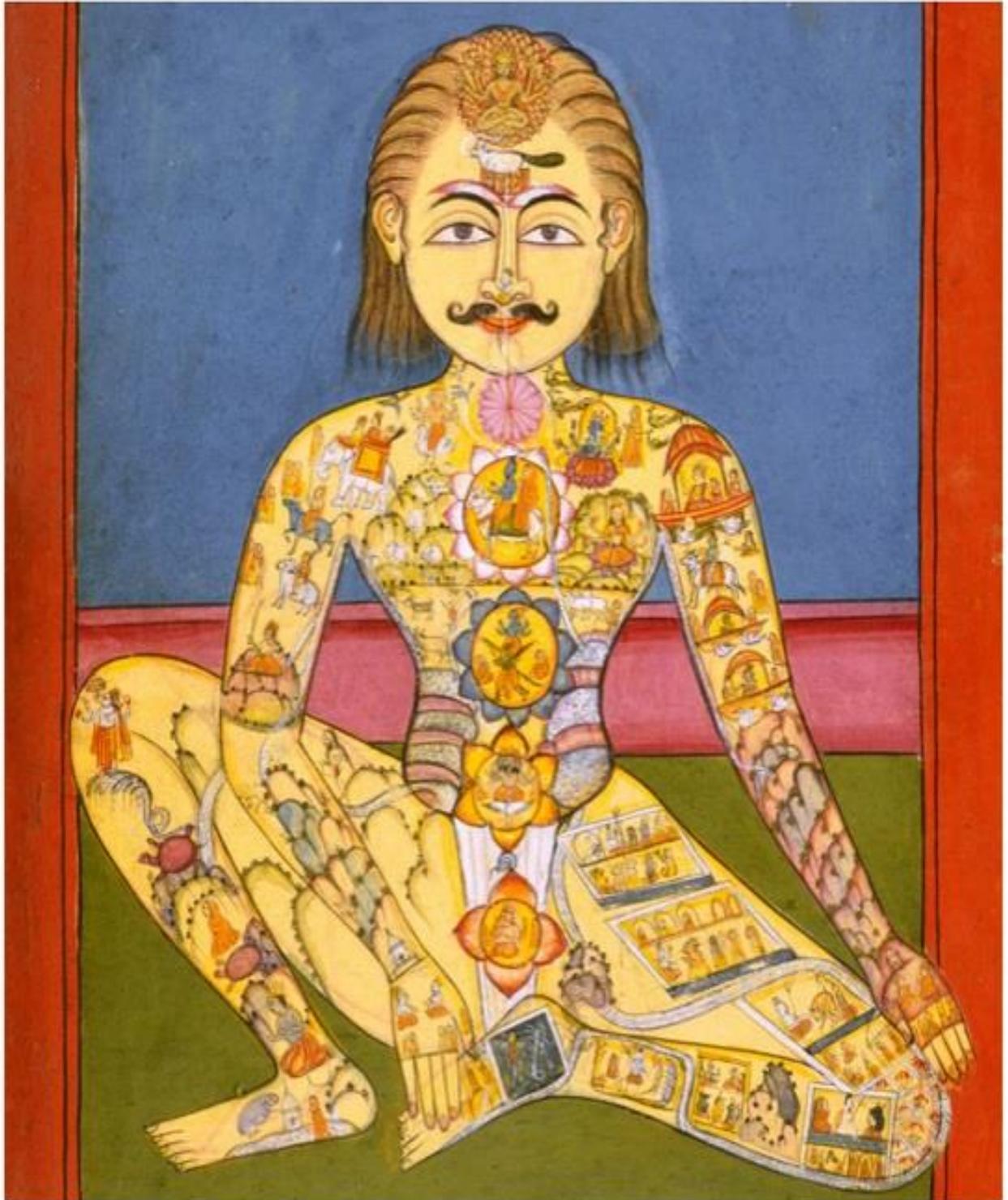


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The Truth of Yoga

Words by Mary-Louise Aitken

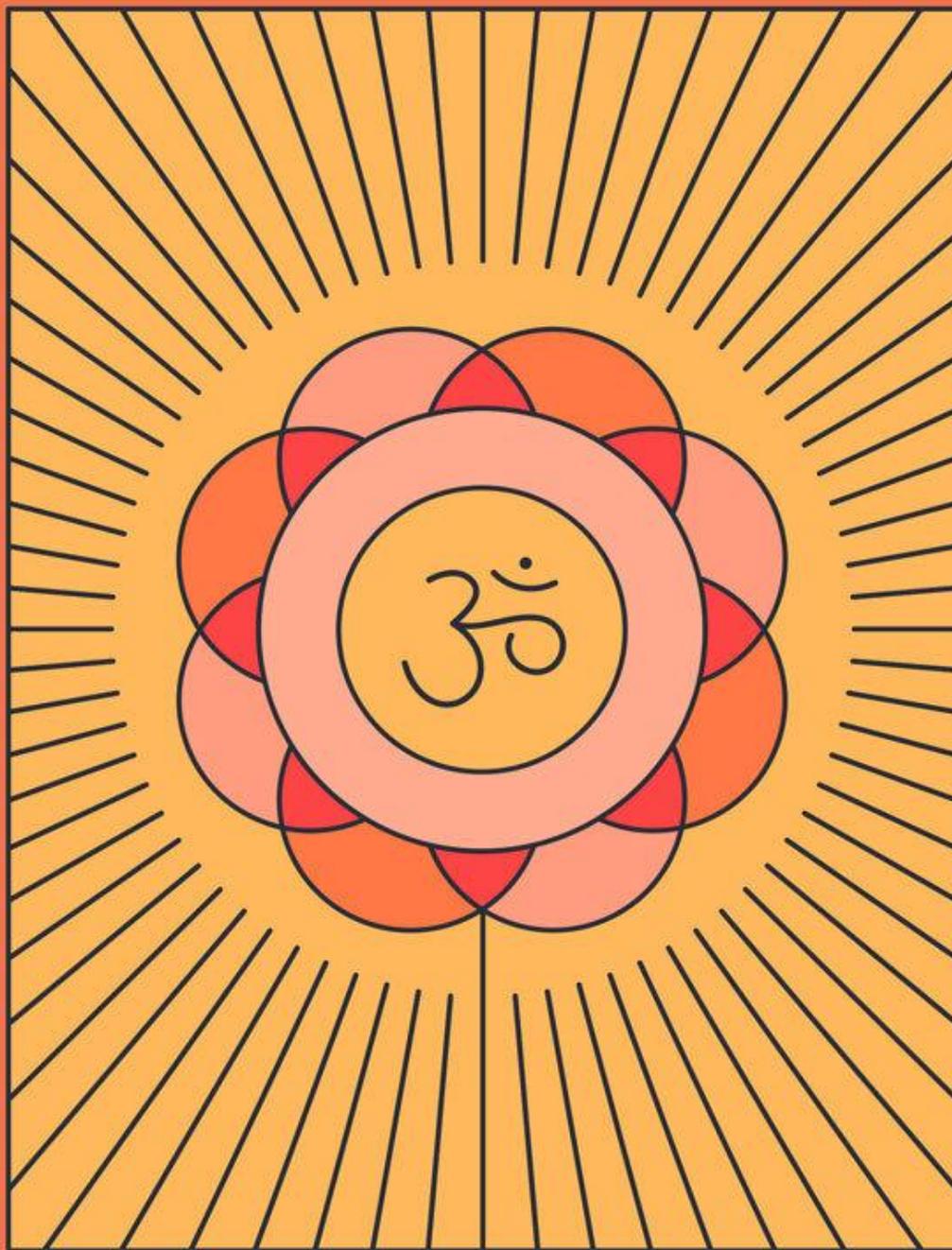
I qualified to teach yoga, as many colleagues do, with a brain overflowing with Sanskrit asana names and those of medial and lateral tendons. However, my yearning for a comprehensive overview of how yoga evolved from its earliest history to what it is now was left largely unsatisfied. We did of course cover certain aspects of yoga philosophy. Like anyone, I felt that some spoke to me more clearly than others. I particularly enjoyed learning about the subtler layers of being – from the energetic qualities of *chakras* to the impact of mantra. However, I had no obvious timeline to show how these areas of interest related to each other as yoga evolved. Meanwhile, some of the more exotic, mysterious practices from ancient texts were hard to relate to my Brighton-based yoga mat in the 21st century.

During my training, my philosophy tutor gave us a flavour of yogic traditions, with a focus on practical aspects, such as healing past trauma. I remain hugely grateful for the morning of mantra and pranayama practices she shared with us from her guru, as these experiences ignited my passion to explore both further. To complement this learning, what I really needed was a concise compendium of yoga philosophy: one which clarified how things fit together; a *not-so-rough* guide to the whole of the tradition in everyday language, with well-researched references for further study. Until recently, I had no idea where to find such an objective summary. Eventually, I discovered The Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies and their wonderfully accessible, varied programmes of online courses. It was here I discovered the very book I needed through one of the Centre's esteemed tutors.

