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# **Pedagogies of Salvation: Discipline, Practice, and the Shaping of the Self in Modern Forms of Yoga**

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## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Acknowledgments</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>10</b>
1. Introduction	10
2. Modern Forms of Yoga: Sketches of a Contemporary History	15
3. Previous Research: An Overview	19
4. The Objects of Study: The Social Organisation and The Discursive Construction of Modern Yoga	24
1. The Structure of the Thesis	26
<b><i>Part I</i></b>	<b>31</b>
<b><i>Theoretical and Methodological Orientations</i></b>	
<b>Chapter One</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>Theoretical Framework: Theorising Pedagogies of Salvation and Beyond</b>	
1. Pedagogies of Salvation	32
2. Bourdieu's Theoretical Project	35
3. Foucault's Theoretical Project	36
4. Bourdieu and Foucault: A Productive Encounter?	38
<b>Chapter Two</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>Research Design</b>	
1. Introduction	45
2. Interpretative Social Sciences	45
3. The Open-Ended Nature of the Research	50
3.1. <i>Significant Turning Points</i>	51
4. Odaka Yoga	57
5. Mooji's Teachings and Monte Sahaja	60
6. Ethnographic Research Methods, Data Collection, and Analysis	64
6.1. <i>Multisensory, Carnal, and Participated Ethnography</i>	65
6.2. <i>Biographical Interviews</i>	69
<b><i>Part II</i></b>	<b>74</b>
<b><i>The Social Organisation and Experience of Modern Forms of Yoga</i></b>	
<b>Chapter Three</b>	<b>75</b>
<b>Introducing Odaka Yoga: Philosophical and Discursive Foundations</b>	
1. Introduction	75

2.	The Social Organisation of Modern Postural Yoga	76
2.1.	<i>The Yoga Field</i>	77
2.2.1.	<i>The Yoga Field as a Hybrid Field</i>	80
3.	Odaka Yoga	84
3.1.	<i>The Yoga Body: Between Fitness and Spirituality</i>	85
3.1.2.	<i>Biomechanics and the Medicalised Body</i>	86
3.1.3.	<i>Yoga, Martial Arts, and the Subtle Body</i>	88
3.1.4.	<i>The Neoliberal Yogi</i>	93
4.	Odaka Yoga’s Founder: Sensei and Niji	96
4.1.	<i>Beatrice</i>	107
5.	The Community	116
5.1.	<i>Odaka Yoga: Tribe or Utopia?</i>	118
	 <b>Chapter Four</b>	 128
	<b>Dissecting the Yogic Habitus: Odaka Yoga’s Pedagogies, the Class Format, and the Shaping of the Self</b>	
1.	Introduction	128
2.	The Class Format	130
2.1.	<i>Beginning the Class: Tuning In</i>	132
2.2.	<i>Performing the Class: The Practice Phase</i>	139
2.3.	<i>Closing the Class: The Relaxation Phase</i>	146
3.	The Transmission of Esoteric Knowledge: The Role of Metaphors and Evocative Language	154
3.1.	<i>Moving from the Center</i>	155
3.2.	<i>Bending Straight Lines</i>	160
3.3.	<i>Rhythm</i>	162
4.	Conclusive Remarks: The Yogic Habitus and the Emergence of a New Middle-Class Ethos	166
	 <b>Chapter Five</b>	 175
	<b>Practitioners’ Voices and Experiences: Expressing “Taste”</b>	
1.	Introduction	175
2.	Practitioners’ Backgrounds: Encountering Yoga	178
2.2.	<i>The “Symbiotic Relationship” Between “New” Middle-Class Occupations and Yoga</i>	188
3.	What is Yoga? Unpacking Lay Theorising	194
4.	The Teacher-Student Relationship: Receiving, Sharing, and Keep Learning	201
5.	Practitioners’ “Journeys” of Self-Transformations: Between Healing and Self-Discovery	214
6.	Conclusive Remarks: Yoga “On” and “Outside” of the Mat	223

<b>Chapter Six</b>	<b>229</b>
<b>Introducing Mooji’s Teachings: Philosophical and Discursive Foundations</b>	
1. Introduction	229
2. The Social Organisation of Modern Denomination Yoga	230
2.1. <i>Modern Denominational Yoga: A Short Analytical Problematisation</i>	231
3. The Yoga Field Revisited	234
4. Mooji’s Teachings: Philosophical and Discursive Foundations	236
4.1. <i>Neo-Advaita and the “God-Self”</i>	238
4.2. <i>Karma, Jñāna, and Bhakti Yoga(s) Against the Ego</i>	242
4.3. <i>The Contested Self</i>	247
4.3.1. <i>Therapy or Salvation?</i>	250
5. Mooji: A Portrait	252
5.1. <i>From Anthony Paul Moo-Young to Moojibaba</i>	258
5.2. <i>Mooji’s Close Entourage</i>	267
5.3. <i>Mooji’s Sangha: Monte Sahaja and Beyond</i>	273
5.3.1. <i>Mooji’s Teachings and the Cyberspace</i>	279
<b>Chapter Seven</b>	<b>283</b>
<b>Pedagogies of Salvation: Mooji’s Ashram and its Dispositifs of Veridiction</b>	
1. Introduction	283
2. Monte Sahaja: The Ashram as a Total Institution	285
2.1. <i>Accessing the Ashram</i>	286
2.2. <i>The Social Organisation of Time and Space in the Ashram</i>	290
2.2.1. <i>The Schedule and Everyday Activities</i>	291
2.2.2. <i>The Spatial Layout and the Material Environment of the Ashram</i>	296
3. Karma, Jñāna, and Bhakti Yoga as Dispositifs of Veridiction	301
3.1. <i>Karmayoga: Serving the Guru</i>	301
3.2. <i>Jñānayoga: Contemplating the Self</i>	309
3.3. <i>Bhaktiyoga: Praying to God</i>	315
4. The “Satsang Dispositif”	324
5. Conclusive Remarks	334
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>340</b>
1. Introduction	340
2. Ethnography and Conceptual Development	342
2.1. <i>Theorising Biopedagogies: A Dispositional Reading</i>	349
3. Future Research	353

