Yoga is perhaps the most successful Indian export in the global marketplace of spirituality. In terms of religious associations, it is most often juxtaposed with the Hindu and Buddhist traditions, though it is also presented today as a generic or stand-alone form of spiritual or physical practice. Because of the way that modern identity politics have played out in recent years, most people may be quite surprised to find yoga connected with Islam in any way. Yet there is a long and complex history of Muslim interest in yoga, going back 1,000 years to the famous scholar al-Biruni (died 1048), who not only wrote a major Arabic treatise on Indian sciences and culture, but also translated a version of Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras into Arabic.

Over the centuries, other Muslim figures followed al-Biruni in seeking to understand the philosophical and mystical teachings found in India. Such efforts were part of a long tradition of intercultural engagement that resulted in a vast series of translations of Indian texts into the Persian language, the lingua franca of government and culture throughout much of the Middle East, Central Asia, and South Asia. This translation movement—which covered subjects ranging from the arts and sciences to politics and metaphysics for roughly eight centuries—is comparable in scope and significance to the translation of Greek philosophy and science into Arabic, or the translation of Buddhist texts from Sanskrit into Chinese and Tibetan.

Alongside this wide-ranging interest in Indian culture was a more specialized focus on the meditative practices and occult powers of Indian ascetics and mystical adepts known as yogis (or jogis, in North Indian pronunciation). A good part of this interest was very practical, and it is obvious from royal chronicles and travelers’ accounts that a number of Muslims were intrigued by the benefits to be found in the wonderworking practices of yogis. This fascination is especially noticeable in the case of Muslim rulers in South Asia; like other kings, they were always eager for any kind of special knowledge or power (such as astrology, magic, or medicine) that would give them an edge. Thus when the fourteenth-century North African traveler Ibn Battuta was in Delhi, he observed Sultan Muhammad ibn Tughluq interviewing a yogi who was successfully demonstrating his ability to levitate in the air. In a similar fashion, the Mughal emperor Jahangir regularly met with the Hindu ascetic Gosain Jadrup, as depicted in his memoirs (fig. 1). Since narratives about the amazing powers of yogis pervaded much of India’s popular literature, it is not surprising that Muslims in South Asia were familiar with and sought greater acquaintance with this lore. It is fair to say that Muslim interest in yoga ranged from the quest for...
philosophical knowledge to engagement with spiritual practices to simply the desire for occult powers. Indian ascetics were assimilated to the model of the Muslim fakir or dervish. They were labeled with those Persian terms, and they frequently appeared in illustrated Mughal histories, Persian translations of Sanskrit texts, and album paintings.

On the philosophical side, the primary framework for understanding Indian religions was the Išrá’ílí form of Neoplatonic thought known as Illuminationism, developed by the Persian thinker Suhrawardi (died 1191). In this formulation, the degrees of being that emanate from the divine source of the cosmos are identified as more or less intense manifestations of light. At the same time, following the philosophical theory of prophecy articulated by the philosophers Farabi and Ibn Sina, religions were considered to be symbolic explanations of philosophical truths in forms that the uneducated masses could comprehend. From this perspective, it was not difficult to view yogic or Vedantic teachings as one more example of the adaptation of philosophy to local traditions. There are quite a few indications of the popularity of the Illuminationist philosophy among intellectuals in Mughal India, some of whom indeed speculated on Indian religious thought and practice. Some Vedantic texts were quite popular in Persian translations, particularly the Yoga Vāsīṣṭha, one copy of which features an important series of illustrations (fig. 2).5

From the perspective of Sufism (Islamic mysticism), yoga was also a subject worth exploring. These two traditions often have been brought together in a consideration of comparative mysticism, and many scholars have assumed that Sufism must have been derived from yoga in some way or other. First proposed in the late eighteenth century by early Orientalists, starting with Sir William Jones, this theory rested upon a deep conviction that all Eastern doctrines are ultimately the same, along with the axiomatic assumption that Islam was a harsh and legalistic religion incompatible with spirituality. It is in fact impossible to make a convincing historical case that Sufism somehow originated from Indian sources; Islamic mysticism is actually Islamic, and it took shape primarily in Baghdad and Khorasan before arriving in India around the eleventh or twelfth century.6 Yet by a curious coincidence, just as the Sufis arrived, ascetics practicing hatha yoga assumed new roles of dramatic importance in the theater of Indian religions. Because those yogis had undergone ritual death and were not bound by the purity restrictions of upper-caste Hinduism, they were free to drop in on the open kitchens that were often maintained by Sufi masters at their retreats in India, much like the “charitable serai” depicted in the Hindi Sufi romance Mrigavati (fig. 3). For this reason, from an early date we have numerous examples of conversations and reflections on yoga in the writings of Indian Sufis. Sometimes, this is limited to the observation that breath control is a helpful adjunct to meditation. But in other cases, it is obvious that Sufis paid close attention to more sophisticated yogic teachings involving the subtle physiology of chakras and the power of mantras, which

