mark Singleton, and other scholars have shown in what ways modern forms of yoga can be seen as cultural hybrids, having absorbed a variety of novel elements.² In this process, breathing techniques (*prāṇāyāma*) and posture practice (*āsana*) have been associated with health and curative effects from the 1920s onwards. Following Singleton, teaching the health benefits of yoga goes back to Shri Yogendra who in 1919 gave perhaps the first modern yoga classes addressing the Indian middle class in a suburb of Mumbai (formerly: Bombay). Cooperating with medical doctors, Yogendra also spread yoga in the United States. The credit for starting laboratory research on the healing powers of yoga postures, contractions, and breathing techniques goes to Swami Kuvalayananda who in 1924 founded the research institute Kaivalyadhama at Lonavla (a hill station between Mumbai and Pune).³

Today it is widely regarded as self-evident that the regular practice of postural yoga, based primarily on *āsana* and *prāṇāyāma*, is healthy. First, knowledge about the health benefits of each exercise and (assumed) ways an exercise works are conveyed during yoga classes and in a variety of yoga manuals.⁴ Secondly, clinical and laboratory research has focused on the measurable effects of particular postures and breath control, mainly with positive results.⁵ Hence the practice of postural

¹ The term “Hatha Yoga” has become a synonym for modern postural yoga, although in medieval Indian theology *haṭhayoga* described ritual traditions that employed the human body for soteriological means. On the revaluation of yoga and resulting problems of classification see this book's introduction.

² Alter (2004), De Michelis (2004), and Singleton (2010).

³ Singleton (2010, 115–122) and Alter (2004, 84); see also Goldberg, cited in Newcombe (2009, 990). Both “Yogendra” and “Kūvalayananda” are spiritual names adopted by Manibhai Haribhai Desai (1897–1989) and, respectively, Jagannath G. Gune (1883–1966). Although some yogic exercises (*āsana*, *mudra*, *bhanda*) have been described in tantric literature as useful to ward off any disease, these promises should be seen as embedded within a wider magico-spiritual agenda rather than conceptualized as health benefits in a modern sense (see the introduction of this volume). On a Hindu notion of health as metaphysical perfection see Alter (1999).

⁴ At times, these descriptions assume an overtly mechanistic understanding of the human body and thus go far beyond biomedical understanding, e.g., regarding the way in that the headstand would improve the blood circulation of the brain (see “Mythos Kopfstand” in *Viveka* 17 October 1999, www.viveka.de/artikel.php, accessed 22 August 2011).

⁵ There has been an incalculable number of individual medico-scientific studies on the particular health effects of yoga exercises, yet comparatively few up-to-date books and systematic reviews on the subject (De Michelis 2007; Ross and Thomas 2010; Saxton 2011; on the risk of injury

yoga is recommended for coping with various symptoms and diseases associated with the modern lifestyle such as stress, depression, sleep disorder, muscle tension, migraine, chronic pain disorder, obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure, to name but a few. However, what actually constitutes a healthy person is neither universal nor timeless. Medical anthropology has shown that the subjective assessment of human well-being and health-seeking behavior is shaped by various influences, ranging from economic needs to cultural discourses.⁶ Furthermore, in industrialized modern nation states a healthy body has turned into a social asset by itself. To keep oneself fit and free of disease is considered an obligation and thus a matter of morality. In recent decades this duty has seemingly expanded to also include notions of emotional balance, mental flexibility, and self-care.⁷

In what follows I consider yoga classes as a cultural site for the social negotiation of what actually constitutes beneficial exercise and a person with a healthy body; with this in mind, I shall focus on habitual language use in yoga tutorials. In my view, language is also crucial for identifying meanings and modulating experience in the course of a transcultural encounter, and a traveling bodily practice such as Hatha Yoga in particular. To address the effects of yoga classes in socio-cultural terms does not negate the significance of yoga exercises and their potential for changing the biomedical status of the human body. Rather it is assumed that measurable results in the body go hand in hand with altered body awareness and, in respect to yoga's global currents, with newly gained knowledge about the mind-body-nexus, well-being, and health. This process may induce changes in the way the abilities and limitations of the body are conceived, in how agency is assessed to manipulate bodily processes, and in forms of coping with discomfort and pain. Although there are several factors that may influence the somatic experience of yoga practitioners—ranging from social context to individual preferences regarding the class situation—the major instrument for (re-)shaping notions of a healthy body is, I suggest, verbal instruction. Following theories on the performativity of language, my assumption is that speech conventions have tremendous influence on

caused by yoga see also the popular book by journalist Broad (2012). Although yoga inventions appear to be equal or superior to other forms of exercise and evidentially improve a variety of health-related conditions, it is problematic to draw general conclusions from these studies. Their validity is limited to distinct health related aspects, types of yoga (gentle or vigorous), and kinds of population (regarding health status, age, gender); moreover the number of participants is often small and the duration of the survey varies from only a single session to six months (Ross and Thomas 2010, 6). Extensive bibliographical references on studies about the physiological, psychological, and biochemical benefits of yoga are provided by the International Association of Yoga Therapists on their homepage (www.iayt.org, accessed 15 January 2012).

⁶On basic assumptions in social anthropology on the conceptualization of health see Janzen (2002); for an example of a culture-specific health concept see Alter (1999). A wide and relative perspective on health has been also acknowledged by the World Health Organization (WHO) which in 1948 defined health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (Constitution of the World Health Organization, see www.who.int, accessed 15 January 2012).

⁷For the recent discourse on self-care see Ziguras (2004); on the issue of flexibility see Martin (1995).

how the regular performance of yoga exercises changes the subjective perspective of the body and its potential for self-development.⁸ Seen thusly, instructions to teach yoga do not only serve as a didactic device. Whether intended or not, they also communicate how yoga practitioners should feel and think about their corporeal self vis-à-vis the “lived-in world” (Thomas Csordas). This is not to say that the effects of yoga postures are merely suggestive. Rather, yoga works not only on a physical but also on a discursive level. Among several other effects, I shall argue, it challenges socially learned cultural attitudes towards personal limits. Moreover, the analysis of habitual language use in yoga classes may also help to understand why Hatha Yoga as a preventive program resonates with specific audiences. As it will be shown further down, the comparison of tutorial styles raises the question of to what extent recent yoga fashions reframe bodily limitations and the sensation of pain during the performance of a posture, from being a warning signal against exaggeration and overwork to an indicator of a successful transformation process bringing the body and self to perfection. Although regular yoga practice influences body awareness in many respects, I focus on the issue of pain since it is directly linked to the personal assessment of psychophysical limits. It will turn out that in social settings shaped by economic liberalization and post-secular thought the ability to cross these personal limits is promoted within the health discourse and only secondarily regarded as a spiritual encounter.

Initially, the idea to explore language use during yoga classes was not driven by theorizing on transcultural flows. Rather, I started practicing Bikram Yoga after a long pause—I had previous experiences with Hatha Yoga 16 and then 6 years ago.⁹ I was puzzled by the contrasting style of tutorial and wondered how to make sense of this difference. Being a social anthropologist with a background in ritual studies and Hinduism I gradually developed a professional interest in the impact of language for the transmission of Hatha Yoga. At the beginning of 2009, I started to make field notes on my own and others’ reactions in this Bikram Yoga studio. I generated a working hypothesis and observed the communication during and after class more systematically. Additionally, I analyzed (remembered and recorded) instructions of several yoga teachers and interviewed some of them.¹⁰ In the following I wish to explore the data of this study against the background of earlier conventions of teaching Hatha Yoga in Germany. Methodologically this proved to be difficult since there are hardly any recordings of yoga classes from previous

⁸ There is extensive literature on language and performance (e.g., Wirth 2002), drawing in one way or the other on John Austin’s (1962) theory of language performativity as introduced in his seminal book *How to Do Things with Words*.

⁹ Since 2007 I have attended Bikram Yoga classes regularly. In 2001 I had joined a short course in Kundalini Yoga tailored for pregnant women. My initial encounter with Hatha Yoga was by means of books and, in 1985, through a 2 week retreat in South India in order to learn Sivananda Yoga. However, after this return from India I practiced yoga only occasionally.