<i>Excursus</i>	355
<i>The Discursive Construction of Modern Yoga</i>	
<b>“Modern Yoga Research” and the Birth and Development of a Discipline</b>	<b>356</b>
1. Introduction	356
2. Foucault’s Archaeology and Weber’s Ideal Type	359
3. Modern Yoga: Typologies and Definitions	363
3.1. <i>Modern Yoga: Definitions</i>	370
4. Modern Yoga Research and the Sociology of Religion: The Birth and Development of a Sub-Discipline	374
4.1. <i>Modern Yoga Research and “Boundaries-Work”</i>	380
4.2. <i>Modern Yoga as a “Boundary Object”</i>	384
5. Conclusion	387
<b>Modern Yoga Research as a Discursive Formation</b>	<b>392</b>
1. Introduction	392
2. An Archaeology of Modern Yoga Research	393
3. The ‘Classics’ of Modern Yoga Research and its Exciting Developments	395
4. Modern Yoga Research as a Discursive Formation	397
4.1. <i>Radical Historicism and Cultural Relativism</i>	397
4.2. <i>Modernism</i>	400
4.3. <i>Orientalism</i>	403
4.4. <i>Neo-Colonialism</i>	407
5. Conclusion	410
<b>Appendix One: Supplementary Material</b>	<b>412</b>
<b>Appendix Two: List of Figures</b>	<b>430</b>
<b>Appendix Three: Glossary of Sanskrit Terms</b>	<b>431</b>
Other Terms	433
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>434</b>

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## Abstract

Both the popularisation and the academic scrutiny of modern forms of yoga are on the rise. On the one hand, yoga is increasingly pivotal to the internal articulation of fields as varied as the wellness and fitness industry and the nebula of disparate contemporary spiritualities. Its ubiquitous role and malleable nature foster the proliferation of different interpretations about the nature and purposes of what counts as “true” yoga. On the other hand, scholars have begun to competently examine the history, transnational developments, and popularisation of modern yoga, underlining its alignment with middle-class values and lifestyles and the neoliberal imperatives of self-care, self-growth, and self-responsibility. However, what is largely missing from this contemporary scholarship is a detailed scrutiny of the pedagogical and apprenticeship processes through which yoga practitioners come to embody and socially reproduce the ethos of their groups and of the broader neoliberal order understood as a “principle of civilisation” (McGuigan 2014). This thesis postulates that modern forms of yoga are first and foremost *disciplines* and *practices* shaped by specific *discourses* (e.g., on health, self-realisation, truth, morality and so on), regardless of their deployment for therapeutic, leisure, spiritual or even religious purposes. Following this framework, the primary object of analysis is the *social organisation* of modern forms of yoga, focusing specifically on the *pedagogies of salvation* and the *apprenticeship processes* of two modern yoga groups: *Odaka Yoga* and *Mooji’s teachings* and his Portuguese ashram, *Monte Sahaja*. The former, founded in Italy in the mid-nineties, is an innovative style of postural yoga blended with martial arts elements. Its philosophical backdrops and practical repertoire are composed of a mixture of “exotic” resources such as Bushido, Zen, yoga, and a constant reference to the ocean waves and biomechanics. The latter is a neo-Advaita group organised around the internationally renowned, Jamaican born guru Mooji, whose core teaching postulates that a practitioner’s “true self” (*atman*) is the same as ultimate reality (*brahman*) and that the purpose of existence is to realise one’s own “god-self” (*brahmajñāna*, literally “god-realisation”). These teachings are chiefly transmitted through *satsangs*, Hindu-inspired congregational meetings where the teacher shares his message of salvation. Theoretically, this thesis merges Bourdieu’s praxeological and dispositional sociology with Foucault’s historical and discursive methodology, attempting to emphasise the mutually reinforcing and circular relationships occurring between practices and discourses as they unfold within specific pedagogical environments and relationships of apprenticeship. Methodologically,

the empirical research relies on a multi-sensorial, carnal, and participatory approach to ethnography, including biographical interviews with yoga teachers, and discourse analysis of a variety of data sources such as schools' websites, yoga magazines, and other promotional materials. The thesis is structured in two parts: Part I introduces the overall theoretical and methodological orientations of the thesis (Chapters One and Two); Part II provides an analysis of the discursive and philosophical backbones of Odaka Yoga and Mooji's teachings (Chapters Three and Six), and their transpositions into specific pedagogical environments and practical repertoires (Chapters Four and Seven). Chapter Five explores the voices and experiences of yoga practitioners across a variety of styles and geographical references, expanding on the "symbiotic relationship" (Wacquant 2004) that occurs between a middle-class habitus and the "yogic habitus" (Di Placido 2018) cultivated on the mat. Read together, these five analytical chapters provide a detailed account of the processes of social reproduction of contemporary yoga groups, their specific ethos, and the broader neoliberal and self-actualising ethos of contemporary societies, via social actors' disciplining, embodiment, and interiorisation of the teachings, values, and lifestyles they are exposed to. The Conclusion summarises the main results springing from these three years of immersion into the field of modern yoga and suggests a few lines for future research. Finally, the thesis comprises also an Excursus dedicated to the archaeological exploration of the field of *modern yoga research*, or *yoga studies* understood as a discursive formation, that is, a collection of texts that constitutes – or contributes to the constitution – of a specific object of analysis. More specifically, the Excursus focuses on the processes of discursive construction of "modern yoga" as an analytical category, the birth and development of "modern yoga research" as an autonomous field of study, and its broader discursive references.

**Key Words:** modern forms of yoga, social organisation, pedagogies of salvation, apprenticeship, discipline, practice, discourse, social reproduction.



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# Introduction

## 1. Introduction

*Every group in every age has created its own version and vision of yoga. One reason this has been possible is that its semantic field – the range of meanings of the term “yoga” – is so broad and the concept of yoga so malleable, that it has been possible to morph it into nearly any practice or process one chooses (White 2011: 2).*

Most people recognise the word *yoga* and readily associate it with certain meanings and images even without any specific technical knowledge or direct experience of the subject. This lack of technical knowledge or direct experience does not, however, prevent the average person from associating the word “yoga” with bearded hippies, middle-class white women or mysterious, secluded ascetics, by no means an exhaustive list of yoga’s popular representations. The inevitable conclusion that we can draw from this “ease of interpretation” – or even from a quick tally of the number of our colleagues, friends or acquaintances who *do yoga* – is that yoga is a central feature of today’s popular consumer culture. To get an idea of the magnitude of this phenomenon, it is enough to look at a recent study conducted by the Yoga Journal<sup>1</sup> in association with Yoga Alliance<sup>2</sup> which estimates the number of practitioners of postural yoga worldwide to be 300 million. The

