

Let the Sādhus Talk. Ascetic understanding of Haṭha Yoga and *yogāsanas*

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Very rarely have scholars focussed their attention on the yoga practice of contemporary ascetics, which is surprising considering that yoga probably originated and developed in an ascetic context.¹ Yoga, for ascetics who chose it as a religious path, has a specific spiritual meaning and purpose; it is a private discipline, and as such it should remain in the private sphere. Furthermore, being such an individual experience, *sādhus* claim it cannot be described by words, nor can be understood by someone who is not on the path. Yoga in effect, is a full-time commitment for the ascetics, while, as we will see, its physical aspect is just a temporary one. For this reason, the yoga practices that I am going to analyse in this paper are those that ascetics call “external”, physical yoga, i.e. *āsanas* and *prāṇāyāmas*.

Haṭha yoga is the usual term to describe this physical yoga. As Mallinson notes: ‘The word *haṭha* (lit. force) denotes a system of physical techniques supplementary to yoga more broadly conceived’ (2011:770). The techniques peculiar to Haṭha Yoga are: *śaṭ karma* (purification), *āsana* (posture), *prāṇāyāma* (breath control), *mudrā* (physical techniques to “seal” the body), *bandha* (lock). They were slowly introduced in texts and then collected in the 15th-century *Haṭhapradīpikā*.² However, in interviews in India with ascetics belonging to the main *sampradāyas* (religious orders) connected to yoga practice – namely Nāgā Daśanāmīs, Nāth Yogīs, Udāsīns, as well as *Vairāgīs* from the Rāmānandī and Rāmānujī

¹ For what has been written on *sādhus* and their practices see the monographs of Bouillier (2004: 157, 220-221), Clark (2006), Gross (1992:233-256), Hausner (2007: 165-168), Oman (1903) and articles by Lamb (2005:312-329 and 2012: 349-356), Mallinson (2005, 2011, 2012) and by non-academics see Gervis (1956, 2011), Hartsuiker (2014), Levy (2010).

² The *Dattātreya yogaśāstra* (13th century) teaches nine *haṭha* techniques that came to be known as *mudrās* (physical techniques for controlling vital energies); three *mudrās* are described in the *Amṛtasiddhi* (likely 11th century), while three *bandhas* and three *mudrās* are present in the *Vivekamārtaṇḍa* (13th century); the *Gorakṣaśataka* (13th century) also teaches the three *bandhas*. However, none of these texts calls its techniques Haṭha Yoga except the *Dattātreya yogaśāstra*; later on, various texts including the *Śivasamhitā*, *Yogabīja*, *Amaraughaprabodha* and the *Śārngadhara paddhati* also do so (Mallinson 2011:771).

sampradāya - specific understandings of Haṭha Yoga, as well as a specific idea about *āsanas*, were articulated.

This paper aims to clarify the ascetic understanding of Haṭha Yoga and the role of *āsanas* in the ascetic practice. Initially, I will give some terminological and theoretical hints on the ascetic world and information about the methodology used. Then the meanings of Haṭha Yoga will be explored mostly from an ethnographic perspective and with the support of textual sources to attempt to reconstruct its use in various ascetic contexts. Exploring the ascetics' understanding of *āsanas* will follow.

Brief consideration on Hindu ascetics

There are several theories about the origin of the renouncer tradition in India: some scholars claim an indigenous non-Aryan root (such as Bronkhorst 1993, Pande 1978, Singh 1972), others believe it represents the logical development of ideas already present in the Vedic religious culture (Heerstaman 1964). Vedic sources do not provide a complete and comprehensive understanding of how renouncer traditions developed and the fact that Indian societies have experienced the effects of numerous cultural and political influxes makes it yet more difficult to track the development of Indian religions (Olivelle 2008:13). What can be certainly said is that renouncer traditions developed over the centuries alongside the development of soteriological theories, manifesting in various tendencies. The variety of ascetic paths has led Burghart to affirm that 'the only general statement which one can make concerning asceticism in the religious tradition of south Asia is that all ascetics see themselves as followers of some path which releases from the transient world (not the social world) and that all ascetics distinguish themselves from non-ascetics who do not seek such release' (1978: 643). As a consequence, there are several understanding of who is an ascetic, according to the criteria chosen by different religious groups. □

In this paper, I use the term ascetics to describe those individuals who renounce or detach themselves from the secular world, following the rules and ideologies of the religious

orders in which they get initiated; this includes remaining celibate (*brahmacarya*) in order to obtain results in their religious practice. Specifically, I deal with ascetics connected with the main traditional religious orders which use yoga as a *sādhana* and in which physical, external yogic techniques are also practiced. One tradition is that of *saṁnyāsins* (renouncers) from the *Daśanāmī sampradāya*,³ so called because they renounce worldly existence in order to follow a spiritual path, celebrating their “human” funeral while beginning their new ascetic life. The *Daśanāmī sampradāya* consists of ascetics from ten lineages, which differ in part in their beliefs and practices, but they all address their devotion to God Śiva. Among these *saṁnyāsins*, I focused my attention on *nāgās*, naked ascetics, organised into seven *akhārās* because the *nāgā saṁnyāsins* are most likely to practise yogic practices and austerities. The word *akhārā* means ‘wrestling ground’ and refers to the place where martial arts are usually practiced in India, and suggests the physical *sādhana* which *nāgās* undergo.⁴

Other ascetic groups from which I found interesting informants on the subjects of ‘external yoga’ and *āsana*, are the Udāsīn *akhārā*, the Nāth *sampradāya*, as well as the Rāmānandī and the Rāmānujī *sampradāya*. By tradition, the Udāsīn *Akhārā* was founded by Śrī Cand (1494-1629), son of Guru Nanak therefore it was initially connected to Sikhism. Since the austerities of the order were not in line with Guru Nanak’s teachings, Śrī Cand started a new order that later on was associated with Śaiva cults. According to tradition, the Nāth *sampradāya* was founded by Gorakṣanāth (disciple of Matsyendranāth). Gorakṣanāth (Hindi Gorakhnāth) is said to be the compiler of several very influential compilations on the subject of Haṭha Yoga and members of the Nāth *sampradāya* are actually called Yogī.⁵ Rāmānandīs and Rāmānujīs are Vaiṣṇava ascetics, devoted to Viṣṇu or one of his *avatārs*, who belong to the Śrī *sampradāya*.⁶ Rāmānujīs are followers of the *Viśiṣṭādvaita* school of

³ For a comprehensive study on the *Daśanāmī sampradāya* see Clark (2006).

⁴ For more information about this topic see Farquhar (1925), Orr (1940), Lorenzen (1978), Bouillier (1993), Pinch (2006).

⁵ See Briggs (1938), Lorenzen & Munoz (2012), and Mallinson (2011, 2012).

⁶ The link between Rāmānujī and Rāmānandī has been source of wide debate among scholars, but also among the ascetics of the two groups. Although they both are generally defined as part of the Śrī *Sampradāya*, Rāmānandīs stress that they are Śrī Rāmavat *sampradāya*, to manifest their devotion towards Rām. On the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* see van der Veer (1998), Burghart (1978), Bevilacqua (forthcoming 2018). On the Rāmānujī see Rangarajan (1996).

Vedānta founded by Rāmānuja (11th -12th century) and address their devotion toward Viṣṇu Nārāyaṇ, while Rāmānandīs follow the same *Viśiṣṭādvaita* but according to the disciplines established by Rāmānanda (probably 15th century) and address their devotion towards Rām. Since among Rāmānandīs and Rāmānujīs there are several subgroups, I focused my attention on the *Tyāgī* branch because *tyāgīs* perform practices of extreme physical austerity and some follow a *Yoga sādhanā*. These ascetics are also called *vairāgīs* (detached) since their renunciation is based on disinterest and detachment from sensual, worldly objects.