¹⁰ I would like to thank Claudia Vahrst and Hans Lamberti who not only allowed insights into the backstage of Bikram Yoga Altona (Hamburg), but also encouraged my research on the relevance of language in yoga tuition in all respects.

decades. Eventually, I decided to consider a tutorial filmed for broadcast on German television. This yoga course started to be aired in 1973 and was called *Yoga für Yeden* (sic), literally: yoga for everyone. Considering the enormous response to this program, this type of teaching demonstration must have hit a nerve with contemporary audience and really met their expectations.¹¹ Below I shall therefore analyze sequences of this program, viewpoints of the presenter Kareen Zebroff, as well as yoga instructions given in her book that was published along with the TV series.¹² Obviously, a filmed tutorial is only in part representative of yoga instructions at the time. Still, I would claim that it shares crucial features (as will be described below). Since framing yoga as a system of physical exercises suitable for everyone corresponded to approaches taken in adult education centers and sport clubs—major institutions in West Germany for teaching yoga in the 1970s and 1980s—the tutorial’s attitude towards yoga (instructions) can be regarded as prime example of making yoga a mainstream activity.¹³ Although at this time yoga was not only practiced as a secular activity, today the variety of yoga styles offered is much larger, ranging from religio-spiritual forms of self-actualization, to physiotherapeutic bodywork, and athletic workout. On this background, Bikram Yoga represents a rather exclusive type within the most recent yoga fashion, which spilled over from the United States to Germany at the turn of the twenty-first century.

In short, I shall compare two highly standardized ways of teaching postural yoga, both associated with fitness and health rather than with “spiritual” goals—although even the most profane yoga teachers would probably agree that yoga postures cannot be reduced to a form of gymnastics but rather constitute a system of refining the human being on a more integral level. Both yoga styles are explored as they were and are practiced in Germany. Since similar forms of teaching and marketing postural yoga can be found in many places in Europe, North America, and, gradually, in other continents, the following analysis should not be read as an ethnography of a particular regional yoga community. Rather than allowing conclusions of an explicitly “German” understanding of Hatha Yoga, it gives insight into two contrasting yoga cultures that have spread across national, geographic, religious, and linguistic borders, yet with distinct regional and temporal agglomerations. In conclusion, I shall come back to the question of how the findings of this study exemplify and raise more general issues about the transcultural dissemination of bodily practices, and the specific role language plays in constituting and possibly reframing the somatic experience of practitioners.

¹¹ *Spiegel*, dated 27 January 1975.

¹² I am most grateful to Kareen Zebroff for sharing her memories with me by email (see also www.kareenzebroff.com, accessed 15 January 2012). I am equally indebted to Christoph Kucklick who provided DVD copies of the original yoga program, and also to Walter Hug (Münchner Yoga-Zentrum) for sharing Anneliese Harf’s scripts of her yoga program for Südwestfunk in 1978. Many thanks to Sonja Majumder for transcribing yoga tutorials from DVD.

¹³ See *Spiegel*, 27 January 1975; Fuchs (1990, 203).

Stretching for Self-Development: Bikram Yoga

Bikram Yoga is a form of yoga developed by Bikram Choudhury (*1946), a Bengali who in 1973 migrated to the United States with the intention of teaching yoga to the West. He had received his yoga training at Ghosh's Yoga College in Kolkata, an institute run by Bishnu Charan Ghosh (1903–1970). Like his Indian contemporaries, Bishnu Ghosh favored a blend of physical culture, muscle control, and bodybuilding, and only in the 1940s shifted to Hatha Yoga—last but not least for the highly acrobatic postures that could be performed on stage for an audience.¹⁴ Similarly, Bikram was trained to perform very strenuous and athletic exercises associated with yoga. He claims to have been awarded the All-India National Yoga Champion at the age of 13. In the 1960s he also practiced weightlifting, yet after a severe knee injury focused solely on yoga. When regaining full flexibility he became a yoga teacher. As such, Bikram's autobiographic statements allude to an initiation story in which the protagonist undergoes a life-changing crisis (in this case the accident and the fear of being crippled) before he felt the necessity to spread the wonders of yoga and became a yoga teacher himself. Once he settled in Hollywood, Bikram opened a yoga school and promoted a particular series of yoga exercises obligatory for every class, irrespective of proficiency, physical condition, or age of the practitioner.¹⁵ This curriculum consists of 26 selected postures and two breathing exercises lasting for 90 min altogether.¹⁶ The room is heated to 40° Celsius with humidity of 40 % in order to release tension, “to sweat out toxins” and to facilitate deeper stretching while preventing injuries.¹⁷ Emphasis is given to verbal instruction and only exceptionally will a yoga teacher demonstrate how to perform a posture correctly. Rather, students are taught to control their own

¹⁴ Bishnu Ghosh learned yoga from his elder brother Mukunda Lal Ghosh (1883–1952), who in 1915 had become a monk known as (Paramahansa) Yogananda. Yogananda promoted a meditation system called Kriya Yoga in India and in the United States. He founded the Self-Realization Fellowship and became widely known as the author of *Autobiography of a Yogi* (1946). According to Singleton (2010, 132), Yogananda had also developed enormous skill in muscle control through willpower. During his early years in the United States, public displays of his mastery were a major crowd puller. Remaining in Kolkata, Bishnu founded in 1923 Ghosh's College of Physical Education, later renamed as Ghosh's Yoga College (see Guggenbühl 2008). Since 2008 the vice principal of this yoga school is Muktamala Ghosh, Bishnu's granddaughter (see www.ghoshsyoga.com, accessed 15 January 2012). Guggenbühl (2008) assumes that Yogananda became acquainted with postural yoga in Mysore and hence inspired Bishnu Ghosh to consider yoga postures as physical exercise. At any rate, Guggenbühl (2008, 7) doubts whether Bishnu Ghosh had practiced yoga himself or if he preferred bodybuilding and muscle control.

¹⁵ See Choudhury and Reynolds (1978); www.bikramyoga.com, (accessed 15 January 2012). According to Bühnemann's (2007, 31–36) investigation the Bikram Yoga series of exercises actually is a selection from a total of 91 postures taught at Ghosh's Yoga College in the 1970s.

¹⁶ Many of these postures are also standard in other forms of postural yoga, e.g., the eagle pose, the cobra pose, the bow pose, the camel pose, and the spine twisting pose.

¹⁷ The idea of yoga as a method of expulsing toxins by means of sweating has been discussed by Smith (2008, 149–150).

performance with the help of large wall mirrors on one or two sides of the hall. Additionally, an instructor may adjust the holding of a pose. In 1994 Bikram began organizing teacher training on a large scale, a process that contributed to the mushrooming of “Hot Yoga.” When in 2002 he managed to hold a US copyright for the distinct combination of exercises and teaching conditions established by him and hence began to accuse nonconformist offshoots to violate rules, a major controversy arose.¹⁸ Meanwhile there are 519 licensed Bikram Yoga studios worldwide associated with the Bikram Yoga College of India, based in Los Angeles.¹⁹ In Germany the Bikram Yoga wave started in 1999; 10 years later there were studios in Hamburg (three), Berlin (two), Munich, Frankfurt, Kiel, and Potsdam.²⁰ Still, numerically, other forms of yoga are much more popular among Germans.

In Hamburg-Altona, Bikram Yoga is taught in a large studio exclusively reserved for this type of yoga. Reception, training room, and other facilities are designed in a modern, minimalist style; dispersed Buddha statues, fresh orchids, teak benches, lounge music, and large photographs of yoga athletes contribute to the atmosphere. The studio offers 27 yoga classes per week, with an annual average of 21 yoga students per class (in 2009/10). The participation and hence the size of class varies depending on the time of the day, day of the week, and season. Generally between 12 and 45 will visit. They pay per class, per month, or for a multiple visit pass. Seventy percent of the students are 26–42 years old (the peak age-group is 29–33), representing a noticeable gender and ethnic mixture.²¹ The staff mainly consists of German women and men, but also includes teachers from the United States, Brazil, and Japan. If required, some classes or sections of classes are taught in English. Yoga practitioners wear a minimum of sportswear (basically shorts, a tank top, bathing trunks) due to the heat. During class students are given almost non-stop precise instructions on the proper performance of a posture, explanations of its health benefits, and reminders to carry out an exercise

¹⁸ This copyright was the basis for franchise yoga studios, see Fish (2006) and Philp (2009, 146–151). The media discourse on this controversy seems to be nourished further by the fact that Bikram is an eccentric, known as the guru of several Hollywood celebrities, claimed millionaire, and, due to several notorious statements, the “bad boy” of yoga. Still, he is by far not the only one to commercialize yoga with the help of propriety claims. According to Fish (2006, 192), there have been hundreds of yoga-related trademarks, copyrights, and patents registered in the United States alone (see introduction).