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<sup>1</sup>The Yoga Journal is “is the world’s largest and most influential yoga brand” and features “12 international editions spanning 28 countries, and 5 national live events annually” <https://www.yogajournal.com/page/about-us> accessed October 6, 2018. They describe themselves as “the #1 authority on yoga and the yoga lifestyle” <https://www.yogajournal.com/page/about-us> accessed October 6, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Yoga Alliance “is the largest nonprofit association representing the yoga community”. On their official website they state that their mission is “to promote and support the integrity and diversity of the teaching of yoga” [https://www.yogaalliance.org/About\\_Yoga\\_Alliance](https://www.yogaalliance.org/About_Yoga_Alliance) accessed October 6, 2018. Their teacher training (TT) protocols and “certification” system are the most widely used in the world to date. However, they are facing increasing competition from other national and international organisations, Ginevra [pseud.], Italy’s National Association of Yoga Teachers (YANI), interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, October 24, 2019. A notable example is the Yoga Certification Board instituted by the Ministry of Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homoeopathy (AYUSH) of the Government of India, “the only Board which has been set up by any Government for certification in the field of Yoga” <http://yogacertificationboard.nic.in/certification-and-accreditation/> accessed June 5, 2020.

study documents that the number of American yoga practitioners increased to over 36 million in 2016, up from 20.4 million in 2012. Finally, it also emphasises that “yoga practitioners report spending over \$16 billion on yoga clothing, equipment, classes and accessories in the past year, up from \$10 billion in 2012” (The Yoga Journal and Yoga Alliance 2016: 4). In other words, yoga is today a multi-billion dollar business.

But what exactly is this thing called yoga? And what are its modern, contemporary forms? What does yoga mean for its practitioners and key figures in contemporary Western societies and elsewhere? Is there a formal system of knowledge, with prescribed practices and rules of conduct, that can be properly described as yoga? Or is it more accurate to speak of an array of divergent and/or overlapping kinds of yoga? In any case, who has the right to say what does or does not count as yoga in today’s world?

Is yoga the “essence” of every religion, as suggested in Swami Vivekananda’s (1863-1902) speech at the World’s Parliament of Religion in Chicago in 1893 to generations of yoga innovators?<sup>3</sup> Is it, perhaps, as the Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi claims, the hallmark of the Indian and Hindu character? Is it, as the most cited sutra of yoga philosophy “*yogaścittavrttinirodha*”<sup>4</sup> puts it, the cessation of the fluctuations of the mind and so the first, vital step in a process of self-mastery that may lead to the attainment of spiritual awakening (*samādhi* or *moksha*)? Or is yoga another example of the ability of neoliberalism to co-opt and commodify the elements and practices of “ancient” traditions, transforming them into mere consumer products? Or finally, as certain members of the scientific community claim, is yoga one of the most effective tools at our disposal for the treatment of a variety of epidemic conditions like anxiety, depression, chronic pain, trauma, and addiction, and lately also a preventive intervention against Covid-19?<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Even though Swami Vivekananda did not explicitly refer to yoga at his address at the World Parliament of Religion in Chicago but to neo-Vedanta (Modern Vedanta philosophy) and the “Hindu religion”, modern yoga scholars seem to agree that his talk was one of the pivotal moments in the ‘birth’ and early history of transnational modern yoga (e.g., Burger 2006; De Michelis 2004; Strauss 2005). However, as Killingley (2014: 23) correctly emphasises: “There is no indication of it [yoga] in the speeches to the Parliament or in the admittedly few records from the time before he [Vivekananda] crossed the seas”.

<sup>4</sup> The reference here is to Patañjali’s ‘*Yogasūtras*’ (c. I century BCE – c. V century CE), a text containing a collection of 196 aphorisms on the theory and practice of yoga, which is often used as a reference by teachers and practitioners alike as the foundational text of ‘classical’ yoga. For an analysis of the reconstruction and reinterpretation of the ‘*Yogasūtras*’ as palatable to both Western Orientalist scholars and Indian Nationalists and yoga innovators, see Singleton (2008). For a recent critical edition of the text see Squarcini (2015).

<sup>5</sup> <https://unric.org/en/international-day-of-yoga-yogas-growing-importance-to-post-covid-19-wellbeing> accessed August 24, 2020; see also William Bushell’s at al., (2020) article ‘*Meditation and Yoga Practices as Potential Adjunctive Treatment of SARS-CoV-2 Infection and COVID-19*’.

As shown below, scholars have begun to grapple with these and other questions. The picture that emerges from their analyses is that yoga is all of these things, but to different people, at different times, and in different places. Therefore, any sociological understanding of modern forms of yoga – especially in their contemporary interpretations – is bound to fail if it simply tries to reduce this abundance of perspectives to one univocal answer, a single focal point. However, simply appealing to the tropes of absolute cultural relativism – context and culture – to explain the many variables underpinning *what* counts as modern yoga would be like naively claiming the existence of an ahistorical, essential, and “true” yoga that has remained unchanged since its origins. To overcome this conundrum, this thesis postulates that modern forms of yoga are first and foremost *disciplines* and *practices* shaped by specific *discourses* (e.g., on health, self-realisation, truth, morality and so on), regardless of their deployment for therapeutic, leisure, spiritual or even religious purposes. Modern forms of yoga are “disciplines” (Foucault 1977 [1975]) intended to govern, normalise, and transform the bodies, minds, and souls of their practitioners, and they are a “practices” (e.g., Bourdieu 1977a [1972], 1984 [1979]) through which practitioners interiorise and reproduce the objective structures of the pedagogical and social order in which they are immersed through the cultivation of specific “dispositions”, defined as durable and transposable “schemes of perception, conception, and action” (Bourdieu 1977a: 86). Naturally, like all disciplines and practices, modern forms of yoga are shaped by a set of discursive and philosophical foundations and the ability of teachers to skillfully range over and mobilise a number of “discourses” on health, self-realisation, truth, morality and so on to make their teachings more appetible in the first place.

Acknowledging these initial remarks, the central stake of this thesis is not so much on the elements that make modern yoga what it is but on its *whys* and *wherefores*, which can be preliminary schematised as: first, the objectives of its various practices (e.g., spiritual, therapeutic, leisure and so on) as they are framed, adopted in, and adapted to different pedagogical contexts, such as urban yoga schools, ashrams, hospitals, prisons and so on; and second, the ways in which these objectives are achieved – or not – through the mutually-reinforcing and circular relationships between *discourses* and their translation into *practices* in the context of specific power relations, that is, *disciplinary* and normalising relationships of teaching, supervision, and knowledge transmission. In other words, I argue that a solid sociological understanding of the social organisation of

modern forms of yoga, their roles, and their deployment in contemporary societies can only be gained by starting with an ethnographic, micro-sociological, and micro-political investigation into the ways in which they are thought of, transmitted, and interiorised through specific *pedagogies of salvation* and *relationships of apprenticeship*.