Historically, Yoga and Haṭha Yoga flourished in the esoteric contexts connected to these religious orders. As clearly said by Sears:

In the past, yoga ... was a highly exclusive ritual activity that could lead either toward liberation or to the acquisition of powerful magical abilities, otherwise known as *siddhis*. While the path to obtaining *siddhis* was potent enough to turn a sage into a sorcerer, the path to liberation often constituted a dramatic ontological shift at the level of the soul. Because knowledge of yoga gave the practitioner the potential to transcend the realm of human existence and enter a state akin to becoming divine, it was restricted to highly accomplished gurus and their most dedicated pupils. (2013:47)

The evidence is that Indian ascetic landscape was fluid, and remained more or less as such even after the formalisation of the various traditions (c. 16th century). In this regard it is useful to consult a description of Nāth Yogīs present in the *Dabistān*, a Persian work composed around the 1655 that examines and compares religions and sects of India: 'When among Muslims they are scrupulous about fasting and ritual prayer, but when with Hindus, they practice the religion of this group. None of the forbidden things is prohibited in their sect, whether they eat pork according to the custom of Hindus and Christians, or beef according to the religion of Muslims and others' (Ernst 2005: 40).

Pictorial evidence of those performing *Yoga sādhanā* show very similar practices and apparel despite sectarian identifications. Early Mughal paintings give glimpses of *yogīs*' appearance: they have 'long matted hair and beards, their bodies are smeared with ashes, they are naked or simply wear a loincloth, they sit around fires, and usually they are

depicted in meditative postures or while doing austerities' (Mallinson 2013: 69). However, they are also clearly differentiated according to the *sampradāya* they belong to through their sectarian marks. The evidence of these paintings suggest that members of several sectarian groups might mingle together. In contemporary times, this fluid exchange between different ascetic orders was also found in my fieldwork amongst ascetics from the various *sampradāyas*. In my experience, there were never particular boundaries among *sampradāyas* and wandering ascetics of one order could spend time with those of other groups, according to their religious interests and spiritual quests. Through my research it has become apparent that there is more commonality than differences between the practice of ascetics of different *sampradāyas*.

Methodological approach

To collect meaningful data about the yoga practised in different religious orders, it is necessary to look at their historical development and to do intensive fieldwork. For this reason, I prefer an interdisciplinary methodology. As part of the Haṭha Yoga Project, I am analysing how historical changes in various religious orders could have brought different use of physical yogic practice.⁷ To do this, we must compare the Haṭha Yoga textual corpus with the material evidence of the practice of ascetics in the past and with ethnographic material from the present. At this stage of my research, I have collected qualitative ethnographic data through interviews, informal conversations, photos and video, by spending as much time as possible within each group of ascetics.

My first period of fieldwork ran from October 2015-May 2016. I began in Varanasi, a city in which I had previously conducted research and which contains representatives of the religious orders I intended to meet. I remained there for four months, before travelling south with Dr James Mallinson. Together we attended the proclamation of the Rājā Yogi of the Nāth *sampradāya* in Mangalore⁸ and then visited important sites (e.g. Shringeri,

⁷ The Haṭha Yoga Project (HYP) is a five-year (2015-2020) research project funded by the European Research Council and based at SOAS, University of London, which aims to chart the history of physical yoga practice by means of philology, i.e. the study of texts on yoga, and ethnography, i.e. fieldwork among practitioners of yoga.

⁸ See Bouillier (2008).

Panhale Kaji and Dabhoi) where there is material evidence of historical ascetic practice. I then travelled independently to the Simhasth Melā⁹ in Ujjain, arriving one month before to talk with those ascetics who were already there to prepare their camps and to be able to move easily among them once the festival started.

My second period of fieldwork, ran from the end of December 2016 to July 2017. During this period I attended the Ganga Sagar Melā,¹⁰ I spent some time in Kolkata and explored neighbouring areas (like Shantiniketan, Birnagar and Tarapith) where I was informed that there were specific yogis which it would be helpful for me to meet. From West Bengal, I travelled in March to Rishikesh, looking for traditional ascetics in a sea of modern yoga teachers. In June 2017, attended the Ambubachi festival in Kamakhya.¹¹ Again, I arrived in the city few weeks before the festival in order to get in touch with local ascetics who could facilitate introductions to the *sādhus* arriving for the festival. My persistent presence in religious Melās (festival) and my moving among several groups created awareness and support among those *sādhus* I met in multiple contexts. Spending long periods in the same place with selected *sādhus*, facilitated stimulating conversations about Haṭha Yoga and *āsanas*, with *sādhus* showing me some postures to assist with the research.¹² A few *sādhus* were even willing to teach me a few *yogāsana* classes even without initiation. I also observed a few performances of *āsanas* during these religious gatherings. Since *yogāsana* practice belongs to the private sphere of the life of an ascetic, the majority of my data comes from conversations. I have properly spoken with about eighty *sādhus* to date as part of this fieldwork.

⁹ The Kumbh Melā is a huge religious gathering held in Haridvar, Ujjain, Prayag, Nasik. The Nasik and Ujjain Melās are also called Simhasth. At any given place the Kumbh Melā is held once in twelve years. In Haridvar and Prayag is celebrated also the Ardh (half) Kumbh Melā six years after the full Melā.

¹⁰ This festival is celebrated in the Sagar Island in the Bay of Bengal. Thousands of pilgrims come on the day of Makar Sankranti (14 January) to take a holy dip at the confluence of the river Ganges and Bay of Bengal.

¹¹ The Ambubachi Mela celebrates the yearly menstruation course of goddess Kamakhya. It is also believed that during this time the monsoon rain and the nurturing power of the menses of Mother Earth mingle.

¹² For example, in Rishikesh an Udāsīn told me “since you are taking photos, then I will show you more *āsanas*”.

However, creating a rapport with the ascetics was not always easy. Ascetics generally reacted in one of two opposite ways to my research: positively or sceptically. The “positive ascetics” appreciated the fact that foreigners are interested in Indian culture and they are making efforts to understand an important religious issue like yoga. They were comfortable in replying to my questions, giving examples and framing their understanding of yoga in their religious practice, while stressing that, being part of their *sādhana*, the specifics of their practice cannot be disclosed. For this same reason, there were ascetics who reacted in a “sceptical manner”. These ascetics did not understand the reason behind collecting information from a variety of *sādhus* instead of practising and understanding Yoga personally. I respected their scepticism because it is an important ethical foundation of my fieldwork that I have the full awareness and support of my informants when I am collecting data and that they are happy for it to be made public. Nothing “secret” will be revealed.

The ascetics’ understanding of Haṭha Yoga

As already mentioned, in texts Haṭha Yoga denotes a system of physical techniques, which over the centuries were said to lead to various results: the raising and preservation of *bindu* (semen), the unification of the *vāyus*, and the raising of *kuṇḍalinī*. As Mallinson explains:

In its earliest formulations, [...] *haṭha*’s distinguishing feature is a variety of physical techniques which are used to keep *bindu* or *amṛta*, i.e. semen, in the head. In contrast, contemporaneous Nāth works emphasise the purpose of their yoga, which they do not call *haṭha*, as being the raising of *Kuṇḍalinī*. [...] In later Nāth and other Śākta works of the canon, the co-option of the *haṭha* techniques (along with their name) is more developed, so that in the *Śivasamhitā* the purpose of the *haṭha* yogic *mudrās* has become the raising of *Kuṇḍalinī* and *bindudhāraṇa* is not mentioned’

(2012: 10)

Despite a diversity of explanations, the main goals of *haṭha* techniques have remained the attainment of *siddhis* (powers) and *mukti* (liberation).