¹⁹ See www.bikramyoga.com/studiolisting.php, (accessed 1 December 2010). From the total number of 519 Bikram Yoga studios in 36 countries worldwide, 316 are in the United States, and only two in India (Mumbai, Pune). Besides, there are several other yoga studios offering tuition branded as Hot Yoga.

²⁰ In the meantime there was another Bikram Yoga studio in Erlangen that had to be closed down for personal reasons. The founder had offered Bikram Yoga classes even before 1999 in private tuition and adult education centers. On Bikram Yoga in the United States see Syman (2010), Chap. 13.

²¹ This statistical analysis is based on all clients ($n = 1016$) who visited a yoga class at Bikram Yoga Altona for a minimum of three times in the year 2009/10 (database provided by the owners of this studio).



Fig. 1 Standing bow pose in a Bikram yoga class at Hamburg, 2008 (Courtesy: Bikram Yoga Altona)

simultaneously. Following the program requires complete attention. The suggested postures are very demanding and require extensive stretching, strong muscles, as well as a good sense of balance and coordination (Fig. 1). Although postures are performed slowly, from the initial breathing exercise onwards, the body sweats intensely. Here is an excerpt from my field diary:

Today the yoga hall seemed to be even hotter. The air was extremely humid; it was really stuffy . . . I needed to pause a couple of times since I had a sudden feeling of nausea . . . However, this time the head-to-knee pose turned out quite well. Doing the locust posture was again so demanding that I couldn't think of anything else but keeping my legs up. Just hold them there. Whew . . . just made it! During the final relaxation, every part of my body seemed to vibrate. I felt so heavy, as if the floor will absorb me, leaden, sufficiently worn down and thoroughly content just lying there.²²

This ambivalent reaction with feelings of exhaustion and happiness is common among Bikram Yoga practitioners. Paying attention to the fast pace of the tutorial, heightened circulation, and heavy sweating produce a cathartic effect. As in a sauna, the individual character of yoga students and their usual self-presentation dissolve into pure corporeality. A Bikram Yoga class thus helps to get away from the everyday; to be reborn, resting in oneself, relaxed, cleansed, energetic. This journey is provoked, directed, and accompanied by verbal instructions.

Every class is structured by the obligatory *Teacher's Dialogue* (for which copyright was obtained), rendered in German. There is, however, a slight variation of this text according to the personality and experience of an instructor. Although called "dialogue," during class, yoga students are not supposed to speak. Rather, they are invited to answer nonverbally, i.e., by means of their bodies. In the following I shall

²² 1 September 2009, translated from the German.

introduce some of the teachers' speech patterns that usually come with the actual posture briefing. These verbal phrases—here (re-)translated into English—fall into four categories. First there is general advice, for instance “focus on yourself,” “look at your image in the mirror and concentrate,” “you are your teacher,” “now you work on your will power,” “jointly start the posture and share your energy so that it will increase,” “struggle more” and “if you do it half-heartedly the posture has not begun.” Some of these phrases have auto-suggestive character, like “where your mind goes, your body will follow” or “the mirror will reflect your energy.” Secondly, there are clear prohibitions: “don't leave the room,” “don't drink water during the [performance of] postures,”²³ “don't care about bathing in sweat,” “don't compare yourself with your neighbor.” Thirdly, there is a lot of positive encouragement and praise. Phrases like “it's a pleasure that you are here,” “enjoy the class,” “this [performance of posture] is perfect,” “you did a good job,” “honor your personal effort,” and “thank you for sharing your energy” comfort the students.

This carrot and stick rhetoric is further enhanced by remarks about physical reactions that may occur during the performance of a posture, the fourth category in my analysis of speech patterns. These commentaries help students to assess their physical limits and the sensation of pain in particular: “if [in this position] you can't breathe properly, this is normal,” “if you feel dizzy now, great; that is how it should feel,” “if now your hip joint hurts that is perfectly alright; you want to have this pain; pull hard,” “if you feel like dying, you did it correctly.” To make it clear, these remarks are intended to increase performance and discipline. Beginners are encouraged to take breaks as needed, as are those who feel lightheaded or sick. As with other forms of postural yoga, there are intervals of supine relaxation. Apart from these intervals, Bikram Yoga motivates students to go beyond their personal limits and to invite sensations of acute discomfort rather than avoiding extremes. “Now you work on your determination!” Painful stimuli are regarded as helpful in order to expand body flexibility. Therefore the obligatory instructions also include phrases asking students to perform “as hard as possible,” to “go beyond [their] . . . flexibility” in order to create “a tremendous stretching feeling, pain sensation all over.”²⁴ In the yoga studio at Hamburg, teachers often modify these directions in order to compensate for their rigor. They realize that the English *Tutorial Dialogue* cannot be translated literally but requires adjustments to get the right tone.²⁵ Some instructors use joking prosody, anglicized jargon, and cool metaphors, as the following statement shows: “Initially your elbows will hurt a little, this is not unusual. If your pulse beats like techno, wow, this is pretty normal!”²⁶ This

²³ Drinking water should be consumed only after the initial exercises and only between posture sets.

²⁴ Teachers are obliged to follow the *Authorized Teacher's Dialogue* from which these quotations are taken.

²⁵ At Bikram Yoga Altona, yoga teachers among themselves reflected on the controversial style in that Bikram Yoga instructions were to be given (interview 12 July 2010).

²⁶ German original: “Wenn das anfangs in den Ellbogen ein bisschen weh tut, ist das nicht ungewöhnlich, . . . wenn dein Puls jetzt ein bisschen Techno spielt, wow, das ist völlig normal!” (2 July 2009, during locust pose).

humorous and at times self-ironical attitude is best exemplified by Bikram himself who is known for opening his class (in the United States) with “welcome to Bikram’s torture chamber.” However, ordinary Bikram Yoga teachers rather encourage their students and ask them to hold a posture with a smile on their faces, or quickly add some plaudit (“This looks great!,” “Now you get the benefits”). At any rate, to go to the personal maximum is considered the prime method for increasing the health benefits of a posture.

It should be clear by now that this particular method of teaching yoga cannot go undisputed. Although Bikram himself claims that his type of yoga can cure all kinds of disease, critics stress the risks of this strenuous practice: fainting, cramps, dehydration, heat exhaustion, and heat stroke. Loren Fishman and Ellen Saltonstall even classify Bikram Yoga as “unsuited to therapeutic work.”²⁷ They identify the health risks of yoga in general as (1) teaching beginners in under-supervised or overcrowded conditions, and (2) surpassing anatomical and fitness-related limits.²⁸ Obviously, Bikram Yoga must appear suspicious to them. Considering the crowd and heat factor alone, popular yoga camps (*yoga śibir*) in India could be criticized as well, given that in these outdoor camps thousands are instructed to perform yoga in often extremely hot and humid weather conditions.²⁹ However, during the final relaxation, Bikram Yoga practitioners are reminded of the postures’ benefits and in what respect mind and body have been released. The students hence learn how to consider temporary feelings of severe discomfort and overstrain as an indicator of an exercise’s efficacy.