This thesis is a first attempt in this direction. Its empirical material is taken from *participatory ethnographic research* conducted in Italy, Portugal, and to a lesser degree the United States<sup>6</sup> over the past three years (2017-2020), informed by *ex post* autoethnographic reflections on more than seven years' personal experience and direct involvement in different yoga environments; 25 *biographical interviews* with qualified yoga teachers; and finally, *discursive analyses* of a variety of resources, such as schools' websites, yoga magazines, and other promotional materials. Most specifically, the thesis introduces a scholarly exploration of two modern yoga groups that have so far been neglected but are highly emblematic of the processes of transnational development, popularisation, and transformation of modern forms of yoga in Western contexts: *Odaka Yoga* and *Mooji's teachings* and his Portuguese ashram, *Monte Sahaja*.

Odaka Yoga is a relatively recent style of postural yoga that was founded in Rome in the mid-nineties by the Italian teachers and entrepreneurs Roberto Milletti (*Sensei*) and Francesca Cassia (*Niji*). This style, or brand (since it is under copyright), has its philosophical foundations in the traditions of Bushido,<sup>7</sup> Zen and yoga. Other central inspirations for Odaka Yoga are the natural rhythm of the ocean waves and biomechanics. The former is emulated during practice in order to allow the practitioner to acquire fluidity of movement, a topos in several Asian martial arts;<sup>8</sup> the latter is the study of the structure and functioning of the mechanical aspects of biological systems, specifically the human body in motion. This hybrid style of yoga illustrates the changing nature of modern yoga and its adaptation to different sociocultural environments, or social fields. The eclectic

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<sup>6</sup> The field work conducted in the United States is not included in the research due to space concerns although it was extremely useful in substantiating the analyses of the two case studies discussed. However, in Chapter Five I openly rely on a number of interviews conducted with American practitioners in order to show the convergence of backgrounds, dispositions, and narrative threads among European and American practitioners.

<sup>7</sup> Literally translated as 'path/moral of the warrior'. It was the code of conduct of the samurai, the Japanese warrior cast.

<sup>8</sup> Bruce Lee's use of the "water metaphor" within his philosophical and martial arts life-project is perhaps one of the most popular representations and practical expressions of this trope. As Lee argues, "[e]mpty your mind, be formless, shapeless – like water. Now you put water into a cup, it becomes the cup, you put water into a bottle, it becomes the bottle, you put it in a teapot, it becomes the teapot. Now water can flow or it can crash. Be water, my friend" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nzQWYHHqvIw> accessed July 3, 2020. I own this reflection on the continuity between Bruce Lee's and Odaka Yoga's interpretations of the "water metaphor" to David Brown.

philosophical backdrops of Odaka Yoga – based on a mixture of “exotic” resources such as Bushido, Zen and yoga, a reference to nature and its elements (chiefly water) and, finally, to Western science (biomechanics) – are a telling example of the strategies of legitimation and differentiation that contemporary yoga brands adopt in their attempt to win a share of the already saturated and highly commodified yoga market. Hybridity and entrepreneurial bricolage between different Asian and Western systems of knowledge have proved here to be very successful strategies in creating an innovative style of postural yoga particularly appealing for middle-class practitioners.

Mooji, also affectionately known as Moojibaba by his devotees, is a neo-Advaita, Jamaican born guru who has been actively teaching since the early nineties. According to the ‘Watkins’ *Spiritual 100 List for 2019* and ‘2020’, Mooji is respectively listed number 37 and 48 among the most influential living spiritual teachers of the year (Watkins Mind Body Spirit 2019, 2020). He teaches that the “true self” (*atman*) is the same as ultimate reality (*brahman*) and that the purpose of existence is to realise one’s own “god-self” (*brahmajñāna*, literally “god-realisation”). In delivering his message of salvation, he mainly puts the emphasis on self-inquiry (*jñāna* or *atma-vichara*), a contemplative practice that promises instant enlightenment, and on ‘*The Invitation*’, his own simplified method of self-inquiry, performed collectively during his *satsangs* (Hindu-inspired congregational meetings). He lives in his Portuguese ashram, *Monte Sahaja*, organised in accordance with a neo-Vedantic rendition of the tripartite model of yoga advocated in the ‘*Bhagavadgītā*’ (III BCE – I CE).<sup>9</sup> Here, his devotees are immersed in a quasi-monastic lifestyle based on three imperatives: work, contemplation, and prayer. Mooji’s neo-guru movement is an example of the ways in which contemporary gurus build up an image of legitimacy, authority, and authenticity, as they skillfully navigate through traditional Hindu teachings and their own innovations in order to make their message palatable to Western audiences. It is also a revealing example of how the guru-disciple relationship – and its inherent exercise of power, charismatic authority, surrender, devotion, and obedience – plays out within the context of Western neo-guru movements. This is a pressing issue, given that Mooji – together with the majority of contemporary gurus and

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<sup>9</sup> The ‘*Bhagavadgītā*’ or Song of God is considered a central text of the philosophical and religious literature of India and is part of the Indian epic the ‘*Mahābhārata*’ (IV BCE – IV CE). It is written in the form of a dialogue between the Hindu deity Krishna and the warrior Arjuna. According to a neo-Vedantic reading, the *Bhagavadgītā* introduces the ‘classical’ neo-Vedantic model of the three yoga(s) (*karma*, *jñāna*, and *bhakti*) in a systematic manner. I will expand on this model of yoga in Chapter Six.

internationally-renowned yoga teachers – has been recently accused of misconduct on a grand scale (e.g., Actualized.org 2018; CEI 2017; Kosi 2019; Scofield 2019; White 2019). His media appeal backfired when Be Scofield’s anti-cult investigation was published on March 4, 2019 on her website ‘*The Guru*’.<sup>10</sup>

In the following section, I will provide a short historical overview of the development of modern forms of yoga in order to better contextualise these two case studies and the overall thesis within broader socio-historical coordinates.

## **2. Modern Yoga: Sketches of a Contemporary History**

The beginning of the international dissemination of yoga’s modern interpretations is commonly traced back by scholars to the British colonial rule of India and Swami Vivekananda’s famous speech at the World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago (1893) (e.g., Burger 2006; De Michelis 2004; Strauss 2005). The history of modern forms of yoga was, from the outset, characterised as a dialectical exchange between the “West” and the “East”, based on closely linked migratory, cultural, and economic flows. Examples of these transnational exchange networks include the aforementioned colonial rule of India by the British; Indian teachers and (counter)missionaries travelling to the West, coupled, in the following decades of the twentieth century, with the mass migration of Indians to the United States and UK; Europeans, Americans and Indians interested in topics ranging from metaphysics and esotericism to fitness and body hygiene; the cultural and emancipatory quest of social movements in the sixties, their growing interest in Eastern spirituality, and the consequent development of the New Age movement; and finally, the transnational circulation of popularised versions of yoga from the West back to the East. It is in the light of these processes that De Michelis (2004: 2) defines modern yoga as “a technical term to refer to certain types of yoga that evolved mainly through the interaction of Western individuals interested in Indian religions and a number of more or less Westernized Indians over the last 150 years”.