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**Fig. 1** Opposite: Jahangir converses with Gosain Jadrup, from the *Jahangirnama*. Attributed to Payag. India, Mughal dynasty, ca. 1620. Musée du Louvre

**Fig. 2** The King and Karkati Discuss Brahman, from the *Yoga Vāsīṣṭha* by Vāsīṣṭha. India, Allahabad, 1602. Chester Beatty Library
were arguably quite similar to the subtle centers (lātā'īf) of Sufi meditation and the zikr formulas consisting of the Arabic names of God. Indeed, one of the most important Sufis, Mu'in al-Dīn Chishti (died 1236), founder of the Chishti Sufi order in India, is credited with the authorship of a widely circulated Persian text on yoga and meditation, variously known as the Treatise on the Human Being or the Treatise on the Nature of Yoga, among other titles. There is some question about the authorship of the text, since none of the manuscripts are older than the seventeenth century, and Mu'in al-Dīn’s successors maintained that he wrote no books of any kind. Nevertheless, the popularity of this work in Sufi circles—and its association with the supreme spiritual experiences of a founding figure of Indian Sufism—reinforced the notion that yoga, in some respects, was fundamentally compatible with Sufism, or at least could be interpreted in that way.7

The first major Persian text devoted to the subject of yoga was composed by an anonymous author in the fourteenth century, with the Hindi title, The Fifty Verses of Kamarupa (Kamau panchasika). The title alludes to Kamarupa (the kingdom of Assam in northeastern India), traditionally considered the source of magic and wonders; it also invokes the primordial syllables known as seed (bij) mantras. The text’s date and wide circulation is established by the appearance of an excerpt in an important Persian encyclopedia compiled in Shiraz by Sharaf al-Dīn Amuli (died 1353). Appearing in the category of natural sciences, the quoted sections dealt with breath control for predicting the future and meditative practices involving the chakras.9

The Italian traveler Pietro della Valle acquired a complete version of the text (now preserved in the Vatican Library) while traveling in southern Persia in 1622; the fact that he obtained this manuscript from a group of provincial Persian intellectuals indicates that it was still popular outside of India. This fuller text reveals, in addition to the material on breath control and chakra meditations, extensive practices involving the summoning of sixty-four yoginis, whom the translator refers to as “spiritual beings” (ruhaniyat). Particular prominence is given to the goddess Kamak Devi (Sanskrit: Kamakhya), who was associated in various Indo-Islamic texts with the symbolism of plantain and cave, which appear in a painting of a yogini from the court of Bijapur (fig. 4). While the tradition of yogic physiology is present in the text to some extent, the main concern is the practical benefit to be gained by summoning the yoginis by using powerful mantras that can deliver to the practitioner whatever he desires. The translator maintains that he rendered this material from the most famous book of the Hindus (although no trace of it appears to survive in any Indian language), and he attempts to use the language of Islamic literary scholarship (and other Islamizing touches) to give credibility to what seem to be oral teachings. The key terms that he uses to describe these practices are “magical imagination” (Arabic: wahm) and “ascetic discipline” (Persian: riyazat); the latter term is the regular Persian equivalent for yoga (jog).10 Della Valle claimed to have employed the practices described in the text with some success, and announced his intention to translate it into Italian, though he never seems to have accomplished that task.
But by far the most important work on yoga by a Muslim author is an Arabic text known by several different titles: The Mirror of Meanings for the Comprehension of the Human World; Do-It-Yourself Medicine; and, most commonly, The Pool of the Water of Life (Hawd maʿal-hayat, often shortened to Hawd al-hayat or The Pool of Life). This popular text, composed by an anonymous author, claims to have originated in the transitional moment when Turkish armies conquered the eastern limits of Bengal in 1212. It is ostensibly a translation of a famous Sanskrit work known as Amritakunda or The Pool of Nectar (although here too there is no trace of any such original text).11