During my conversations with *sādhus* the term Haṭha Yoga was very rarely used. Therefore, I had to ask directly about their understanding of Haṭha Yoga. During these exchanges, I realized that although the ascetic understanding of Haṭha Yoga has several

different nuances, it largely has a single meaning: Haṭha Yoga is analogous to *tapasyā* (austerities), or better it is the strong determination that can lead to *tapasyā*. I will describe the dominant understanding of Haṭha Yoga as *tapasyā* before elaborating on the more nuanced discussions which include understanding of Haṭha Yoga as a) the union of the sun and the moon, b) strictly connected with *prāṇāyāma* and c) a physical practice for the body.

Haṭha Yoga as strong determination

According to the majority of the ascetics that I have interviewed, Haṭha Yoga is not a yoga system, rather it represents a mental attitude that was defined by a *tyāginī* (a female ascetic of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*) as a *dr̥ḍh saṅkalp*: a firm intention to accomplish or reach an aim. For this reason, Haṭha Yoga is often related to *tapasyā* (austerity). The word *tapasyā* (austerity) comes from *tap* (to heat) and *tapas* (heat), which mean the inner mental-spiritual fire resulting from austerities accomplished through strong determination.¹³ *Tapasyā* can refer to specific practices that are performed during a certain time of the year, like *dhūnī tap* (sitting under the mid-day sun surrounded by a ring of burning cow dung) for the hot season, or *jal tap* (remaining in water for several hours per day) during winter; or austerities that last for years, like standing up, keeping the arm up, remaining silent and so on. However, it is also considered *tapasyā* to take a vow of eating only fruits, or drinking only juice, behaviours that likewise are understood and given as examples of Haṭha Yoga. There are several reasons behind the choice to perform *tapasyā*: some ascetics do it as a vow that will bring them to finally meet God; others hope to obtain specific powers, while others claim to perform it for the wellness of society, trying also to give an example of religious commitment to householders.

In Varanasi I met a *saṃnyāsīn* who has sat all day long in *padmāsana* for the last ten years in Lalitā Ghāṭ. ‘He always walks bare foot, he does his pilgrimages bare foot, he sits in that position all day long, this is Haṭha Yoga madam’, I was told by one of the lay people

¹³ In Indian religious traditions sacrificial fire offerings are used to burn the gross and render it subtle. However, among ascetics the physical fire of the sacrifice is substituted by the heat generated from within oneself due to a life of austerity. There are two kinds of internal fire, one mental-spiritual and one physical (which achieves practical aims such as digestion and warming the body).

who was with him. In another instance, a Nāth in Mangalore told me that in his *sampradāya* Haṭha Yoga means following the rules and behaviours of the *sampradāya* all life long, i.e. it is a strict intention to be committed to the ascetic life.

I had a further proof of this connection in Ujjain, when I went to meet an *ūrdhva*bāhu (a *sādhu* who holds his arm up) of the Āvāhan Akhārā, because on the board outside his camp he was named as *haṭhayogī*. I went to him to ask about his *tapasyā* and the title of *haṭhayogī* and he replied that because he does *tapasyā* (which he has done for the last thirty-five years), he is considered a *haṭhayogī*. According to him, those who do *tapasyā* are *haṭhayogīs*, because Haṭha Yoga means taking a decision and adhering to it until it brings results. He does not care about *āsana* and *prāṇāyāma*, and he has never done any of these practices, since his *sādhana* was completely based on *tapasyā*.

This understanding of Haṭha Yoga as leading to *tapasyā* can be assumed in textual and visual sources as well. Early texts such as the *Amanaska* claim that Rājā Yoga is superior to Haṭha Yoga because it is effortless, therefore implying that Haṭha Yoga requires exertion (Birch 2011: 527), while the *Laghuyogavāsiṣṭha* describes Haṭha Yoga as causing suffering (Birch 2011: 531).

An association between Haṭha Yoga and pain was echoed by an Udāsīn in Rishikesh. He reported that God does not like Haṭha Yoga, because it creates suffering; its practices are painful and pain can actually push the mind to think more. He gave an example from his personal experience. He had undertaken a vow of complete silence (*mauna vrata*), but he was suffering because his friends were coming and he could not talk to them. So after nine years of this *tapasyā*, he decided to speak only for four hours a day, from 8 p.m. till midnight so he could talk with friends at that specific time; he reported that he kept this practice for eighteen years.

In textual evidence, the word *haṭha* is frequently associated with the idea of “force, effort” and *tapasyā*. Monier-Williams described Haṭha Yoga as a ‘kind of forced Yoga or abstract meditation (forcing the mind to withdraw from external objects; treated of in the Haṭha

Pradīpikā by Svātmārāma and performed with much self-torture such as standing on one leg, holding up the arms, inhaling smoke with the head inverted &c.)' (1964: 1297). This nineteenth century definition resonates strongly with the explanations of contemporary Indian ascetics. Mallinson has suggested that the *haṭha* techniques were originally called thus 'because, like *tapas* (asceticism), with which they were associated, they were difficult and forced their results to happen' (2011: 770). Similarly, Briggs's 1938 study of Nath Yogis notes that 'fasts, mortification and ascetic disciplines generally fall within the province of Yoga practice. Bodily discipline became a means to further mental control' (1938: 259). In fact, already in the Mahābhārata (c.300 BCE to 300 CE) the word *yogī* denoted a man who practised religious austerities and asceticism, a celibate able to reach great virtues and highest powers.

Among ascetics the meaning of *tapasyā* and Haṭha Yoga often overlap; sometimes it seems that *tapasyā* is the practice in itself while the approach/method through which is performed is Haṭha Yoga, the strict determination necessary to bear the most extreme practices. There has been a remarkable continuity in practices and associations between yoga and *tapasyā* in ascetic practice across time.

Evidence found in buildings and artwork further reinforces the conflation between yoga and *tapasyā*; *yogīs* were often represented as *tapasvins*. Ascetics are often carved in a standing position, sometimes while performing austerities like the *ūrdhvaḥāhu*. For example, among the sculptures of Rani Ki Vav in Patan, Gujarat, from the eleventh century, *ūrdhvaḥāhus* are used as decorative motif to fill the spaces between main deities. Fine arts provide innumerable examples of sages and *yogīs*, who are portrayed in small gatherings or while performing austerities, but rarely *āsanas*. An outstanding figurative example of both these practices is an eighteenth century watercolour from Jodhpur that depicts Rām entering the forest of the sages. Here the sages are illustrated as *yogīs* from distinct sectarian traditions, some performing austerities like swinging back and forth through a fire, or standing up on one leg or holding up both the arms (Diamond 2013: 206).

In the Haṭha Yoga canon, the word *haṭha* is not used to denote a forceful, violent effort. On the contrary, the *Haṭhapradīpikā* claims that exertion is one of six obstacles to Haṭha Yoga (Birch 2011: 532).¹⁴ Svātmārāma, the *Haṭhapradīpikā*'s author, rejects some practices that are closely associated with ascetic behaviour: '[...] Gorakṣa says: "One should avoid marginal areas where there are bad people, the use of fire, women and travelling, bathing in the early morning, fasting and so forth, and observances which cause suffering to the body' (1:61).¹⁵ The use of fire, travelling, bathing in the early morning, fasting and hard physical activities are usually typical of ascetics especially those connected with austerities. Many ascetics have a *dhūnī* (sacred fire place), they roam from place to place, take a bath as soon as they wake up, fast and, if we consider the practice of *āsana*s or *tapasyā*, do hard physical activities. It is likely that Svātmārāma wanted to present Haṭha Yoga as a practice suitable for everybody, dissociating it from those more extreme practices that would not suit or be attractive to householders, focusing the attention on more physical practices. In effect, it is likely that Haṭha Yoga texts were written by Brahmin devotees or followers of particular gurus, "working" under specific patrons to promote yoga teachings. The fact that they do not urge people to join a specific sect makes them like general books to be studied under the guide of a personal guru.¹⁶ My field research indicates that for most contemporary ascetics, texts are not part of their practice, nor a reference for experience. In Kamakhya, a Nāth explained succinctly that: 'these works [written texts] are for *saṃsārik* log¹⁷ (lay people), for those people who cannot practice yoga constantly. Otherwise you need just to have your *āsana* — *siddhāsana padmāsana*

¹⁴ The others are over-eating, talkativeness, adhering to rules (like taking cold baths in the morning, eating at night or eating only fruits), the company of men and unsteadiness.