As also shown by De Michelis (2004), the type of yoga that would soon gain worldwide diffusion through Vivekananda’s teachings and his ecumenical appeal was itself the outcome of the neo-Vedantic reinterpretation of yoga that occurred during the Bengali Renaissance (first three quarters of the nineteenth century) in Bengal, North-

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<sup>10</sup> I would like to thank Amanda Lucia for bringing this investigation to my attention in the Spring of 2019.

Western India. Here, the ‘*Bhagavadgītā*’ and its tripartite model of yoga were reinterpreted through a theistic perspective and under devotional Vaiṣṇavism<sup>11</sup> influences, coupled with Christian and Western esoteric thought. Religious reformers such as Keshab Chandra Sen (1838-1884), one of the inspirational forces behind Vivekananda’s project, reintroduced and adapted this tripartite model (with the addition of *Rāja Yoga*<sup>12</sup>) in an attempt to provide new schemes of religious and ritual life that would satisfy the increasingly secularised mentality that was spreading among Bengali elites by the end of the nineteenth century, and to counteract proselytising by Christian missionaries among the Bengali population (e.g., De Michelis 2004; King 1999). In other words, the yoga exported by Vivekananda was already the outcome of a complex dialogue between British colonisers and local elites, and the expression of the specific socio-political conditions of colonial India. As this yoga moved West, it was first championed – not to say adopted – as an integral part of the doctrines of esoteric groups such as the Theosophical Society (e.g., Choné 2003; De Michelis 2004), and – despite protests, backlash, and scandals – found its place in the North American landscape of “metaphysical religions” (Albanese 2007; Foxen 2020). The interest of the latter in the inherent ability of individuals to connect with some form of dormant inner force (e.g., the soul, life force, god will, god self and so on) as a means of gaining health, balance, and prosperity or aligning with divine energy, readily matched Vivekananda’s teachings. Moreover, it is reasonable to claim a certain continuity between Vivekananda’s *Rāja Yoga* and many of the movements and groups that began to flourish in the West, especially in the second half of the twentieth century. New Religious Movements (NRMs) such as the International Association for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) (e.g., Rochford 2000, 2007; Squarcini 2000; Squarcini and Fizzotti 2004), neo-Hindu groups such as Sivananda and Siddha Yoga (e.g., Altglas 2005, 2007, 2008, 2014a; Strauss 2005; Williamson 2010), not to mention the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission (e.g., Lucia 2014a, 2014b, 2014c; Warriar 2005, 2014), are to a certain degree contemporary manifestations

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<sup>11</sup> “Vaishnavism, also called Vishnuism, one of the major forms of modern Hinduism, characterized by devotion to the god Vishnu and his incarnations (avatars). A devotee of Vishnu is called a Vaishnava. The devotional Vaishnava literature that emerged in Sanskrit and in vernacular writings from the 10th through the 16th century continues to be a part of Vaishnava worship, though it is often supplemented by later philosophical and narrative texts, both written and oral” <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Vaishnavism> accessed February 14, 2019.

<sup>12</sup> According to Vivekananda’s neo-Hindu understanding, *Rāja Yoga* is “a practical and scientifically worked out method” (1974: 128) to reach salvation. Moreover, in line with its ecumenical message and the conviction of India’s spiritual superiority, he argued that “*Rāja-Yoga* is the science of religion, the rationale of all worship, all prayers, forms, ceremonies and miracles” (1974: 165).



of Vivekananda's neo-Vedantic reinterpretation of yoga, especially in reference to their ecumenical and salvific interpretations of the philosophical universes they draw from, their simultaneously devotional and self-actualising practical repertoires, and their organisational structures. The same is true for Mooji's teachings, as I will discuss in detail in Chapters Six and Seven. Nevertheless, despite the long-lasting influence of neo-Hindu and neo-Vedantic reinterpretations and popularisation of yoga in the West, there is significantly more to modern forms of yoga.

The "invention" of modern postural yoga – or perhaps its "rediscovery"<sup>13</sup> – also had a dramatic impact on the history and forms of yoga as we know and practice them today. Key figures such as Swami Kuvalayananda (1883-1996), Krishnamacharya (1888-1989), and Yogananda (1893-1952) among others, reconstructed yoga as a form of Indian physical culture that merged elements of both Western and Indian fitness regimes (e.g., Goldberg 2018; Singleton 2005, 2007, 2010; Sjoman 1999) and Western medical and scientific discourses (e.g., Alter 2004, 2015, 2018a), in an attempt to shape a domestic system of physical practices that could be appropriated as a symbol of the spiritual superiority of India over its colonisers and that was also deemed superior to other Western fitness regimes (Singleton 2010). Not surprisingly, this form of yoga was often bound up with the nationalist aspirations of anti-colonial groups and is now one of the central elements mobilised by Narendra Modi's nationalist politics and his Hindu supremacist ideology (e.g., Mazumdar 2018; McCartney 2018, 2019a). Today, postural variants – in India as elsewhere – are mostly presented as a physical activity that may or may not incorporate a certain spiritual/religious element but the primary functions of which are the "personal-growth", "self-care" and "transformation" of practitioners (Jain 2020) within the framework of fitness, health, and well-being (e.g., Goldberg 2018; Jain 2014a; Newcombe 2007, 2019). Prominent examples of this type of yoga are Iyengar Yoga (e.g.,

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<sup>13</sup> While some postural yoga teachers and yoga enthusiasts claim that certain yoga postures have been practiced and taught since pre-Vedic times, the available historical evidence – to my knowledge – suggests otherwise. In fact, the characterisation of modern yoga as a physical practice, that is, a practice primarily based on physical postures or *āsana*, is generally considered a quite recent phenomenon, although medieval texts such as the '*Haṭhayogapradīpikā*' (XV AD) and '*Gheraṇḍa Saṃhitā*' (XVI – XVII AD) respectively mention fifteen and thirty-two *āsana* but differ both in their performance and rationale from the modern postures named after them. Given this evidence, some scholars have argued that modern postural yoga is an invented tradition, drastically shaped by Western physical cultures such as harmonial gymnastics, esoteric, dance and para-psychological therapies (Singleton 2005, 2010, 2013; see also Foxen 2020). However, there seem to be growing evidence that a number of postures practiced today, and that were previously thought of as Western, were in fact already known, practiced, and codified before the British colonisation of India (e.g., Birch 2018, 2019, 2020; Birch and Singleton 2019).