Entitled *The Truth of Yoga*, its author is a former foreign correspondent, Sanskrit scholar, and fellow yogi, Daniel Simpson. His book is a concise and approachable guide to the origins, development, key texts, concepts, and practices of yoga. In other words, a blueprint for the philosophy component of any teacher training, and at the same time a helpful introduction for the average reader, with a relatable approach to a subject that sometimes feels 'otherworldly.' Since my passion is to point my fellow yogis in the direction of insights and inspiring resources, this was something I felt compelled to investigate in more depth, so I asked Daniel for an interview. How did he manage to fit the apparently unwieldy vastness of yoga into this slim paperback?

"It's all down to my previous career as a reporter. We were trained to sum up a story in a single sentence, preferably shorter than 30 words. If you couldn't do that, it meant you hadn't understood yet. Of course, that approach can lead to generalisations, so one needs to know a subject well enough to summarise it accurately. That still leaves a lot out, but the nuance and important detail are preserved. It's a challenge, but part of the fun – I spent much longer editing than writing!"

THE TRUTH OF YOGA



A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE
TO YOGA'S HISTORY,
TEXTS, PHILOSOPHY,
AND PRACTICES

DANIEL
SIMPSON

The four parts of the book (*Early Yoga; Classical Yoga; Hatha Yoga; and Modern Yoga*) hold some wonderfully named sections, such as *Seers and Soma, Mystic Mantras, Saluting the Sun, and Lead Me to the Real!* I find it easy to dip into quickly for inspiration, but it's also rewarding to read in longer bursts. This duality perhaps reflects my love of teaching a quieter yin style as well as the faster-paced yang of vinyasa (another example of the ever-evolving nature of yoga through cross-fertilisation – Chinese concepts from Taoist philosophy have combined with Indian traditions).

Before reading this book, I found I often got side-tracked researching themes for a class by reading websites, articles, or books that either left me confused, or took time to digest. Thankfully, today I have the perfect place to turn for a (roughly) 500-word overview of any area of yoga I want to discuss, from a trusted source. Drawing on *The Truth of Yoga*, I recently themed a class around saluting the sun. My students relished hearing about how this sequence relates to the Gayatri mantra (a translation of which I shared during *shavasana*), solar deities, and inner strength, as well as the more recent postural sequences that harness it. Daniel's simple summary of this subject allowed me to give a clearer explanation of where this approach sits in yoga's history, and how it might be embodied more generally, asking: 'How does it feel to build heat in the body?' and 'What this might help us *burn away*?' I asked Daniel what inspired him to write the book.

"I wrote what I wanted to read when I started asking questions 20 years ago. I was intrigued by yoga philosophy after visiting the Kumbha Mela in 2001, and encountering ascetics doing difficult things like holding an arm in the air for years. I was also confused when I turned to texts such as the Yoga Sutra and found nothing like the postures that seemed to be the basis of most modern classes. It seemed philosophy and practice were separate, and it took me a while to understand what connects them. Even studying in India still left me confused. However, combining traditional knowledge with what I learned from academics provided answers. As things became clearer, I wanted to share that."

The Truth of Yoga refreshingly demystifies some key concepts. For example, the word "yoga" can hold many meanings and does not always mean union (among other definitions, it describes a one-pointed focus that isolates consciousness, detaching it from matter, including the body). I was also fascinated to read that yoga might not be five thousand years old, since the earliest evidence of practice dates back about twenty-five hundred years. This revelation was balanced by noting that yoga may well be older, but that no one can prove it. Daniel's scholarship is lightly worn, and if you want an authoritative and practical guide to the *where, how, when, and why* of yoga, avoiding the pitfalls of getting lost in philosophy, look no further. I use the book as a primer on particular themes before I explored them in more depth once I have a firm grounding. I asked Daniel whether writing this book had helped him reach his own students in new ways.

"One of the upsides of Covid lockdowns was the chance to connect with online study groups, providing a space to come together and talk. I was teaching on Zoom before the pandemic, but it challenged me to

focus on the current situation, and identify ways in which philosophy might help. I've been hosting book clubs and weekend retreats, as well as regular offerings for the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies. I'm now launching a course to accompany the book at truthofyoga.com, to be followed by others on traditional texts that make their teachings accessible to modern practitioners."

That lonely feeling of standing in the metaphoric, ancient jungle of yoga's rich landscape, trying to gather my bearings, is a thing of the past. *The Truth of Yoga* is an atlas which clearly shows the diversity of the terrain I feel called to explore and I am certain that many others will be thankful for this trustworthy guide along their own path.