¹⁵ Translation by James Mallinson.

¹⁶ A proper analysis of each Haṭha Yoga text, its origin, historical and religious background would be useful to better understand issues of patronage and audience. Eventually a comparison of texts in Sanskrit and texts in vernacular might bring to light interesting differences or new clues about the use of these texts. Perhaps, Sanskrit texts looking at a wider audience left aside austerities, i.e. *tapasyā*, properly practiced by ascetics. Therefore, they likely had a similar purpose to that of yoga books today: to attract people and their economic support with practices that could lead to *dhyāna* yoga. Probably the Haṭha Yoga practised among ascetics is more easily to be found in vernacular texts produced inside *sampradāyas*, circulating only in the *sampradāyik* milieu for the individual practice of its ascetics than in Sanskrit works. For example, while analysing secondary literature about the textual production of the Rāmānandī *sampradāya*, I came across a few works –the *Siddhānta Paṭal*, the *Yoga Cintāmaṇi* and the *Ātmabodha*– which deal with a *tapasī sādhanā* highly permeated by *haṭha* yoga themes.

¹⁷ People who are part of *saṃsāra* (the mundane world), i.e. lay people.

— and hours to do your activities’. To summarize, the *yogī* is traditionally also a *tapasvin*,¹⁸ and according to contemporary ascetic understanding, the *tapasvin* is theoretically a *haṭhayogī*.

Haṭha Yoga as the union of Sun and moon

Only three ascetics whom I interviewed explained Haṭha Yoga as being the union of *ha*- the sun and *ṭha*- the moon (its so-called “esoteric meaning”, see Birch 2011). One was a Nāth, who is involved in the activities of the publishing house of the Gorakhnāth temple in Gorakhpur. Therefore, he had more theoretical knowledge of Haṭha Yoga than many of the ascetics of his *sampradāya* who did not give this interpretation. The second was a Vaiṣṇava belonging to the Svāmī Nārāyaṇ *sampradāya* who has studied yoga in several centres and from various perspectives. The third was a practitioner of the Kaula Mārg, who studied Haṭha Yoga texts by himself, and who lamented the fact that most sādhus are ignorant and do not know the real meaning of the practice. It is interesting to note the relative infrequency of this understanding of Haṭha Yoga amongst contemporary aesthetics, compared to its general currency amongst twenty and twenty-first century global yoga milieus. This would further corroborate the hypothesis that very few ascetics look at textual sources for their understanding of practices and theories, since they rely more on the teachings of gurus or other ascetics.

There are certainly textual references for this interpretation of Haṭha Yoga. The tantric *Jayadrathayāmala*, which pre-dates descriptions of the earliest Haṭha Yoga techniques, associates the syllable *ṭha* with the moon.¹⁹ The *Amṛtasiddhi* (dated around the eleventh century) interprets Yoga –but not Haṭha Yoga– as the union of the sun and the moon (Birch 2011: 533). Briggs reports this understanding of *haṭha* as present in a commentary to verse one of the *Gorakṣa Paddhāti* where it is stated that *ha* means the sun and *ṭha* the moon and that their union is called Yoga (not Haṭha Yoga) (1938: 274). Only in the *Yogabīja*, a text usually attributed to Gorakṣanātha (twelfth to thirtieth century), we do find

¹⁸ But the *yogī* is not only a *tapasvin* since there are several forms of Yoga *sādhana*. For example, according to the Bhagavad Gita 6.46 the *yogī* is superior to the *tapasvin* (see Mallinson & Singleton 2017: 17)

¹⁹ Following the work of Sanderson (2002: 1-2), Birch notes that the *Jayadrathayāmala* is mentioned by Ksemarāja, who flourished ca. 1000-1050 A.D., and so it predates the earliest *haṭha* texts.

an early definition of *haṭha* as the union of the sun and the moon. However, Mallinson has argued that the *Yogabīja* may more likely be a later compilation –which nevertheless predates the 1450 CE since the *Haṭhapradīpikā* borrows from it- because there is no manuscript evidence to support the attribution of its authorship to Gorakṣanātha and it borrows many verses from earlier *haṭha* texts (2008: 9). And Birch suggests that contemporary understandings of *haṭha* with this meaning might be a result of Srisa Chandra Vasu's commentary on his English translation of the *Gheraṇḍa Saṃhitā* in the late nineteenth century (Birch 2011: 532). However, a medieval Pāñcarātra text, the *Jayākhyasaṃhitā*, equates the sun with the in-breath and the syllable *ha*, while Abhinavagupta's *Tantrāloka* equates the sun and the moon with both the in and out breaths respectively (Birch 2011: 532-533). This association of the practices of *haṭha* with breaths leads us towards the another explanation of *haṭha*, which connects it with *prāṇāyāma* (breathing practices).

Haṭha Yoga as a discipline of manipulating the breath

The idea of Haṭha Yoga as manipulation of the internal winds (*vāyus*) and the retention of the breath was mentioned by very few ascetics. One guru from the Rāmānujī *sampradāya*, firmly associated Haṭha Yoga with *prāṇāyāma*. He stressed that the aim of Haṭha Yoga is to reach *keval kumbhak* (breath retention unaccompanied by specific methods of inhalation and exhalation) and then to go into *samādhi*. Therefore, according to him, the *haṭhayogī* reaches a stage where he is not going to breathe again if he does not want to and, in so doing, he can push his body into death. Then, the final stage of Haṭha Yoga would be the death of the yogī who remains in *samādhi*. The earliest references to this understanding as applied to the Haṭha Yoga canon in the *Amaraughaprabodha* (14th century) where Haṭha Yoga is actually described as 'that which is intent upon stopping the breath' (Birch 2011: 547). A Buddhist text from the Kālacakra tradition, the *Vimalaprabhā* (c. 10-11th century), also connects Haṭha Yoga with the breath: it is the practice that makes the *prāṇa* flow in the middle channel and arrests the *bindu* of the *bodhicitta* (Birch 2011: 536). Briggs reports a definition of Haṭha Yoga that lays emphasis upon *prāṇāyāma*: Haṭha

Yoga would use physical methods to produce a voluntary suppression of the breath in the body to obtain various mental states (1938: 273).

Breath control is one of the most recurring features of the practice of meditation since early times. J. Bronkhorst reports the episode of the *Majjhima Nikāya* of the Pali Buddhist Canon in which the Buddha claims that before his enlightenment he tried two ascetic methods: meditation without breath and reduced intake of food, practices that the Buddha eventually judged without value for the attainment of salvation (1993: 1-3). The *Śvetāsvatara Upaniṣad* claims that it is necessary to suppress the breath and bring the movements of the *vāyus* under control but, it is not a complete suppression, rather a decrease (Bronkhorst 1993:47). Thus, the practice of retaining the breath was not initially categorised with the label Haṭha Yoga, but could be connected to a wider range of ascetic practices. For example, Grierson (mentioned by Briggs 1938) connected Haṭha Yoga with a method in which the control of the breath leads to control and transcendence of the other two elements that constitute the “lower self”, i.e. the sexual power, and the mind (1938: 273). A similar explanation was given to me by several ascetics. According to this idea (whose first textual teaching is in the *Amṛtasiddhi*) breath, mind and *vīrya* (sperm) have analogous *śakti* (energy); if the breath stops, the *vīrya* and the mind also stop. Conversely, if you control the mind, it is believed by some that the breath will stop as well as the *vīrya*. This process is understood by some as that of Haṭha Yoga. According to one *tyāgī*:

When we eat we create our blood. Initially the blood is *kaccā* (imperfect). *Kaccā* blood goes down in the testicles, and there it becomes *pakkā* (mature). Therefore, from the blood comes the *śakti* that becomes *pakkā* in the testicles and that is when you have to control it [...] When the man has full control of his body he can remove diseases just thinking about them. This happens when you have strength and with the *tapasyā* you get all this.