De Michelis 2004; Newcombe 2007, 2019), Ashtanga Yoga (e.g., Goldberg 2018; Burger 2006; Sidnell 2017), and a plethora of other contemporary styles and brands, among which figures also Odaka Yoga, as discussed in Chapters Three, Four, and Five.

As these reinventions of yoga spread and were consolidated throughout the twentieth century, the figure of the yogi also underwent dramatic changes. Traditionally regarded with disgust and allure and as agents of ritual pollution by both Orthodox Hinduism and Indian popular representations long before the colonisation of India and the Bengali Renaissance, the figure of the yogi was increasingly sanitised and disassociated from its previous associations with promiscuous sexuality, belligerence, black magic, and unseemly conduct (e.g., Foxen 2017a; Singleton 2010; White 2009). As White eloquently (2009: 248) puts it:

However, like postmodern man, who has in recent decades been smitten by a sort of remorse and nostalgia for the various plant and animal species he is responsible for having annihilated, in the latter half of the nineteenth century the British in India began to romanticize the yogis whose lifestyles and livelihoods their policies had largely contributed to wiping out. In urban middle-class society in particular, the bogey of the wild, naked, drug-crazed warrior ascetic was gradually airbrushed into the far more congenial image of a forest-dwelling meditative, spiritual renouncer, something far closer to the ideal of the sages of vedic lore. This romanticization – indeed, this reinvention – of the yogi and his yoga occurred not only among the British but also within an increasingly Anglicized Indian urban society, and most especially among the *bhadralok*, the “gentlefolk” of late nineteenth-century Bengal.

This metamorphosis, or as White says “this reinvention”, of the figure of the yogi reached its peak in the last few decades as a consequence of yoga’s transnational dissemination, popularisation, and commodification. In fact, as yoga travelled, hybridised, changed, and adapted to new sociocultural environments, it was gradually tailored to match the demands of the Western middle-classes. Indeed, middle-aged, white, and affluent women now represent the majority of its practitioners (e.g., Altglas 2014a; Jain 2014a, Newcombe 2019).<sup>14</sup>

The popularisation of yoga seems to reflect a broader phenomenon in the history of religions whereby religious institutions and individuals continuously construct and reconstruct themselves to meet their changing social, cultural and historical contexts (e.g., Albanese 2007; Samuel 2008; Squarcini and Mori 2008). Consequently, as Singleton and Byrne argue, “... it might be more helpful to think of *yogas*, with a multiplicity of

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<sup>14</sup> For quantitative data on the American population see the Yoga Journal’s and Yoga Alliance’s (2016) study mentioned at the outset of this thesis.

definitions and interpretations, rather than of a single yoga that we would seek to define and circumscribe” (2008: 5, emphasis in original). From this perspective, modern yoga’s widespread dissemination and its central status within contemporary societies may derive precisely from its malleability and adaptation to different historical and sociocultural contexts. It is this malleability, which makes possible the many interpretations of yoga and enables it to signify different things, depending on the needs, attitudes, social positioning, and interpretations of the practitioners (e.g., Jain 2012a; Newcombe 2018; van Der Veer 2009). Modern forms of postural yoga are currently practiced in the yoga centers and gyms of urbanised areas across the globe, where they intersect with, nourish, and satisfy contemporary demands for self-actualisation, self-growth, self-care, and self-improvement. However, these locations are not the only social domains where it is possible to practice – or consume – yoga. It is enough to think about its centrality in ashrams and spiritual communities of various kinds, its inclusion in clinical, penitentiary, educational, and corporate settings and the countless festivals, retreats, and yoga teacher training sessions constantly underway throughout the world, not to mention its pervasive online presence. In conclusion, it is not an exaggeration to state that modern forms of yoga are today a ubiquitous presence in contemporary societies.

### **3. Previous Research: An Overview**

The bulk of the literature on modern forms of yoga is composed of genealogical studies that attempt to trace the social and discursive roots of this complex and heterogeneous phenomenon, focusing on its inception and transnational development (e.g., Alter 2004, 2007a, 2007b, 2008, 2015, 2018a, 2018b; Baier, Maas and Preisendanz 2018; Birch 2018, 2020; Birch and Singleton 2019; Burger 2006; De Michelis 2004, 2007, 2008, 2020; Foxen 2017a, 2017b, 2020; Goldberg 2018; Hauser 2018, 2020; Mallinson and Singleton 2017; Newcombe 2009, 2013, 2014, 2018, 2019; Newcombe and Ciolkosz 2017; Newcombe and O’Brien-Kop 2021; Samuel 2008; Singleton 2005, 2007, 2010, 2016; Singleton and Byrne 2008; Sarbacker 2014, 2021; Sjoman 1999; Squarcini 2006, 2011, 2015; Squarcini and Mori 2008; Strauss 2002, 2005; White 2009, 2011; Wujastyk, Birch and Hargreaves 2019). Some of these studies were already partly mentioned in the previous section and a detailed analysis of their typologies, definitions, and discursive references will be given in the Excursus at the end of this thesis. Here, it suffices to say that they are historical in nature, spring from different disciplinary domains (religious

studies, anthropology, South Asian studies and to a lesser degree sociology), and are aimed, as Joseph Alter (2004: xv) argues, at the study of the “just-past of the present – say, a period of one hundred years or so – where there is a high degree of looseness, flexibility, and slippage in the control of knowledge and meaning”.

However, as yoga’s popularity grows, so does its scholarly scrutiny. Several contributions have begun to address modern yoga’s commodification, marketisation, and popularisation within the framework of neoliberal discourses on health, body appearance, self-care, and self-responsibility (e.g., Altglas 2014a; Askegaard and Eckhardt 2012; Carrette and King 2005; Burchardt 2017; Coskuner-Balli and Ertimur 2017; Cox et al. 2017; Ertimur and Coskuner-Balli 2015; Frayeh and Lewis 2018; Godrej 2017; Hauser 2013a; Mahlo and Tiggemann 2016; Mangiarotti 2019, 2020; Markula 2014; Markula and Chikinda 2016; McCartney 2019b; Jain 2014a, 2014b, 2016, 2020; Lavrence and Lozanski 2014; Lucia 2020; Powers and Greenwell 2017; Strings, Headen and Spencer 2019; Tenfelde, Hatchett and Saban 2017; Webb et al. 2017a, 2017b).<sup>15</sup> What emerges from this literature is a picture of yoga as substantially shaped by the practical-discursive logics of the market, increasingly devoid of spiritual, philosophical, and religious significance and unavoidably focused on a fetishised idea of practitioners’ bodies and selves. A fraction of this literature is specifically concerned with the study of practitioners’ processes of self-transformation (e.g., Atkinson 2010; Brown and Leledaki 2005; Cadman, Philo and Lea 2017; Lea 2009, 2020; Lea, Philo and Cadman 2016, 2018; Griera 2017, 2020; Leledaki 2014; Leledaki and Brown 2008; Lewis 2008; Mangiarotti 2019, 2020; Markula 2004; Mcilwain and Sutton 2014; Philo, Cadman and Lea 2015; Schnäbele 2010, 2013; Sidnell 2017; Smith 2007; Smith and Atencio 2017), largely studied through interview-based analyses and an overall Foucauldian matrix.<sup>16</sup> More specifically, this literature explores different declinations of the power/knowledge

