

Institutional Power and Community Power in Modern Yoga: Aligned or Maligned?

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Bio: Amelia Wood is a PhD candidate at SOAS, University of London, researching abuses of power in modern transnational yoga contexts. She has presented work at several international conferences: the University of Chester Spiritual Abuse: Coercive Control in Religions conference (2021), the University of California, Riverside Religions and Sexual Abuse conference (2022) and the Jagiellonian, Poland, Yoga Darśana, Yoga Sādhana conference (2022).

Amelia received an MA in the Traditions of Yoga and Meditation at SOAS in 2015 –her dissertation focused on the roles and representations of women in pre-modern texts, supervised by Dr. James Mallinson.

Amelia is currently on the steering committee for the SOAS Centre for Yoga Studies (CYS) and convened the 2022 CYS Summer short course. She was on the organising committee for the 2022 YDYS conference in Krakow, Poland.

Institution: SOAS, University of London

Status: PhD candidate

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Abstract:

In the last decade there have been a number of allegations and revelations of abuses of power from within yoga contexts, including spiritual, sexual and financial abuse. Responses from industry organisations, grass-roots communities and the media have been inconsistent. Abuse has been minimised and denied –a discourse that has sometimes caused further harm to survivors and victims. Those accused have been both glorified and vilified –again, the impact on survivors of such a discourse is rarely considered. In some instances, communities have made space for the voices of survivors, victims and those who have been harmed.

I will present the ways in which institutions have responded to abuses of power in yoga contexts –implementing safeguarding process and scheduling trauma-informed studio classes –and compare it to community responses. Are institutional, organisational and community responses aligned –and if not, why not –or do they cause further harm? This paper builds on my work presented at the previous Yoga Darśana, Yoga Sādhana conference, which was largely theoretical. This new work includes qualitative fieldwork findings and therefore the voices and experiences of survivors.

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