Another *tyāgī* from the Rāmānandī *sampradāya* described Haṭha Yoga in these words:

When you want to stop your breath until a certain point, when you do this, then *haṭha* happens. The exercise of Haṭha Yoga is to stop the flow of *prāṇa* in *iḍā* and *piṅgalā* to converge it in the *suṣumnā*. And this is for waking up *kuṇḍalinī*. In the lower part of *nāḍīs* dwells *kuṇḍalinī* in a spot that is called in different way according to the experience of the person. *Kuṇḍalinī* lies there like unconscious. Thanks to the waves made by the *prāṇāyāma* it becomes hot in there, so *Kuṇḍalinī* needs to cough and in so doing she opens her mouth and ascends the *nāḍī* in the middle that passes from the back.

A *yogī* may also have a goal of diminishing the frequency of breathing. For example, this *tyāgī* claimed that the time without breathing should be slowly increased and to accomplish this at the beginning of his practice, he verified the length of his exhalations through a *yantra* (a diagram usually associated with a particular deity, mantra or ritual). Although he did not explain the details of how it worked, the *tyāgī* claimed that through the use of the *yantra* he could chart his progresses, slowly diminishing his breath until it was completely internalized. According to him, when the *prāṇa* is not breathed out it goes in the *trikuṭī* (between the eyebrows) and this would lead to *samādhi*, because ‘when you internalize your breath then even your vision becomes an inner vision and this allows you to visualize god inside you’.

Haṭha Yoga as *kriyā* or as physical practice

In ascetic contexts, the word *kriyā* (which could be translated as ‘action’) usually specifies techniques or practices within a yoga discipline meant to achieve a specific result.²⁰ Some ascetics emphasised *kriyās* as being a defining feature of Haṭha Yoga. For example, a *saṃnyāsin* in Rishikesh said: ‘Haṭha Yoga has six important Kriyā: *neti*, *dhauti*, *kuñjal*, *gaṇeś*, *khecarī*, *vajrolī*. These are the six *kriyā* of Haṭha Yoga’. For those unfamiliar with these techniques, generally speaking, *neti* (for ascetics) is a technique of cleaning of the nasal passages by inserting a cotton thread into the nostril, pulling it out of the mouth, and drawing it back and forth.²¹ *Dhauti* is a technique of cleansing the stomach by swallowing a length of cloth while holding onto one end and then slowly extracting it. The intestines are cleansed by *gaṇeś kriya*, the activation of the bowel movement by inserting, while in a squatting position an oily or wet finger into the anus and rotating it clockwise/anticlockwise alternatively while applying gentle pressure along the walls inside. The technique of *nauli*

²⁰ It is interesting to note that in the *Bhagavadgītā* Kṛṣṇa describes Kriyā Yoga as the neutralizations of the outgoing and the ingoing breath (offering inhaling breath into the outgoing breath, and offering the outgoing breath into the inhaling breath) in order to release the life force from the heart to bring it under control, a technique that, as we have seen, was later on associated with Haṭha Yoga. Patañjali, instead, describes *kriyāyoga* as necessary for the distracted mind, also saying that *kriyāyoga* is asceticism, recitation and devotion to Isvara, and ‘its purpose is the cultivation of *samādhi* or the attenuation of the afflictions’ (1.2.1-2). More detailed studies would be necessary to verify connections between these definitions of *kriyāyoga* and the development of the meaning of haṭha yoga.

²¹ Many ascetics use also *jal neti*, substituting the thread with water. For example, I have seen a *saṃnyāsin* “drinking” water through both his nostrils at the same time, to expel it from his mouth.

is a muscular cleaning of the internal organs by tensing the abdominal muscles in such a way that they form a vertical column which can also be rolled from side to side, putting variable pressure the organs. *Kuñjallgajakaraṇī* is a technique of the cleaning of the stomach by drinking water and then regurgitating it. *Vajrolī* is a technique of the sucking liquid into the bladder by means of a pipe inserted into the urethra. *Khecarī* is a technique aimed to stop *bindu*, once raised up the channels of the body, from leaving the head by turning the tongue backwards into the throat and into the nasal cavity. However there are various in practices associated with all these terms depending on a particular tradition.

Another *saṃnyāsin* I met in Kamakhya, who gave a short speech during the International Day of Yoga in 2017, said that *nāgā sādhus* are those who practice Haṭha Yoga; Haṭha Yoga is that section of Yoga in which *kriyā* happens. He added that *nāgās* know all the *kriyās* of Haṭha Yoga, then he performed *navuli* and listed some other *kriyās*: *neti*, *dhauti* and *vajrolī*. He stressed that *āsanas* and *prāṇāyāmas* are easy practices and therefore are for everybody, while Haṭha Yoga is only for *sādhus*, because only *sādhus* have the *haṭha* (the intention) and this comes directly from Brahman. In this way his understanding of Haṭha Yoga also returned to the earlier one of Haṭha Yoga being equivalent to *tapasyā*. In a private conversation this sadhu explained Haṭha Yoga as the intention brought to *tapasyā*, because with austerities the individual keeps senses under control.

A tantric *saṃnyāsin* from Birnagar, said that the *yogī* is recognized by his being able to perform *kriyā* since he has full knowledge and control of the body. He gave this example: if you vomit using the fingers, that is not a *kriyā*, but if you know how to make the vomit come up, that is a *kriyā*. I asked him how many *kriyās* there are and he said that there are as many *kriyās* as the number of traditions, and new *kriyās* are constantly invented. He then explained the meaning of Haṭha Yoga: 'Haṭha Yoga, *yogāsanas* are like gymnastics but what is different is that in Haṭha Yoga there is the intention. *Āsanas* are pure physical exercises whose purpose is to strengthen the body, since you must have full control of your body.'

Likewise, a very old *saṃnyāsīn* that I met in Kolkata claimed that Haṭha Yoga is physical yoga, whose purpose is to prevent the body catching diseases and to stop it becoming lazy. He expanded on this idea, noting that another purpose of this physical yoga is to reduce the breath, because when the breath reduces the mind stabilizes and the life gets longer. According to him, Haṭha Yoga has nothing to do with meditation; meditation is the only way to reach the Absolute, and the “fun” of yoga practice, while *āsanas* are the painful part.

A *saṃnyāsīn/tapasvīn* from Shantiniketan explained that Haṭha Yoga is for the body, and it is constituted of physical techniques (such as *āsanas*, *prāṇāyāmas*, *mudrās*) whose purpose is to keep the body *sthira* (steady). Haṭha Yoga, then, would be necessary at the beginning of the *sādhana*, for the health and wellness of the body. He also added that in Haṭha Yoga it is necessary to develop *kriyās*, like *vajrolī*. He claimed to have practised all the *kriyās*, and explained that he continues practising a little bit of Haṭha Yoga to keep his body healthy. Interestingly, these *sādhus* gave a definition of Haṭha Yoga quite similar to that given by many *sādhus* while talking about the purpose of *āsanas*.