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<sup>15</sup> In the context of this review of the literature, the contributions must be mentioned of the *‘Race & Yoga Journal’*, the first scholarly journal entirely dedicated to critically examining and deconstructing the representation of the prototypical American yogi. To date, this journal has discussed the experiences of black women as yoga teachers and yoga practitioners (e.g., Strings 2017; Pantan and Evans 2017; Berger 2018), provided alternative, counter cultural narratives of modern yoga (e.g., Blu Wapka 2018; Sood 2018; Quiñones, Adelaida López and Lefurgey 2018) and explored the role of modern yoga in different institutional settings, such as schools and prisons (special issue 2019). Moreover, there is also a growing literature that inquiries into modern forms of yoga through a feminist framework, as testified by the recent online event *‘Symposium: “Gender & Diversity in Contemporary Yoga”*, University of Ghent, Belgium. <https://www.crcg.ugent.be/en/events/yoga-symposium/> accessed October 22, 2020.

<sup>16</sup> The most notable exceptions are Mar Griera’s (2017, 2020) work on the inclusion of yoga in penitentiary settings and inmates’ experiences of well-being and self-transformation through Alfred Schütz’s concepts of “finite province of meaning” and “stock of knowledge”; and Jennifer Lea’s (2020) recent online lecture on yoga teachings and emotional labour.

nexus,<sup>17</sup> the disciplining,<sup>18</sup> and the biopolitical<sup>19</sup> features of the current social organisation of modern forms of yoga and of the processes of self-transformation that they give rise to.

The last area of research that I would like to mention is the study of various gurus and neo-Hindu and neo-guru NRMs (e.g., Alglas 2005, 2007, 2008; Copeman and Ikegame 2012a, 2012b; Di Placido 2018; Gleig and Williamson 2013; Goldman 2005; Frisk 2002; Forsthoefel and Humes 2005; Joosse 2012, 2014, 2017; Keul 2009; Lucas 2011, 2014; Lucia 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2018a, 2018b; Pandya 2014, 2016; Pechilis 2017; Remski 2019; Rochford 2000, 2007; Rudert 2010; Singleton and Goldberg 2014; Squarcini 2000; Squarcini and Fizzotti 2004; Srinivas S. 2008; Srinivas T. 2010; Urban 2005, 2012; Versluis 2014; Warriar 2003, 2005, 2014; Williamson 2010). The above sources largely focus on the transnational developments of these movements and the ways in which traditional Hindu teachings are mobilised, innovated, and reinvented to match the religious attitudes of Western(ised) societies. Naturally, central to these processes are issues of cultural appropriation, authority, and power over how and what to transmit as culturally legitimate knowledge.

There are, of course, a number of merits in the literature introduced above: first, it pays critical attention to the processes of transnational development, evolution, and change which lie at the heart of modern forms of yoga as we know and practice them today, that is, how modern forms of yoga and the sociocultural environments of Western societies reciprocally influence and reproduce each other's logics; second, it encourages a general movement towards "bringing the social back" into the study of the contemporary religious and spiritual field (e.g., Altglas and Wood 2018), focusing in

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<sup>17</sup> The concept of "*le savoir-pouvoir*" (e.g., Foucault 1977, 1978, 1980) is a central tool of Foucault's genealogical studies and seeks to reveal the complicit and circular relationships between the exercise of power and the establishment of particular fields of knowledge. As Foucault (1977: 27) argues when he introduces this concept in '*Discipline and Punish*': "Knowledge linked to power, not only assumes the authority of 'the truth' but has the power to make itself true. All knowledge, once applied in the real world, has effects, and in that sense at least, 'becomes true.' Knowledge, once used to regulate the conduct of others, entails constraint, regulation and the disciplining of practice. Thus, 'there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations'".

<sup>18</sup> Quoting directly from Sidnell (2017: 14) subjectivation "refers to the 'way in which people are invited or incited to recognize their moral obligations' (Foucault 1997c: 264) or 'the way in which the individual establishes his relation to the rule and recognizes himself as obliged to put it into practice' (Foucault 1985: 27). With this, Foucault indexes that aspect of ethics that has been understood in deontological terms as having to do with obligation or duty".

<sup>19</sup> Foucault introduces the concept of "biopolitics" in '*Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the College the France 1975-76*' (2003 [1997]) where he defines it as the management and control of the population as a biological entity. He further elaborates on this concept in '*Security, Territory and Population: Lectures at the College the France 1977-78*' (2007 [2004]) and in the '*The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College the France 1978-79*' (2008 [2004]).

particular on the influences of neoliberalism and its dominant discourses in shaping contemporary forms of yoga and therefore practitioners' experiences; third, part of this literature is also worthy of praise for its efforts to rehabilitate the study of power and authority as central analytical dimensions, whether through the invocation of Foucault's understanding of biopolitics or through a focus on the teacher-student relationship.

My own work builds extensively on these foundations. In common with the studies discussed there is an awareness that the transnational and transcultural developments of modern forms of yoga are particularly appealing for Western middle-classes; it problematises essentialist understandings of yoga as either "ancient" or intrinsically commodified, favouring solid sociocultural theorising over ideological positioning; and it goes against the general tendency of the contemporary sociology of religion to frame religious and spiritual experience in self-centered terms.<sup>20</sup> In so doing, it focuses on the ways in which modern forms of yoga and the experiences they foster are socially and discursively constructed in the first place (e.g., Altglas 2014a; Altglas and Wood 2018; Bourdieu 1977b; Guizzardi 1979; Wood and Altglas 2010; Wood and Bunn 2009). In other words, this thesis starts from the assumption that "[u]ltimately, the realization of the self (and what kind of self is desired to be realized) is not "natural" or even unique to each individual's subjectivity; rather, it reflects the political and economic structures of contemporary Euroamerican societies" (Altglas 2014a: 241) and, I would add, the "ethos"<sup>21</sup> of specific pedagogical environments. Unfortunately, however, the sociological study of the pedagogies of modern yoga remains, to date, largely unexplored, and with it a detailed scrutiny of the pedagogical and apprenticeship processes through which yoga practitioners come to embody and socially reproduce the ethos of their groups and of the broader neoliberal order understood as a "principle of civilisation" (McGuigan 2014).