The later history of The Pool of Nectar is complex. There are two different versions of the Arabic translation, one containing more Indic material and the other demonstrating a noticeable degree of Islamization. The Arabic text was translated into Ottoman Turkish twice and was popular among members of the Mevlevi order (the Whirling Dervishes) in Istanbul in the late nineteenth century. Many manuscript copies in Istanbul libraries are erroneously attributed to the famous Andalusian Sufi master Ibn ʿArabi (died 1240), although other copies are simply classified as Indian magic. The next major step in the transmission of these teachings took place in sixteenth-century India, when the noted Sufi master of the Shattari order, Muhammad Ghawth Gwaliyari (died 1563), translated the Arabic version of The Pool of Nectar into Persian, under the title The Ocean of Life (Bahr al-hayat).12 This expanded and revised version probably drew upon oral communications from contemporary yogis, and there are also signs that it was based on an earlier Arabic version than the text we currently possess. Several copies of the Persian translation are lavishly illustrated, with twenty-one paintings depicting yogic postures; by way of comparison, the Persian text of this chapter is four times as long as the Arabic original, which only describes five postures.13 Known as asanas in yogic traditions, these postures are named by two joined terms, the Hindi shabda (“word”) and the Persian dhikr (“recollection”), in the Persian translation, which suggests that mantra chants rather than physical postures are the key element. But for convenience’s sake, I will continue to refer to them as postures. (The oldest illustrated copy, in the Chester Beatty collection, is finely done, while the later manuscripts exhibit a much simpler style; see fig. 5).

Close study of half a dozen manuscripts of the fourth chapter of The Ocean of Life, where the illustrations are found, calls for some new observations.14 There are major verbal discrepancies and even lacunae in the manuscripts; an entire folio is missing from the Chester Beatty manuscript after folio 22.15 This gap has obscured the fact that the text actually describes twenty-two postures, not the twenty-one that were announced, suggesting the possibility that there may have been another illustration (for the bodhak position, whose description is likewise missing). Beyond that, there are wide variations in the names of these practices among the manuscripts (which is all too predictable in scribal transcriptions of difficult technical terms). Even where discrepancies can occasionally be clarified by terms spelled in Devanagari script (as found in India Office, Ethé 2002), the names of positions in The Ocean of Life often differ significantly from the names of the same yogic postures found in later Sanskrit texts on hatha yoga, and the descriptions in Persian frequently provide details that are otherwise unavailable. In other words, the text of The Ocean of Life provides a valuable historical documentation on yogic practices and terminology that is an important supplement to the Sanskrit tradition.

The last major Persian sources to be considered for documenting the practice and depiction of yoga were not written by Muslim authors, but by Hindu munshi (secretaries) working in the administration of the Mughal Empire, and later for the British. Deeply immersed in the Islamicate and Persianate culture of the time, these Hindu scholars contributed to the gazetteer literature modeled on the Aʾin-i Akbari by the Mughal minister Abu’l Fazl, providing not only revenue statistics for the empire’s provinces, but also information about the customs and beliefs of Indian religious groups. From the mid-eighteenth century to roughly 1830, when Persian was the language of colonial administration, British officials commissioned a considerable number of Hindu scholars to write Persian treatises on the religions of India. Several of these Anglo-Persian compositions included depictions of yoga and
ascetics in the Company style, providing a sort of field guide to the identification of these groups. Two notable examples are The Chain of Yoga (Sīsīla-i jujhān), composed by Sītal Singh in 1800, and The Gardens of Religion (Riyāz al-mazahib), written by a Brahmin Nathuranand and commissioned by John Cyn in 1812 as a guide to the religions of Varanasi. The history and character of the portrayals of yogis have yet to be fully explored, but it is safe to say that these late Persian texts connected Muslim understandings of Indian religions to the colonial religious categories enacted by the census, the courts, and Orientalist scholarship.16

The long history of Muslim interest in the philosophy and practice of yoga is a helpful corrective to the blinkers that we often bring to the understanding of religion today, which is frequently defined in purely scriptural terms without reference to history and sociology. Current ideological oppositions between Islam and Hinduism, which are strongly underpinned by nationalist agendas, leave no room for understanding the intercultural engagements that have taken place across religious lines over the centuries. The transmission of yoga—in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Urdu translations and through images—is an important reminder that the history of Indian religions needs to take account of a wide range of sources, including those Muslim interpreters who were so fascinated by yoga.

Notes

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