The ascetic understanding of *āsanas*

For the majority of the *sādhus* that I have interviewed, *āsanas* are practices whose only purpose is to make the body healthy and to make it *sthira*, stable, because when the body is stable, then the mind is stable and it becomes easier to meditate. I will reproduce here parts of conversations I had with a *tyāgī* about this issue.

T: You have to make an *āsana* regular/simple (*sādā*), then all the other *āsanas* are *sādā*, they become ok by their own.

D: Then what is the purpose of learning other *āsanas*?

T: Other *āsanas* are taught because when you sit in one *āsana*, then your body can become stiff. If your body is not steady, thanks to other *āsanas* you can bring it back to a comfortable condition. One does other *āsanas* when one's body needs to. One does not have to waste time in doing many *āsanas*, you focus on spending hours in one position, because it is in this position that you do your “work”.

D: Then, if you change the *āsana*, for how long?

T: Just for one, two minutes, not more. If one spends time doing all the *āsanas*, then one does not have time for the single *āsana* that one really needs.

This understanding of *āsana* is widespread among ascetics. Several *sādhus* told me that once they are able to make the *āsanas siddh*, i.e. perfected/accomplished, then they stop practising them. There is no need to continue doing apart from when necessity arises, i.e. to alleviate particular physical problems. For example, a *tyāginī* from Varanasi told me that she returned to the practice of *āsanas* to lose weight.²² A Rāmānujī from Varanasi said that he does some *āsanas* if he has to participate in *yogāsana* competition, and in general if he has free time.

In Ujjain, a *saṃnyāsin* told me that it is not even necessary to fully accomplish the *āsana* stage: he learnt only a few *āsanas* and methods of *prāṇāyāma*, because he was able to reach his purpose without fully mastering all of them. A Rāmānujī from Ujjain stressed the uselessness of physical practices. He said: 'I practiced all the *āsanas*, the [*śaṭ*]karmas, the *kriyās* and the *mudrās*, and I did not get any *sānti* (peace). They are physical practices, you do not have to waste time in them; if you are looking for yoga then you have to do *dhyāna*. Through it you obtain *jñāna* and then Yoga (union with the Paramātmā). The only way is *dhyāna* yoga. But without a real guru, you cannot reach any result'.²³

It seems that there are two ideas of *āsanas* in the ascetic milieus. On the one hand there are *āsanas* used as stable, seated positions for practising *dhyāna*, in particular *sukhāsana*, *siddhāsana* and *padmāsana*.²⁴ These seated positions are mentioned and described in nearly all texts about Haṭha Yoga. On the other hand, there are postures whose purpose is to keep the body healthy by preventing disease. That is why they are often associated with *vyāyām* (exercises). A female ascetic told me that '*vyāyām* is for making your body strong

²² A *saṃnyāsin* from the Āvāhan Akhārā said that he used to make seventy out of eighty-four *āsanas siddh*, but then he had an accident: a car hit him while he was eating in New Delhi Railway Station so he spent three days in coma, and after that (in 2015) he stopped practising *āsanas*. In effect, although yoga *āsanas* are said to cure diseases and solve physical problems, several *sādhus* who are practitioners of *āsanas* stopped them as soon as they got ill to use different methods. In many cases they follow a doctor's prescription or attribute a cure to themselves.

²³ His statement resembles the *Amanaska* (Mallinson and Singleton 2017:40): 'the ultimate reality is not found in the Base and the other *cakras*, (nor) in the Suṣumnā and the other channels, (nor) in *prāṇa* and the other breaths (1.3) [...] all the various locks and seals of (*haṭha*) practice produce only the yoga of ignorance. Meditation on the bodily centres, the channels and the six supports (*ādhāra*) is delusion of the mind. (1.7) [...] There is no point in spending a long time cultivating the breaths (or) practising hundreds of breath-retentions.' (2.42).

²⁴ A *saṃnyāsin* defined these as the spiritual (*ādhyātmik*) *āsanas*.

and soft. *Āsanas* are for when you get tired, you do not do *āsanas* for more than two minutes, you can do *vyāyām* for five to thirty minutes to prepare your body.’

Quite often ascetics do not even know the name of a particular *āšana*, and when asked about how many *āsanas* exist, they give a mythical answer, sometimes similar to the answer of the *Gheraṇḍa Saṃhitā* (2.1). A *tyāgī* said that there are eighty-four lakhs of *āsanas* (8,400,000), however eighty-four are the main, and among these thirty-two are important; among these thirty-two sixteen are important and among them eight; among these eight, there are four, and in the end just one is the most important: *siddhāsana*, the posture you use to meditate.

This association of superficiality with the non-seated *āsanas* is found also in early Yoga texts that deal mostly with seated *āsanas* used for breath control and meditation. In the *Patañjalayogaśāstra*, *āšana* is said to be *sthirasukham*, steady (*sthira*) and comfortable (*sukham*), but only in the *Bhāṣya*, the commentary of the *śāstra*, are they listed; they are thirteen “and others” but are not described. The priority given to seated posture is typical in written works until the first half of the second millennium when more complex *āsanas* began to be described. For example, the *Haṭhapradīpikā* describes fifteen *āsanas*, of which eight are not seated postures (Mallinson and Singleton 2017:87).

This lack of importance given in the past to non-seated postures is reflected also in visual evidence: it is very difficult to find *āsanas* different from seated ones represented in the early period: ascetics and gurus are represented always in meditative postures like *padmāsana*. The earliest evidence of non-seated postures so far discovered is in the sculptures of the Dabhoi northern (Gujarat). Likely built in 1230,²⁵ this gate displays three layers of sculptures. In the lower layer twelve Nāths are represented; on top of them are eight Yoginīs and above them eight Bhairvas with consorts, while above in between the facades of the arches there are carved sculptures of ascetics performing complicated

²⁵ Actually the gate is popularly ascribed to the Chalukya king Jayasimha Siddharaja (1093-1143 AD), however according to Mallinson, this claim is apparently without any foundation. Analysing the work of several scholars, Mallinson has concluded that the gate might have been built in 1230 CE (personal communication, 22nd November 2017).

āsanas.²⁶ Likewise, a few postures are used as decorative motifs on the pillars of the numerous temples in Hampi (c. 15th-16th century). This paucity may indicate the relatively low importance among ascetics of the practice of *āsanas*, but at the same time their presence may show the desire of the artists to reproduce those complicated postures performed in the temples to amuse pilgrims.

That non-seated, complicated postures were not represented in statuary nor mentioned in texts until the second millennium does not mean that they were not being practised previously. As noted by Mallinson and Singleton (2017: 88), Indian ascetics have been using extreme postures for at least two and half thousand years. The two scholars take into account Strabo's reports of the encounter of members of Alexander the Great's entourage with *yogīs* in the 4th century BCE: 'fifteen men standing in different postures, sitting or lying down naked, who continued in these positions until the evening and then returned to the city. The most difficult thing to endure was the heat of the sun, which was so powerful that no one else could endure without pain to walk on the ground at mid-day with bare feet.' Furthermore, there were also two more ascetics who 'came up to Alexander's table and took their meal standing, and they gave an example of their fortitude by retiring to a neighbouring spot, where the elder, falling on the ground supine, endured the sun and the rain, which had now set in, it being the commencement of spring. The other stood on one leg, with a piece of wood three cubits in length raised in both hands; when one leg was fatigued he changed to support the other, and thus continued the whole day' (Mallinson and Singleton 2017:88). These glimpses show that ascetics used to hold seated, lying and standing postures for long period, rather than just a few minutes before holding another posture. We could perhaps hypothesize that originally *āsanas* were kept for longer periods, a practice that even today "converts" an *āsana* into a form of *tapasyā*. This understanding was recently confirmed to me by a Nāth ascetic who claimed that each *āsana* should be kept until it becomes perfected. Therefore, a *sādhu* can spend months practising the same *āsana* and this practice in itself is a form of *tapasyā* that only with

²⁶ It is noteworthy that this is the only known extant gate that presents sculptures of *āsanas*; the three others at Dabhoi and the four very similar gates at Jhinjuwada, likely built in the same period, do not have depictions of yogis.

haṭha can be accomplished.