Being gradually in a position to perform hitherto unachievable postures seemingly proves the success of reaching and transcending personal limits. In my opinion this phenomenon is not limited to Bikram Yoga. Several types of yoga that have become fashionable since the mid-1990s emphasize vigorous physical workout, for instance Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga, Power Yoga, and Jivamukti Yoga. Each of them employs techniques to help practitioners reach their limits. Similarly, in the well-established tradition of Iyengar Yoga students are encouraged to experience and test their bodily flexibility. According to the philosophy of its guru B. K. S. Iyengar (*1918), the pain is present as a teacher, alluding to the didactic role of physical discomfort. A German journalist and yoga adept who in 1990 joined yoga tuition by Iyengar in Pune indeed recalls vigor instructions with orders such as “Hey, give your maximum,” “[hold the position] two more minutes. Taste the Yoga of Pain.”³⁰ Regarding an early-morning yoga class for Delhites in

²⁷ Fishman and Saltonstall (2008, 263). The positive effects of Bikram Yoga were explored by Hart and Tracy (2008); the pros and cons of yoga in a heated room were further assessed by Saxton (2011).

²⁸ Ibid., 279.

²⁹ On yoga camps in India see Alter (1997, 2008).

³⁰ Iyengar, quoted by Bertram Job in “Schmerz ist dein Meister,” the title story in the popular German science magazine *Geo*, dated September 1990. The cover of this magazine had a large photograph of Iyengar in his seventies performing a variation of the headstand (*parivṛttaikapāda śīrṣāsana*).

1994, Alter too perceived yoga instructions sounding like coming from a “a drill sergeant,” commanding students to “stretch, stretch, stretch harder now . . . OK, grab your ankles—c’mon, put a little effort into it! OK, then. All together now. Breath in . . . and out . . . OK, relax.”³¹ The strict teaching methods used in several Indian yoga classes seem to echo the Anglo-American fitness mantra “no pain, no gain.” However, both settings imply a distinction of good and bad pain.

Bikram Yoga does not only provoke in respect to the assessment of exhaustion and at times painful body sensations. The fairly authoritarian mode of teaching, emphasizing straight commands, discipline, and self-control seems to contradict the image of yoga as a gentle, mindful, soft and effeminate practice, giving attention to introspection and individual body condition.³² Therefore the professional association of yoga teachers in Germany (Bund der Yogalehrenden in Deutschland, BDY) has been very critical of the “Indian athletics” offered by Bikram Choudhury. According to their view in 2004, Bikram Yoga had hardly anything in common with yoga’s “original idea of uniting body, mind, and soul.”³³ However, taking this perspective conceals that the cultural imaginaire of yoga as an integral, esoteric, and recreative bodily practice first emerged in a Western context (see below). Moreover, one driving force behind the general acceptance of Hatha Yoga as a secularized mind-body technique in Germany was the flower power generation.³⁴ They appreciated yoga as an alternative practice, calling upon the liberating aspects of bodily self-determination, carefully avoiding any allusion to discipline and authority, not to speak of business. However, this movement also contributed to yoga becoming mainstream practice and, therefore, by the 1970s the gentleness of yoga was (re-)produced and reflected on in probably all varieties of yoga teaching in Germany.

Popular Sport and Relaxation: Yoga for Everyone

In terms of the number of yoga practitioners and media coverage in 1970s Germany, postural yoga gradually lost its subcultural character. Following estimations by the weekly magazine *Spiegel* in 1975 100,000 West Germans were practicing yoga (equivalent to 4 % of yoga practitioners in the year 2007).³⁵

³¹ Alter (1997, 320).

³² On the notion of discipline and authority in Ashtanga Yoga see Smith (2008).

³³ Cited by journalist Julia Johannsen in her article “Bikram Yoga” published by *Yoga Aktuell: Magazin für Yoga und Neues Bewusstsein* 26, 03/2004.

³⁴ On the development of yoga in Germany and the variety of yoga schools in the 1950s and 1960s see Fuchs (1990, 2006).

³⁵ *Spiegel*, 27 January 1975. Comparing the number of yoga practitioners between 1975 and 2007 one should note that the population had risen from 61.6 million in former West Germany to 82.2 million inhabitants after reunification (source: Statistisches Bundesamt, www.destatis.de/DE/ZahlenFakten/Indikatoren/LangeReihen/Bevoelkerung/lrvev03.html, accessed 15 January 2012). Following a market study in 2007 there were about 2.5 million people practicing yoga in Germany,

The market was newly flooded with yoga self-help books, corresponding records and cassettes, thus reflecting the idea of predominantly doing yoga at home.³⁶ Apart from classes in adult education centers (*Volkshochschule*), one very powerful medium for teaching yoga exercises and spreading knowledge about the health benefits of Hatha Yoga was television. The use of mass media to address larger audiences in order to raise physical fitness was not completely new. German radio stations started broadcasting gymnastic programs from the 1930s onwards, and from 1975 to 1984 a yoga course was offered.³⁷ Still, the idea of explaining the correct yoga posture by means of television was developed in the United States. In 1961 Richard Hittleman coined a weekly TV format with yoga teachers demonstrating their skills, thereby positioning yoga as physical fitness for women.³⁸ In 1969 Kareen Zebroff started her daily yoga course on Canadian television where it ran for 16 years. In 1971 British stations began screening a regular twenty-minute course named *Yoga for Health*; similar yoga programs followed until 1986.³⁹ Ostensibly, the German TV-channel Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF) just adopted what had already proven to be an attractive format. The program was called *Yoga für Yeden* (sic), yoga for everyone, taught by Kareen Zebroff (*1941) who, with her German roots, had no difficulties speaking the language. Her weekly yoga course ran from 1973 to 1976, first as a 5-min section during the *ZDF-Sportinformation* and later, slightly extended as part of *ZDF-Drehscheibe*. The composition of *Yoga für Yeden* was generic for TV productions of the early generation, and by means of a frontal camera perspective and real-time playback in some way resembled a stage performance. Moreover, there was hardly any shot composition or visual editing. Instead, a fixed camera simply constantly focused a very slim blonde, dressed in a colorful leotard and tights, practicing yoga

but higher estimations also circulated (*Focus*, 26 May 2007). With regard to the spread of yoga in earlier years there aren't any statistics available but only estimations. Although in the 1960s there were several institutes teaching yoga as a more or less spiritual system, it was still considered an exclusivist vocation. According to the theologian Walter Schmidt (1967), throughout West Germany 45 Hatha Yoga courses were offered in 1966 by an estimated number of 20–30 adult education centers (see also Fuchs 1990, 2006).

Most data given in this section refer to West Germany. To date, knowledge about the spread and practice of yoga in the German Democratic Republic is only fragmentary (Fuchs 2006, 179–182). However, in 1977 the Eastern German newspaper *National-Zeitung* published a series on *Yoganastik für Jedermann* (“yoganastic” for everyone), indicating that the yoga fashion was not limited to West Germany (Fuchs 2006, 180, quoting the magazine *esotera*).

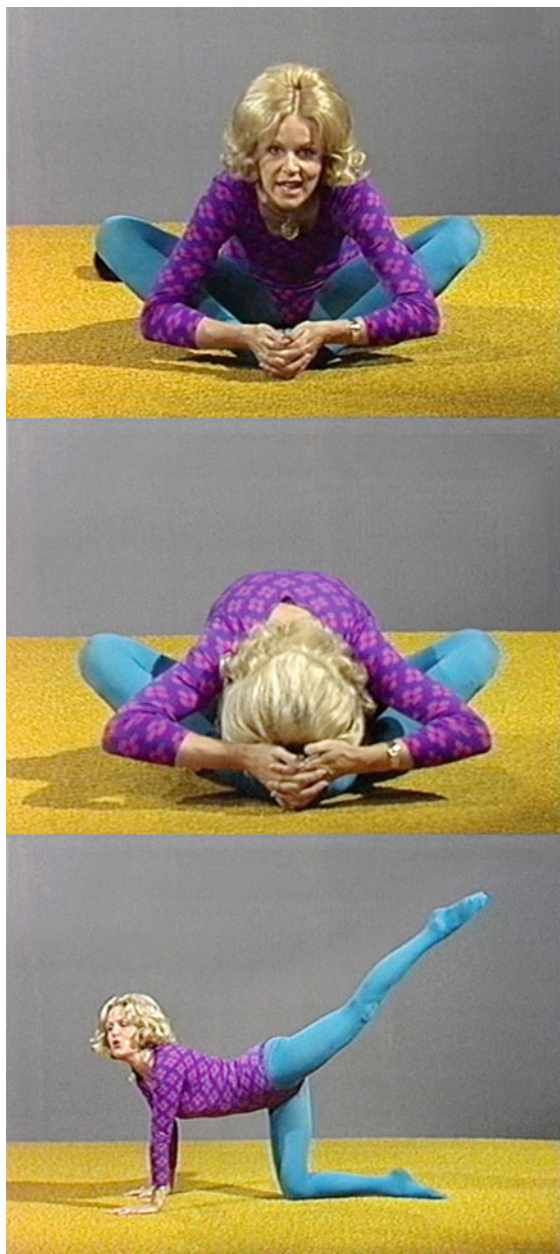
³⁶ According to Newcombe's (2008) exploration of the development of modern postural yoga in Britain, the number of English publications on yoga doubled during the 1970s (*ibid.*, 30). Similarly the number of practitioners rose from an estimated 5,000 in 1967 to about 100,000 in 1979 (*ibid.*, 172).

