

Transnational Inspiration: Prāṇa and Prāṇāyāma in Early Modern Yoga

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A central practice to both premodern and modern yoga, prāṇāyāma (lit. “breath control”) is widely practised in yoga classes today. Yet, until now, it remained under-researched. Kraler’s PhD thesis “Yoga Breath: The Reinvention of Prāṇa and Prāṇāyāma in Early Modern Yoga”(2022) radically changes this. By carefully examining the history of modern prāṇāyāma between 1850 and 1945, it unearths several strands of modern yoga that were largely unknown or ignored. The thesis contains longitudinal threads, in which the continuity of the South Asian practices and their longstanding history are highlighted. The thesis also maps the more horizontal developments that bridge practices from Euro-American physical culture and yoga. In doing so, it carefully analyses yogic breath practices and their overlap and interaction with Euro-American hygienic, medical, and occult ones such as deep breathing and rhythmic breathing. Within these multiple intersections, ten key figures of modern yoga and their individual contributions to prāṇāyāma are discussed. In all these contexts, prāṇāyāma is understood as a tool for introspection providing physical, mental, and spiritual transformation. This paper will present the most salient points made in the thesis and opens a discussion whether parts of the history of modern yoga can be re-written by analysing modern prāṇa and prāṇāyāma.

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