We can suppose that the *āsana* practice evolved, assimilating some postures and positions from other forms of physical traditions, for example wrestling. Let us not forget that physical exercises (*vyāyām*) are present among ascetics as part of particular training and *nāgās* used to follow and still follow a martial training, whose exercises could have influenced the *āsana* practice as well.²⁷ A Nāth I met in Kamakhya told me that he used to be a *pahlvān* (wrestler) because in the *āśram* of his guru there was also an *akhārā* (in the sense of gymnasium). There were wrestlers exercising as well as young *sādhus*. He used to do both practices: *āsanas* and *vyāyām*. According to this Nāth, the exercises in the *akhārā* are quite different compared to *āsana*: *vyāyāms* are practiced to increase the strength of the body and the muscles, while *āsanas* are simpler and need less effort. He used to do *kuśṭī* (wrestling) and to lift weights even with his mouth, but as soon as he got the complete Nāth initiation, he stopped.

Clearly, more data and evidence are necessary to understand the origin and development of postures in the ascetic context taking also into account various physical traditions present in India.

To summarise, in my fieldwork with contemporary ascetics, the general attitude towards *āsanas* and *prāṇāyāma* was that they are necessary but temporary practices, initial steps for the ascetic who wants to practise meditation (*dhyāna*), which is the main practice of Yoga.

Obviously, *sādhus* recognize the importance of *āsanas* and *prāṇāyāmas* since they are necessary for the *sādhana*: when *sādhus* get tired in the meditative position, they do *āsanas* so the body relaxes and they can continue the meditative practice. This concept of

²⁷ Considering Alter's works on Indian wrestlers, it is clear that the *vyāyām* practiced by wrestlers and the *āsanas/ vyāyām* practiced by *sādhus* belonged to two different realms, given the fact that their aims and their "use" and conception of the body is different. Although wrestlers 'consider wrestling a sub-discipline of yoga in its broadest, nonsomatic sense' (1992:323), I wonder whether the direction of exchange was actually that (Alter takes it for granted that many practices were taken by wrestlers from Haṭha Yoga), or perhaps was more mutual. However, further research about the historical development of Indian wrestling and martial arts would be necessary to verify such a statement.

improving the *sāadhanā* was stressed by a *saṃnyāsīn*, who considered the practice of *āsanas* not only as physical but also mental training. According to him, since each *āsana* has to be practiced for hours until it is perfect, the ascetic who practices *āsanas* with such approach would increase his powers of perseverance and determination, so that he is then able to use the same persistence to accomplish and follow religious aims.

Who can practice *āsanas*?

Although yoga is now considered a discipline open to everybody, especially in its physical aspect, in the ascetic world secrecy and the teachings of a guru are still fundamental for those who intend to achieve Yoga's religious goals. This also means that it is up to the guru whether to give the teaching or not: if the guru does not think that a disciple is suitable for Yoga, he will not teach that person, but rather will suggest another more appropriate *sāadhanā* (religious/spiritual path). For example, when I was in Ujjain in 2016 I met a Rāmānujī *sādhu* who is considered an expert *yogī*, and who was in the company of his *guru bhāt* (brother). Although they had the same guru, this other *sādhu* was given a *bhakti sāadhanā* rather than *dhyāna yoga sāadhanā*, since his guru at the time of initiation realized *bhajan* and *nām jap* (the repetition of God's name) were more likely than Yoga to bring him success on the religious path.

However, it is also true that the *sādhu* will not always follow the teaching of the *dīkṣā* (initiation) guru, because his/her individual religious quest can lead him/her towards another master, from whom he/she will take a secondary *dīkṣā* in order to set foot on the right path. For example, an Udāsīn told me that he knew 110 postures, learned from the different great *sādhus* he met in his life. The same *sādhu* said that *āsanas* are for young ascetics, since they have the energy and the desire to make them perfect, as well as the desire to challenge themselves. He gave the examples of the *liṅga kriyās*, practices used to mortify the penis like lifting stones, pulling trucks or rolling the penis around a stick. However, the Udāsīn also stressed that to accomplish this kind of practice an ascetic has to be very powerful in his *sāadhanā*.

Although Haṭha Yoga texts declare the practice suitable for everybody, ascetics have a specific perspective. According to them, the majority of people can do *āsanas* as exercises for the body, although for many *sādhus* not all bodies are suitable for *āsanas*, and not everybody has a mind that can be taken under control through yoga practices. For example, there is a common idea amongst *sādhus* that people with physical problems cannot do yoga. For example, it was suggested to me that fat people instead should lose weight before practicing.

A *tyāgī* told me that householders can think about Yoga only in a physical manner: they cannot reach the goal of Yoga until they practise celibacy, because *brahmacarya* is the Rājā of the body. In effect, according to ascetics, *brahmacarya* is essential in order to obtain results in religious practice.²⁸ The same *tyāgī* explicitly said: 'If one does not observe *brahmacarya*, one cannot obtain the result. It is like you go to school but you do not study, you do not obtain anything. If you have sex while practising yoga, you can accomplish physical results, but not spiritual, as all your spiritual attainment is flushed away with the ejaculation.' As he explained, semen flows up by the practice of yoga *sādhana* and is converted into *tejas* and *ojas*.²⁹ He also said:

'with celibacy you can do all the *sādhana*, in spite of your gender, there are no differences, you also have *śakti*, no? The *śakti* produced by *brahmacarya* is one. Bhagavān has said in the *Gītā* that by maintaining the *brahmacarya* the *man* (mind) in the body becomes distinct, you get strength, and if you have an aim you will achieve it. Like you want to see god, and he will come in his form in front of you.'

He also stressed that *brahmacarya* is not for everybody because it can be difficult to keep the mind free from desire: as each *man* is different, the practice should be different. Therefore, it is correct for a *gṛhastha* (householder) to use yoga for the body, to solve physical problems, but with the awareness that he cannot go beyond that stage. To summarize, according to ascetics everybody can do *āsanas* to keep the body healthy and

²⁸ The significance of celibacy is present in many mythological examples: through celibacy and *tapasyā*, *ṛṣis* and *yogīs* are able to attain supernatural powers and get boons from the gods, while in other narrations the power accumulated by ascetics doing *tapasyā* is nullified by deities sending female attendants who, inducing them in sexual activities, cause the loss of their semen (*bindu*).

²⁹ *Ojas* is a fine and subtle material in the body, the purest form of all the *dhātus*. *Tejas* is the subtle energy of fire as the radiance of vitality.

to avoid diseases, however this practice as not to be confused with Yoga as a *sādhana*, which leads to spiritual results.

The ascetics' demonstration of āsanas

There is a dual attitude on the part of ascetics regarding the display of *āsanas*. On the one hand there are ascetics that do not agree with the public performance of *āsanas* since they consider them as personal, physical practices for the body to be done before or during the *sādhana*. Once, for example, I was talking about this topic with a *tyāgī* and he actually got angry with me and told me to leave his tent because he had understood I wanted him to show me some positions. According to an *ūrdhvaḥhu* I met in Ujjain, *āsanas* are displayed by *dukān-dārī* "shopkeeper" *sādhus*, i.e. those who want to make money from it and the *āsanas* that are shown are in fact usually the more spectacular ones which can capture the attention of pilgrims or curious people.

