

Bridging the gap between yoga scholarship and practice: explorations in democratising knowledge

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What can or should yoga practitioners and teachers do with the research findings of yoga scholarship? What are the specific implications for contemporary yoga practice? Whilst increasing opportunities exist to be taught by academics and researchers in this area, enthusiastic learners are still often left on their own to ponder the significance of this information on their practice and teaching. The authors of this paper completed the Traditions in Yoga and Meditation MA at SOAS in 2020, and felt this gap acutely. We began a series of interventions to explore these questions, using workshops, qualitative research (including interviews and surveys) with students, auto-ethnography, case studies and applications of relevant frameworks. For McNeil in particular, bringing techniques from more diverse yogic texts into their own teaching has been an illuminating innovation. In this paper we will share the results of this work, in the hope of encouraging further research and discussion in this area. We discovered that many students indeed felt adrift and confused by contradictions in simplified narratives of yoga history, most were unaware of the complexities of yoga scholarship. However, we also found that fruitful insights arise through collaboratively exploring the changing ways in which yoga has been understood and practised through time and around the world from its Indian beginnings with contemporary practitioners. From these insights we propose an inclusive and democratic approach to both disseminating this wealth of knowledge to a broader audience as well as enabling the findings from that process to feed back into academic research. Collaborative endeavours, open dialogues, and dynamic discussions are valuable pathways to making this profound body of knowledge accessible and meaningful, ultimately bridging the gap between yoga scholarship and practice.

Martha Henson, SOAS.

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Martha completed a 200 hours Yoga Teacher Training in 2016 in Nepal and was left with more questions than answers. She briefly taught yoga before discovering the SOAS MA in Traditions of Yoga and Meditation, which she did over 3 years and was awarded a distinction. She was also coordinator for the SOAS Centre of Yoga Studies from 2018-2020. Under the banner of IntoYoga, she has recently begun running small-scale yoga studies workshops on the Isle of Wight.

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Ruth is a PhD candidate in Theology and Religious Studies at King's College, London, under the supervision of Professor Clare Carlisle and Dr Karen O'Brien-Kop. Ruth's interdisciplinary research project proposes a radical exploration of emptiness (śūnya), a key state which leads to liberation, as embodied experience within the ancient to early mediaeval Hindu and Buddhist contemplative traditions of South Asia. Ruth completed the MA Traditions of Yoga and Meditation at SOAS, University of London in 2020 for which she received a distinction. Her studies, in combination with the somatic perspectives she has developed over the last twelve years as a teacher and practitioner of yoga, Pilates and as a movement therapist, place her at the unique intersection of theory and practice.

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