³⁷ See Wilk (2006, 262, 422). Yoga lessons were broadcasted by Südwestfunk; their presenter Anneliese Harf was teaching yoga and had run her own yoga school since 1962 (Fuchs 1990, 106; Tietke 2007, 25; personal communication with Werner Hug, Münchner Yoga-Zentrum).

³⁸ Singleton (2010, 20). According to Newcombe (2008, 180) the program started only in 1966.

³⁹ For the spread of yoga by means of British television see Newcombe (2008, 172–196).

Fig. 2 Karen Zebroff teaching *Yoga für Yeden* on German television, 1973 (Courtesy: ZDF)



on a wall-to-wall carpet (Fig. 2). In this way Karen demonstrated week by week how to perform one to three yoga postures correctly. *Yoga für Yeden* created an immense audience response, according to the sport-television presenter, that

exceeded any other program.⁴⁰ In 1974 the viewing figures for this afternoon program could be as high as 24 %.⁴¹ Moreover, the corresponding yoga manual immediately became a bestseller with new, partly revised editions, the 2010 edition being the most recent.⁴² It (was and) is structured like a recipe book with a brief introduction, chapters on 47 yoga postures, and a few lists of recommended posture routines suitable for practice “during office hours,” “for smoking cessation,” or for children. Illustrated with photographs, each chapter explains the performance of a posture step-by-step, informs about its respective health benefits and includes tips for advanced practitioners.

Kareen’s mode of teaching yoga was in many respects exemplary for rising yoga popularity in Germany at the time. Like many other yoga teachers of the period she was an autodidact and, being a mother of three children, advertised Hatha Yoga as a system of physical exercises particularly useful for “modern people” and “housewives” to generate “fresh energy,” youth, as well as an attractive, healthy, slim body.⁴³ Kareen thought of herself as a cultural translator adapting what “the Indian yogis did 5000 years back” into a technique suitable for modern Western people.⁴⁴ She claimed “we are occidentals [*Abendländer*]. From the beginning our lifestyle, our view of life, and our rhythm differs from the Eastern philosophy.”⁴⁵ She disapproved that “we civilized people are not able to do many things” because “in modern times, with all its stress, our muscles became so strained that at night we almost lost the ability to relax.”⁴⁶ This drastic opposition not only of Orientals vis-a-vis Westerners but also of ancient times and modern civilization is a popular trope in German yoga discourses of the post-World War II period up to the 1970s. In a similar manner the Indian Selvarajan Yesudian, who in 1949 had opened the first yoga school in Switzerland, contrasted the “perfect prehistoric man” with the “degenerated” lifestyle of modern office employees and civil servants.⁴⁷ In Kareen’s TV-program Hatha Yoga was promoted as a system to vitalize the body

⁴⁰ It is not known whether this response resulted from a genuine wish to learn yoga, the entertainment value of this TV format, or rather the attractiveness of Kareen’s yoga presentation. However, since it is at any rate difficult to distinguish these motives, in my analysis I regard the program’s success as an indicator as a general interest in this form of Hatha Yoga.

⁴¹ *Spiegel*, 2 September 1974 and 27 January 1975.

⁴² Originally the book was published in English as *The ABC of Yoga* (1971). The German version was named *Yoga für Jeden* (1973); the title of revised editions was slightly modified (2010: *Yoga: Übungen für jeden Tag*). Here I shall refer to the German 1975 edition, (re-)translating relevant sections.

⁴³ Only after her TV career had started, Kareen improved her Hatha Yoga with the help of American and Indian gurus (personal email-communication, 11 July 2010).

⁴⁴ *Yoga für Jeden*, 5 October 1973.

⁴⁵ Zebroff (1975, 7).

⁴⁶ German original: “Lauter Sachen, die wir zivilisierten Leute gar nicht können. Warum können wir das nicht mehr? Weil mit der modernen Zeit, mit all dem Stress, haben sich unsere Muskeln so angespannt, dass wir sie am Abend fast nicht mehr entspannen können” (*Yoga für Jeden* 1973).

⁴⁷ Yesudian and Haich (1949, 246–248). The Swiss yoga schools were run in cooperation with Elisabeth Haich.

and regulate its organic functions, i.e., as a tool to relax, to regenerate, to cure minor ailments, and to beautify the body.⁴⁸ Yoga was emphasized in this way as a remedy for several side effects of modern life in industrialized nations. Kareen positioned herself as the living example that “yoga works and works wonders.”⁴⁹ Nevertheless, while comfortably sitting in the lotus position, Kareen reassured her audience: “Don’t be afraid, for the next 3 years you do not need to do this [particular posture]. Headstand and lying on a bed of nails is for fakirs only.”⁵⁰ Explanations on the (apparent) background of Hatha Yoga and its use to combat stress and keep the body in shape constituted about half the tutorial.

Kareen improvised her instructions, mostly in a rather fragmentary style, complemented by her physical demonstration of Hatha Yoga during which she again addressed her audience directly, sharing her personal somatic experience. There was no third voice to comment on her posture performance. Apart from an introductory sitar melody, the program was accompanied by only natural sounds. This created a very informal, personal atmosphere in spite of the restricted artificial setting. The names of yoga postures were merely paraphrased in German, for instance, *Kobra* (cobra pose), *Löwe* (lion pose), *gespreizte Beinstreckung* (straddle leg stretch), *Kerze* (literally “candle,” referring to a shoulder stand), but also to more general warm-up and gymnastic exercises like *Katzenstreckung* (stretching like a cat), *Arm-Hebung* (arm lifting), and *Rock’n Roll* (referring to a rocking motion). This was part of making yoga an easy enterprise, suitable for every age group and good to combine with a daily routine. “That you can do while combing your hair,” she appealed to her audience, “Why don’t you practice this in your office or at home?” and “You could bend like this as well, for instance while you watch television.”⁵¹ It is not known how many spectators of *Yoga für Jeden* actually performed yoga postures during Kareen’s program and even kept on exercising afterwards. Still the viewing rate and the sales of the corresponding book indicate the tremendous interest in following her suggestion: “Come down on the floor, this is easy, everybody can do it!”⁵²

In retrospect one might criticize Kareen Zebroff’s yoga instructions as naive, overly simplified, and embellished with stereotypes. Yet at the start of the 1970s yoga in Germany was still a socially contested practice, faced with reservations about it being a religious cult or, contrarily, mocking and sarcastic comments about “breath artists” (*Atemkünstler*), “crackpots” (*Spinner*), “soul seizers”

⁴⁸ Zebroff (1975, 10).

⁴⁹ Ibid., 7, my translation.

⁵⁰ German original: “Das ist zwar der typische Lotussitz, aber bitte, kein Angst haben! Sie brauchen ihn nicht zu machen, auch für [die nächsten] drei Jahre nicht. Kopfstehen und auf Nägelbetten liegen ist auch nichts für Sie. Das ist für Fakire” (*Yoga für Jeden* 1973).

⁵¹ German original: “Das können Sie auch machen, während Sie . . . sich vorwärts beugen beim Haarekämmen. . . . Machen Sie’s doch auch: im Büro, zuhause, . . .” (*Yoga für Jeden* 1973). “So, auch Sie [sollten] sich so bewegen, zum Beispiel während Sie vor dem Fernseher sitzen” (*Yoga für Jeden* 1973).