On the other hand, some ascetics approve of the display of *āsanas* for a public (although they do not emphasise its importance). For example, at festivals those who have the title *Yogī Rāj*, which means that they are expert in the practice of *āsanas*, often have boards with photos of them demonstrating some *āsanas* so that they might to be recognized. A *Yogī Rāj* that I met in Kolkata, told me that *āsana* can become like a *nāṭak*, a theatrical act, that is for the public, not to be confused with the *sādhana* that is the real practice. Another *saṁnyāsīn*, who lives close to Shantiniketan, said that Yoga is a hidden knowledge (*vidyā*), like Tantra, that it is not for the public, and that only *āsanas* can be shown.

This idea was also shared by another *saṁnyāsīn* who claimed that the showing of *āsanas* or particular position or actions (like putting the head in the sand which is, according to him, possible to keep for days thanks to a proper use of the *kumbhak*) is done to show to the public, and thereby to give them *ānand*, "bliss". This explanation is quite similar to that given by a *tapasvīn* about the reason for his *tapasyā*: to demonstrate to lay people that with religious strength incredible results can be obtained. However, *tapasyā* is also 'for the welfare of society' (*samāj kā kalyāṇ*), because ascetics' austerities permit the world to

continue.

I attended such a kind of demonstration, i.e. a kind of real exhibition of *āsanas*, in Kamakhya (Assam) during the Ambubachi festival. It happened that the International Day of Yoga fell during the festival, when many ascetics were already gathered in the city, and a group of *saṃnyāsins* decided to show *āsanas* in front of journalists and the curious. The exhibition was realized with the purpose of showing and surprising the spectators. The *sādhus*, most of them from Kashmir, had covered their bodies with *vibhūti* (ash), and then started performing *āsanas*. In front were those able to perform the most difficult postures, while those in the back were playing musical instruments, clapping and encouraging those performing. Mostly, headstands were executed with some variations. It was interesting for me to notice the mood of this performance: some ascetics, before doing *āsanas* were warming up their body with few jumps, or beating their body, to then accomplish the posture with fast and energetic movement. They showed positions, moving from one position to the other, treating *āsanas* as pure physical movements, whose accomplishment nevertheless was the result of strenuous practice but also a gift of god. That is why other *sādhus* praised those accomplishing the most difficult poses with a loud invocation to Śiva: “Har Har Mahadev”.

Sādhus teaching āsanās

The *āsana* “classes” I had with three *sādhus* were obviously different compared with those that a novice would undertake. Usually a young ascetic will be asked by the guru to sit in posture for several hours per days, until he/she can sit for as long as ten to twelve hours per day. This is because, as a *tyāginī* from Varanasi told me, first of all one has to learn how to properly sit: when the back is straight, then the *prāṇa* and the energy flow better and the *yogī* can control it.

I had a few classes with this *tyāginī*. The lesson started with about thirty minutes of various *prāṇāyāmas*. Then we did exercises for warming up the body followed by several *āsanas* performed by lying down, twisting the body and standing up. *Āsanās* were alternated with *vyāyāms*. The lesson finished with some jumps.

My next class was with a *saṃnyāsīn* in Birnagar. There was no warming up in his class, everything was based on strengthening the body and balancing it. It was all about levers, pressure and balance. In an hour and a half we did from thirty to forty *āsanas*. He pushed and sometimes helped in making the position right, just to show how it should be done and to demonstrate the possibilities of the body.

The lessons with a *saṃnyāsīn* in Kolkata were extremely tiring. He stressed that the secret for obtaining result was “practice, practice, practice”. In the first class, he tested the body’s flexibility and resistance. We did not do any *prāṇāyāmas* for the first two days. The *yogāsana* class was based on the repetition of few *āsanas* several times during the class. We did a lot of exercises for stretching the muscles and strengthening them, especially abdominal exercises. After these initial days, a few *prāṇāyāmas* were added and every *āsana* was repeated three times. According to this *saṃnyāsīn*, an *āsana* is perfected when it can be held for three hours and forty-eight minutes and can also be used as meditative posture; once this is achieved then the *āsana* may be kept just for one minute. He said that he used to remain in the same *āsana* even for six or seven hours: discipline and commitment are necessary for the *sādhana*.

Considering these few classes and considering those ascetics who kindly showed me some positions during our conversations, or showed old photographs or videos of them while performing, some generalisations can be made. First of all, in each of these classes there was almost no time to relax between one position or group of positions and the next. *Āsanās* are performed one after another. The positions are adopted in a very natural way, according to the capacity of the individual's body: there are no rigid rules nor precise positions for the arms or legs. They often chose to show complicated *āsanas*, and those teaching me also asked me to perform them. “Spiritual” explanations were almost absent during the practice. Some explanations about the benefits of an *āsana* were given, but mostly they wanted the individual to concentrate on the posture and its perfection. There is no notion of getting mentally relaxed while doing *āsanas*: it is the body and its muscles that

are stretched; the mind is “refreshed and cleaned” through *prāṇāyāma*. The main aim is to have full control of the body, because if the body is controlled, then one can control even the mind with the help of *prāṇāyāma*, and from there accomplish the next steps.

Conclusion

Observing the ascetic practice of today provides fascinating data that may help in reconstructing the development of the concept of Haṭha Yoga, and facilitate comparison with Yoga as it is more broadly conceived. This paper has shown that the association between Haṭha Yoga and *tapasyā* is deep-rooted among contemporary ascetics and artistic and textual evidences support the idea that in the past a *yogī* was often also a *tapasvin*. It is likely that what today is called Haṭha Yoga is the result of different traditions and practices that at a certain point were to be collected and organized in a system that was never acknowledged by all. Several different understandings of yoga coexist amongst contemporary ascetics.

For ascetics, physical (postural) yoga has always had a relatively minor importance in comparison with spiritual practices like meditation and austerities. Those features that today characterize Haṭha Yoga (*āsana*, *prāṇāyāma*, *mudrā*, *bandha* and *ṣaṭ karma*) are understood by ascetics as a form of knowledge whose purpose is to support the body and the mind. It seemed that every ascetic knows how to practice at least a few *āsanas* or other yogic practices, and it seemed taken for granted that they have such basic knowledge. But physical practices still have a relative and subsidiary importance in the life of ascetics. For many of them it is just an initial stage that has to be abandoned as soon as it is perfected in order to direct effort towards the more important practices, *dhyāna* and *samādhi*; Yoga is a *sādhana*, a spiritual path.

However, one theme regularly emerges when talking with ascetics: to accomplish a difficult religious path, *haṭha* is necessary. For ascetics *haṭha* is most often explained in Hindi as “enforcement” (*jabardastī*) or “firm promise” (*dr̥ḍh samkalp*).” It is still not clear when the word *haṭha* became associated with a wide range of physical practices such as the retention of the breath, *kriyās*, and *tapasyā*. It is clear that all these practices have in

common the commitment of the ascetic to accomplish them, and a determination to force the body into difficult positions and activities.

Therefore, Haṭha Yoga perhaps would be better understood not only as the Yoga of Force, but also as the Method of Determination. Considering the difficult path of Yoga as a *sādhana* it is quite clear why Haṭha Yoga is usually considered to be preliminary to the attainment of *samādhi*, *kaivalya* or *mokṣa*. By training in austerities and complicated physical practices, the individual can verify that his/her determination is sufficient for more committed practices which bring about the attainment of the highest reality, i.e. *dhyāna* and *samādhi*. Contemporary understandings from my fieldwork align well with the majority of medieval textual sources in which meditation is the central theme and *āsana* and *prāṇāyāma* are preliminary to the main practice. Significantly, the *Haṭhapradīpikā* begins with such a statement: ‘Salute the primeval Lord, who taught the Haṭhayoga-vidyā, which is as a stairway for those who wish to attain the lofty Rāja-Yoga’ (1:1).³⁰

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³⁰ See Birch (2011).

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