

The Purpose of Pain in Modern Yoga

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Abstract

The centrality of pain in ascetic experience has long been recognised. Tales of the sufferings of martyrs and anchorites abound in the literature. While we can also find many examples of painful practices in the Vedas and epics, there is less information available about its role in Modern Yoga. Indeed, the popular narrative of the use of Yoga for pain relief appears to argue against the proactive application and acceptance of pain for the practitioner's benefit.

Using qualitative methods as well as textual research, this paper explores the role of pain in Modern Yoga practice. Drawing on the testimony of Yoga practitioners, primarily in the lineage of Krishnamacharya, it argues that, rather than something to be avoided, pain is seen by many of these practitioners as an inescapable, indispensable part of yoga practice. The result is a religious imaginary which takes its cues from the cultural context of the individual practitioner.

This paper argues that, for the Modern Yoga practitioner, the experience of pain is more aligned with ancient and Classical yoga texts than with the Modernist aversion to pain or the post- twentieth- century appropriation of Yoga for biomedical or therapeutic purposes. The blending of contemporary religio-spiritual preoccupations with physically demanding practices results in a philosophy in which pain is appropriated and interiorised as a soteriological tool. The language and imagery used to describe the experience of pain reflects the blending of cultures and religions which is at the heart of Modern Yoga. The result is an attitude to pain which has more in common with the askesis of the ancient yogin than previously recognised.

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