⁵² *Yoga für Jeden* 1973.

(*Seelenfänger*), and “flexible housewives” (*biegsame Hausfrauen*).⁵³ The professional association of yoga teachers in Germany BDY (initially: Berufsverband Deutscher Yogalehrer), founded in 1967, aimed to improve the general image of yoga.⁵⁴ With this objective, yoga was demystified and reframed as an integral, yet secularized mind-body technique. This “clean” form of posture practice could be commercialized as Hatha Yoga whereas any reference to a specific yoga tradition or teacher risked being stigmatized as a form of blind guru worship.⁵⁵ The issue of spiritual self-development was a difficult one, and thus, in mainstream teaching, beyond the scope of Hatha Yoga. For the same reason, the ZDF-producer had asked Kareen to pass over any philosophical meanings associated with yoga. This direction was in line with the policy on German adult education centers.⁵⁶ Besides a rising number of sports clubs, these adult education classes were the main venues for teaching and learning yoga in Germany, from approximately the late 1960s to the beginning 1990s.⁵⁷ Regarding the emphasis on fitness, safe stretching, and relaxation, the type of yoga on television was thus modeled after adult education classes and vice versa. However, as Christian Fuchs showed in his study, the attention given to meditation and spirituality in German yoga classes varied.⁵⁸ Several yoga teachers were probably active in both adult education centers as well as private institutes devoted to self-development in a more religious sense. At any rate, during this period the preferred location for practicing yoga was at home.

In this socio-historical context Hatha Yoga was conceived as a very gentle and soft practice with curative effects on lifestyle diseases. Accordingly, Kareen Zebroff argued that yoga exercises differed from mere gymnastics in that they revitalized the body rather than caused exhaustion or muscle fever. Movements should be deliberately slow any physical exertion should be avoided: “The secret of yoga is to stretch rather than to contract muscles like in a gymnastic exercise. The movements are [to be] slow and thoughtful in order to stop at the initial sign of pain which is the body’s warning signal.”⁵⁹ Hence she appealed during her television class not to struggle too hard. “Don’t force yourself! Please never jerk and force your body, that would be anti-yoga! Lift [your foot] and put it on your thigh. Then

⁵³ See *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 23 May 1970 and *Spiegel*, 27 January 1975.

⁵⁴ Fuchs (1990, 114–120). Meanwhile the BDY has been renamed Berufsverband der Yogalehrenden in Deutschland e.V.

⁵⁵ Fuchs (2006, 175–176) mentions German yoga instructors who in the course of their professional career felt the need to distance themselves from their teachers.

⁵⁶ Fuchs (1990, 204). According to Newcombe (2009, 994) the Physical Education (sic) department in London had similar requirements for yoga not being identified as cult.

⁵⁷ See Fuchs (1990, 197–208). A survey in 1988 among yoga teachers associated with the BDY revealed that 64 % offered yoga in adult education centers, 42 % in private yoga schools and only 9 % in sports clubs and studios (Fuchs 1990, 229). In 2006 the importance of the adult education sector had decreased: Only 40 % taught yoga there, 26 % offered classes in private yoga schools and 17 % in the sports clubs and fitness centers (see Weber 2007, 157).

⁵⁸ Fuchs (1990).

⁵⁹ My translation of Zebroff (1975, 10).

you lift [this] knee slightly, take your foot, press the [other] knee down, of course in the same gentle way.”⁶⁰ She emphasized holding a posture only as long as it feels comfortable and warned against any exaggeration. “Now we do it again, very relaxed . . . close your eyes and enjoy the exercise!”⁶¹ This soft attitude towards the performance of a posture was considered the central quality of yoga, regardless that none of the exercises could be done without at least a minimum of muscular activity. One should carry out yoga postures very calmly and with kinesthetic pleasure. Hence Kareen motivated her audience by explaining that “yoga is not difficult because you proceed only as much as you can do easily.”⁶² This gentleness of yoga was also conveyed during yoga instructions broadcasted by radio. Anneliese Harf, for example, recommended: “Whenever we feel exhausted by a [yoga] exercise, we miss its meaning”. “It is important to lovingly sense your lumbar spine and thus allow it to bend softly without any force . . . There is a big difference which can be realized only by means of sensitive practice. Whenever pain occurs, we proceeded too fast and the pressure became too strong.”⁶³ Regarding *Keep Up With Yoga*, aired by British television, Suzanne Newcombe identifies a very similar style of teaching yoga, here associated with the presenter Lyn Marshall: “So slowly, there is no hurry, lie back down—legs and feet together . . . Now close your eyes . . . Don’t try to come up as far as I am. Just go to your own limit and stay there . . . And now slowly let your head slide back. Don’t rush. Just let the back sink down very gently. Now when you feel your back on the floor, just relax. Let your feet relax. Let your hands relax.”⁶⁴ Clearly, yoga was defined in contrast to athletic exercise regimes and the crucial sign to distinguish was the sense of ease and relaxation associated with yoga instead of any kind of exertion, exhaustion, fast movement, or sensation of pain. Furthermore, yoga teachers of that time stressed the importance of deep relaxation at the end of each yoga session, employing methods ranging from autogenic training (“let your feet relax”) to progressive muscle relaxation (the alternate tensing and relaxing of particular sets of muscles). For example, the December 1973 issue of *Yoga für Jeden* was devoted to various relaxation techniques.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ German original: “Bitte nie zwingen im Yoga, nie rucken und zwingen, das ist Anti-Yoga. [Den Fuß] hochheben und auf den Schenkel legen. Dann kommt das Knie leicht hoch, der Fuß kommt vor, das Knie kommt runter und natürlich genauso sanft” (*Yoga für Jeden* 1973).

⁶¹ German original: “Jetzt machen wir es noch einmal, ganz locker . . . machen Sie die Augen zu und genießen es” (*Yoga für Jeden* 1973).

⁶² German original: “Im Yoga geht man nur so weit, wie man es als individueller [Mensch] kann” (*Yoga für Jeden* 1973).

⁶³ German original: “Wann immer uns Übungen anstrengen, übersehen wir den Sinngehalt” (4 November 1978). “Wichtig ist, dass wir uns liebevoll in die Lendenwirbelsäule einleben und ihr ohne Zwang Gelegenheit geben, elastisch nachzugeben” (29 January 1979). “Hierin liegt ein großer Unterschied, der nur durch einfühlsames Üben bewußt werden kann. Wann immer Schmerz auftritt, sind wir zu weit gegangen und die Belastung ist zu groß” (11 June 1979).

⁶⁴ Newcombe 2008, 185, quoting *Keep Up With Yoga*, 5 September 1977.

⁶⁵ On the origin of relaxation practices in nineteenth- and twentieth-century proprioceptive theory see Singleton (2005).

In comparison to Bikram Yoga, the tutorial emphasis on softness preferred by Kareen Zebroff and others appears feminized, and indeed the rising popularity of yoga in 1970s Germany can be attributed to women who constituted approximately 80 % of all practitioners.⁶⁶ This feminine aspect of yoga was further enhanced through its association with dietary requirements (healthy nutrition) and by means of advertising yoga in mass media as a system of raising attractiveness, youthfulness, and beauty.⁶⁷ However, the concept of yoga as a particularly soft and gentle system of relaxation emerged during the post-war period and still continues dominating large strands of yoga discourse. In German speaking countries this attitude has been significantly influenced by Selvarajan Yesudian (1916–1998), a medical student from South India, who together with the Hungarian artist Elisabeth Haich had founded a yoga school in Zurich in 1949 and later at other Swiss locations.⁶⁸ Yesudian's approach to *Yoga and Health* is well known through a book of the same name.⁶⁹ He promoted a set of 25 postures and ten breathing exercises. What is more, during the years of teaching yoga in Switzerland, he developed and standardized a particular mode of teaching and performing yoga postures: instructions were to be given in a soft voice; an *āsana* had to be performed without physical pressure; it should be held with closed eyes in order to concentrate on breathing and focus inwards to raise awareness. Furthermore, a yoga class was to be concluded by deep relaxation through affirmation and guided imagery. As far as possible these conditions should also accompany the regular performance of yoga exercises at home.⁷⁰ Although Hatha Yoga by Yesudian was largely a spiritual

⁶⁶ Fuchs (1990, 201). Following Tietke (2007, 77) the percentage of female practitioners seems to be consistent.

⁶⁷ The feminizing of Hatha Yoga can be traced back to Indra Devi (née Eugenie Petersen) who in Devi 1954 explicitly promoted yoga as a technique suitable for women to stay *Forever Young, Forever Healthy*, published in New York. Following Singleton (2010, 150) some yoga postures were already incorporated in British women's gymnastics during the 1930s by Mary (Mollie) Bagot Stack who herself never referred to it as yoga. On excessive hopes in yoga as beauty and youth elixir see also Newcombe's contribution in this book.

⁶⁸ According to Kareen Zebroff her favorite source book was Iyengar's *Light on Yoga* (1966). The format of this publication must have indeed been tempting. The book explains more than 200 yoga exercises, describing all intermediate stages to reach the final pose with a total number of 602 illustrations. In the printed companion to *Yoga für Jeden*, however, Kareen gave only the very basic information, often with bullet points. Clearly, she did not teach Iyengar Yoga despite being inspired by this perspective on posture performance.

⁶⁹ The German edition *Sport und Yoga* was published in 1949, the Hungarian original dates 1941. Following Fuchs (1990, 96, 2006, 173) *Yoga and Health* is probably the worldwide top-selling book on yoga. Although the publication is co-authored by Haich, Yesudian acts as first person narrator.

⁷⁰ See Fuchs (1990, 96); www.yesudianyoga.ch (accessed 15 January 2012). At any rate, Yesudian's book still carries traits of an earlier perspective on yoga (Yesudian and Haich 1949) that echo nationalist body ideals in India. He addressed primarily men, praised the muscular body, and suggested practicing yoga almost naked in front of a mirror (*ibid.*, 249, 259). Female concerns were mentioned only in passing (for instance, on pages 204, 214, 231) and—surprisingly, given his later spiritual overtone—regards the prevention of wrinkles, menstruation disorder, and obesity.

rather than fitness-oriented program—and therefore also included regular lectures on yoga philosophy—it not only shaped the dissemination and development of Hatha Yoga but also created a tutorial style that became normative for yoga classes in the adult education sector and therapeutic contexts in Germany and elsewhere.⁷¹

In general, the importance given to relaxation techniques has been a rather recent addition to Hatha Yoga, and goes back to Anglo-American and European developments in the 1920s.⁷² During this period, psychosomatic techniques such as progressive relaxation (following Edmund Jacobson), autosuggestion and mental healing (inspired by Émile Coué), rotation of awareness (as in proprioceptive therapy), as well as guided imagery and visualization (practiced by Jungian psychologists) were promoted and gradually associated with yoga. Following Singleton these relaxation techniques were combined with deep breathing and gentle ways of stretching the body, both already popular in the realm of “harmonial gymnastics” developed between the world wars. However, the emphasis on relaxation also entered strands of the Indian yoga revival. In Vishnudevanda’s writings on Sivananda Yoga in the 1950s, Singleton locates several influences from relaxation theories although without respective reference.⁷³

Conclusions: Language in the Transcultural Circulation of Yoga

In academic debates and medico-scientific research on the global circulation of Hatha Yoga the role and impact of speech patterns in yoga tutorials is hardly mentioned. As it stands, language use seems merely to be an indicator that assesses whether one form of yoga is considered a sophisticated representation (claiming to convey the complexities of Indian thought) or rather a mundane simplification, framed as a popular keep-fit practice. Although the influence of renowned individuals and their rhetorical figures in shaping the multidirectional flows that constitute modern yoga has been rightly acknowledged recently,⁷⁴ one major

⁷¹ Yoga instructors in post-war Germany were not only influenced by Yesudian and Haich’s yoga school in Zurich, but also by the teachings of Sivananda (see Fuchs 1990). Particular soft forms of Hatha Yoga often emphasize meditation and the chanting of hymns (*mantra*). Kundalini Yoga for instance, a type of yoga developed within the realm of the Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization, should raise neither muscle fever nor backache. Extensive stretches, twists, splits, or the headstand are to be avoided. Teachers should adjust to the students’ bodily condition (see Laue 2006, 29–34).

⁷² Singleton (2005, 2010); on the influence of mesmerism, New Thought, and psychotherapy on notions of meditation and yoga see also Baier (2009).

⁷³ Singleton (2005, 295).

⁷⁴ For the debate about Vivekananda’s influence on yoga see, e.g., De Michelis (2004), Singleton (2010, Chap. 9) discussed the role of Krishnamacharya in shaping the image of postural yoga. On the translation of Asian concepts into English and their result on the identity of religious movements see Aravamudan (2007).

cognitive device to grasp and codify the somatic sensations of posture practice seems to have escaped critical reconsideration: spoken language in yoga tuition. Whereas claims regarding physiological and biochemical benefits of yoga exercises, as well as their effects on the human being (perceptive faculty, cognitive and psychomotor functions), are beyond the methodological possibilities of the humanities and social sciences, there are indeed theories on the impact of language in the social construction of reality, applicable to the transnational production of yoga cultures. The aim of this chapter was to show that this strand of theorizing, and the concept of language performativity in particular, opens up new analytical space in modern yoga research to recognize the importance of verbal tuition and to invite rethinking its impact on the circulation and diversification of bodily practice. Although performance theory cannot “prove” how tutorials influence the experience of yoga practitioners, it certainly is helpful to recognize when and how differing speech patterns and semantic preferences arise, overlap, compete, and disappear, and hence influence the assessment of corporeal practice and, as a consequence, the process of meaning production. This kind of analysis allows conclusions about the impact of verbal conventions on the respective communities of yoga practitioners and their socio-cultural notions of well-being, their self, and bodily health. However, the present investigation resulted from a pilot study only. It identified and reflected on particular sets of phrases and indicated in what respect yoga tuition has the capacity to evoke specific, discursively shaped somatic experiences, i.e., regarding the practitioners’ assessment of their body, personal limits, and the evaluation of pain. Although Bikram Yoga and *Yoga für Jeden* stimulate the cardiovascular system in contrasting ways, this socio-cultural impact should not be underestimated. It goes without saying that any further conclusions on the experience of yogic exercise should also take account of its wider social context and the response and self-reflection of yoga practitioners.

Language as a medium of instruction gained its present significance only in the course of the twentieth century. What used to be transmitted largely by mimesis in a life-long relationship between guru and adept was gradually communicated in new forms, shaped by the spread of print, photography, and changing institutional structures. Hence the development of postural yoga is inherently linked to modern modes of learning and teaching, not least to groups of people in classes that have a defined beginning and end. In this context, it became important to verbalize why and how to perform an exercise correctly, and also its further implications. Regarding the transcultural dissemination of yoga, the tutorial essentially serves to convince newcomers about the significance of posture practice in terms that correspond to their frame of reference, and possibly with the aid of further elements that substantiate this understanding. This applies equally for Hindus who in 1920s India promoted the medicalization of yoga to resist the degeneracy associated with modern (colonial) life, for Indian gurus who spread yoga in the United States, and for Western seekers turned into yoga celebrities addressing a global audience. Language constitutes the major cognitive device to anticipate, frame, and rationalize somatic experience in a variety of yoga cultures, whether exclusivist or mainstream at a particular time and place. In this chapter this was shown taking the

example of two highly standardized forms of yoga tutorials that in regard to their uniformity can be considered exceptional. In these cases, habitual language use constituted an important factor in shaping yogic experience. Beyond a doubt, the impact of speech patterns on the introduction and translation of yoga to new audiences is of similar importance in cases of less standardized tutorials that characterize the vast range of yoga traditions.⁷⁵ However, although a group class with verbal instructions is normative today, it is not mandatory. Mimi Nichter observed how travelers who aimed to learn Ashtanga Yoga in Mysore were often troubled by the fact that this type of yoga class was not guided by a tutorial. Rather, everybody followed his or her own posture practice merely in the presence of an experienced teacher who only occasionally rectified the individual performance of a posture.⁷⁶

Although based on largely overlapping sets of postures,⁷⁷ the two case studies clearly show that there are contrasting attitudes to Hatha Yoga as a method to achieve and maintain a healthy body. This difference concerns the assessment of bodily activity and painful stimuli. On one hand, these examples reflect two competing yoga ideologies, if not approaches in pain ontology: the elementary, gentle, and feminized paradigm, in line with Karen Zebroff's instructions, and, contrarily, the demanding, vigorous, and manly version, here exemplified by Bikram Choudhury. Whereas in the first case well-being is conceptualized as a result of slowing down and avoiding strenuous action to create a pleasurable body experience while doing yoga, in the latter case well-being is acknowledged as a consequence of giving maximum effort and what has been described as cathartic effect.⁷⁸ At any rate, both approaches constitute extremes in mapping the wide field of modern postural yoga with schools differing in their accessibility and choice for difficult postures, as well as in their balance of physical exercises, relaxation, and meditative elements.

On the other hand, the comparison of these teaching styles also points to two distinct periods of yoga's globalization. Considering habitual language use in yoga classes clearly shows how common phrases and speech patterns reflect the zeitgeist. What makes yoga a fashionable, valued, and healthy practice also varies over the course of time. During the 1970s, Hatha Yoga in the West emerged from an exclusivist subcultural movement into a mainstream activity framed as a self-help method for coping with the side effects of a modern life style, whether to regenerate the body from sedentary jobs or to meet excessive beauty standards. At this time, yoga was still perceived as being mysterious and accessible only after being

⁷⁵ One could also consider the impact of tuition in the case of "modern meditational yoga" (De Michelis 2004), i.e., yoga traditions that emphasize mental rather than physical exercise.

⁷⁶ Nichter (Chapter "The social life of yoga: Exploring Transcultural Flows in India").

⁷⁷ Both curricula include triangle pose, eagle pose, bow pose, cobra pose, locust pose, camel pose, standing forward bend, seated forward bend, spinal twist, and corpse pose.

⁷⁸ Significantly in sports medicine there is no agreement on either the benefits of stretching to the point of pain, nor its use as a method to enhance human performance and flexibility (Albert and Meyer 2005, Chap. 3).

explicitly translated for Western aspirations. Yoga was a “foreign tradition” that called for adjustment to occidentals (*Abendländer*). When the current yoga boom started spreading from North America at the end of the 1990s, postural yoga was marketed as a universal mind-body practice with various styles, still incorporating “Indian wisdom,” yet framed as a technique that is learned and taught worldwide in a similar fashion. Bikram Yoga exemplifies this approach, last but not least due to a franchise system on the basis of a copyrighted combination of verbal instructions and classroom conditions. In this period, yoga came with the promise of perfecting the mind/body and to help balance the self in a constantly changing transient world. In this way Bikram Yoga classes emphasize the development of self-awareness and self-care, but also of endurance and flexibility as liberating. Following Verena Schnäbele, the combination of these skills indeed helps to succeed in a labor market structured by economic liberalization, i.e., in settings with rising demands regards working hours, self-organization, and geographical mobility.⁷⁹ To clarify: I do not argue for a clear-cut boundary between attitudes to Hatha Yoga in the 1970s and since the turn of the millennium. Yet I would claim that the present transnational popularity of postural yoga is also related to this new image and emphasis associated with dynamic and rather vigorous types of yoga, whether newly branded (e.g., Power Yoga) or long-term yoga traditions reaching a wider audience (in case of Iyengar Yoga). In this process, the notion of Hatha Yoga as a method to transcend personal limits by means of vigorous endeavor is both contested and tempting.

To train focus and willpower, to give maximum effort, and to achieve extraordinary flexibility appears like a formula suitable for improving the self on several levels. Similarly, Bikram Yoga pushes not only physical limits but also aims to widen the experiential horizon.⁸⁰ Reaching goals, which had seemed unattainable for a long time, becomes a realistic challenge for those who succeeded in their self-discipline. Unlike in earlier periods of yoga’s dissemination in the West, this expansion of personal limits is rarely conceptualized as a spiritual program but framed within the health discourse: it serves to “balance” not only work and life, but first of all mind and body. Whereas in 1970s Germany the focus on self-development by means of yoga was still considered beyond mainstream acceptance and likely to be stigmatized as its dubious religious Other, the recent emphasis on willpower in order to achieve some sort of perfection has been subsumed as health behavior. It nourishes the vision of an individual being both in control of her/his life and extremely flexible in all respects. The trope of exerting and refining oneself emerged in yoga discourse long before its commercialization as a global mind-body practice. The goal of human perfectibility has a long history on the Indian subcontinent, transmitted in Sanskrit sources on yoga and related subjects, and in tantric

⁷⁹ See Schnäbele (2009, Chap. 9) and “The Useful Body: The Yogic Answer to Appearance Management in the Post-Fordist Workplace”.

⁸⁰ Seen thusly, yoga may raise self-confidence and the subjective feeling of empowerment (see Nevrin 2008).

hathayoga (see footnote 1) in particular.⁸¹ It is beyond the scope of this chapter to explore its representations in Indic discourses through time and place, yet discipline and control were probably regarded as instrumental throughout. The Indologist Frits Staal has put the point concisely: “yoga is not for relaxation; rather the opposite: it is meant to increase ‘restraint of control’ (yoga).”⁸² This notion achieved a modern incarnation in the first half of the twentieth century when in India yoga postures were rediscovered as a tool to enhance physical strength.⁸³ Like their contemporaries, Bishnu Ghosh and Selvaranjan Yesudian idealized the muscular (male) body, yet influenced their successors in quite diverse ways, as the approach to yoga by Bikram Choudhury and, by comparison, Kareen Zebroff has shown.⁸⁴ Moreover, in regard to this particular timeline, the arduous form of Bikram Yoga seems to link in more closely with the Indian tradition in the 1920s than any gentle way of posture performance. This is not to make any claims of authenticity, since both “gentle” and “vigorous” types of modern yoga are cultural hybrids. Rather, I wish to stress the ironies and turns in the transcultural dissemination of various kinds of yoga where Hindu notions of increasing “restraint of control” meet a Western approach such as “no pain, no gain” and compete with esoteric ideas and visions of the nature of “true” Indian yoga.

Furthermore, the exploration of language use in yoga tutorials and the reconsideration of Hatha Yoga as a context-dependent exercise system also have an impact on the conceptualization of transcultural flows. Whereas particular ways of breathing, posture practice, and bodily activity in general may circulate across cultural boundaries, the issues raised in this chapter strongly suggest that their experiences resist translation. Rather, somatic meaning is shaped through and by means of the “socially informed body” (Pierre Bourdieu), and hence influenced by contingent factors and the present environment rather than any appropriated significance for somebody else.⁸⁵ Embodied experience has a fundamentally socio-cultural character and varies along with its collective and personal memory. The corporeal encounter of yoga is thus shaped by the living conditions, values, and structures in the community of practice. Moreover, in the context of transcultural flows, the human body serves as a source of creative misunderstanding: it may incite the production of new meanings altogether. Seen thusly, bodily practice—and its twin: embodied knowledge—constitute an epistemic entity that differs in its capacity to be

⁸¹ Coward (2008, 103), for more details on the perfectibility of human nature in Indian philosophy and in Hinduism see Chap. 6 and 7 in Coward’s study.

⁸² Staal (1993, 71), compare Birch (2011).

⁸³ See introduction.

⁸⁴ For Yesudian’s praise of the beautiful muscular body see Yesudian and Haich (1949, 249, 259); for Bishnu Ghosh’s view see Singleton (2010, 133) and Guggenbühl (2008, 3) who also noticed that Yesudian must have been familiar with muscle control. Even Paramahansa Yogananda, who later became far better known for his spiritual teaching, caught the attention of his American audience by the display of muscle mastery on stage in the 1920s (Singleton 2010, 132–133); see also footnote 14.

⁸⁵ Bourdieu (1977, 124). On the notion of embodiment in social anthropology see Csordas (1994).

translated across distant social environments from the global circulation of cognitive knowledge. What yoga is and does depends on the expectation of practitioners, which is not a sign of degeneration but an inherent feature of a traveling physical activity.

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