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<sup>20</sup> In fact, while labels such as "invisible religion" (Luckmann 1967), "seeking spirituality", "patchwork religion" (Wuthnow 1998), "spiritual but not religious" (Fuller 2001; Mercadante 2014), "believing without belonging" (Davie 1990, 1994) or again "spiritualities of life" (Heelas 2008) correctly reveal a paradigm shift from traditional religions towards more self-centered processes of meaning attribution, this is achieved by confining the role of power dynamics and authority to the margins of contemporary religious/spiritual life. Also the "lived religion" approach (e.g., Ammerman 2007; Hall 1997; McGuire 2008), with its focus on "how religion and spirituality are practiced, experienced and expressed by ordinary people (rather than official spokespersons) in the context of their everyday lives" (McGuire 2008: 12) minimises the study of power dynamics and authority in regulating the behavior of spiritual seekers. Therefore, this dominant focus on the self and on individuals' narratives of self-determination comes at the cost of only partially understanding how the seemingly individual and freely chosen practices people rely on are often the result of complex processes of socialisation across religious groups and traditions where "spiritual directors" (Foucault 2010 [2008]), such as priests, teachers, gurus, and workshop leaders still play a prominent role.

<sup>21</sup> With this concept, covered extensively in Chapter Three, I intend to address the character of specific modern yoga groups or movements, that is, their discursive and philosophical foundations and the pedagogical repertoires.

This thesis aims to be a first attempt at a systematic exploration of the pedagogies of modern forms of yoga.<sup>22</sup> It argues that focusing on specific *pedagogies of salvation*,<sup>23</sup> defined as those pedagogies teleologically oriented towards the attainment of specific end-goals (e.g., therapeutic, fitness, spiritual and so on), is crucially important for a number of reasons: first, it conveys a micro-sociological and micro-political understanding of the processes of apprenticeship of the modern yogi, seldom and only incidentally explored in the existing literature; second, it contributes to the study of the processes of transnational development, adaptation, and change of Asian religions and spiritual resources, focusing on how modern forms of yoga are transmitted and translated into practice through situated teacher-student relationships and processes of apprenticeship; third, it also allows to inquire into how “the political and economic structures of contemporary Euroamerican societies”, their ethos, and imperatives, are put into practice within specific pedagogical environments, that is, for instance, how neoliberal and biopolitical injunctions are promoted, socially reproduced, challenged, or resisted within specific pedagogical environments.

In order to understand the social organisation of modern forms of yoga and their relevance as transnational, commodified, and self-transformative “salvation goods” (e.g., Weber 1965 [1922], 1978 [1920]; see also Altglas 2008; Stolz 2006, 2008), more elaborate sociological analyses are required, rather than simply labelling yoga as a another commodified tool or consumer product in the hands of corporate and political elites and in the service to capitalism, as part of the literature discussed does. One alternative is to focus on the ethnographic, micro-sociological, and micro-political study of the pedagogies of modern forms of yoga since the pedagogical level offers an invaluable opportunity to explore the study of macro-structural phenomena and sociocultural processes as they are translated and socially reproduced in practice by specific

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<sup>22</sup> Within this overall framework, I consider both the guru-disciple relationship in a strict sense, as in the case study of Mooji’s teachings, and the pedagogical relationships between postural yoga teachers and their students, as in the case study of Odaka Yoga. However, I contend that a theoretical and methodological focus on the pedagogies of modern yoga may be relevant also in the case of less dedicated practitioners who just “do yoga” occasionally and only for fitness purposes as they are nonetheless exposed to – and their practiced is shaped by – the pedagogical encounter with their teachers. Naturally, this is not to say that there are not substantial differences between, for instance, a traditional conception of the guru-disciple relationship, teacher-student interactions within specific styles or schools of postural yoga, and finally yoga as performed within what Wildcroft (2020) names “post-lineage yoga”, that is, communities based on peer-networks rather than hierarchical leadership models. My position simply amounts to state that these different pedagogical contexts and relationships could still be fruitfully studied following a theorisation of yoga as discipline and as a practice inhabited by specific discourses as transmitted – in practice – by guru and/or yoga teachers, whether lineage holders or post-lineage.

<sup>23</sup> I define and extensively discuss this concept at the start of Chapter One.

communities (e.g., Sherkat 2003). Moreover, as I intend to show in this thesis, it is only through a closer scrutiny of the circular relationships between discourses and practices as enacted within specific pedagogical relationships and apprenticeship processes that the most needed agenda of bringing the social back – and with it the centrality of the dimensions of power, authority, and domination – into the study of religion, can be fully realised.

#### **4. The Object of Study: The Social Organisation of Modern Forms of Yoga**

The main focus of this thesis is *the social organisation* of modern forms of yoga in the *fitness and wellness industry* and *neo-guru movements*,<sup>24</sup> based, respectively, on the case studies of Odaka Yoga and Mooji's teachings and ashram. By social organisation, I mean the *organisational structure* and *pattern of relationships* that characterise the everyday life and functioning of specific communities or groups of modern yoga practitioners, and most specifically: first, the *teacher-student relationship*, framed as the organising principle and the main socialising relationship through which the bodies, minds, and souls of practitioners are governed, that is to say, normalised, disciplined, and transformed; second, the *practices* prescribed and performed (postures, breathing exercises, contemplations, prayers, working activities and so on); third, the *discourses* (on health, truth, morality, salvation and so on) informing these practices, as promoted, enacted, and socially reproduced within specific pedagogical environments; and fourth, the *categories* identified by modern yoga practitioners to make sense of their life-world and experiences of self-transformation.<sup>25</sup> In other words, the main objects of study of this thesis are the *pedagogies of salvation* and the processes of *apprenticeship of the modern yogi*, with a detailed examination of the relationships, practices, discourses, and categories mobilised in these processes of socialisation, knowledge acquisition, subjection and subjectivation.<sup>26</sup> This overall orientation echoes with what the German philosopher Peter

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<sup>24</sup> Neo-guru movements are a specific subgroup and later development (mid-sixties onwards) of a broader phenomenon in the landscape of contemporary religion and spirituality, usually given the label of New Religious Movements (NRMs). I will expand on this point at the outset of Chapter Six and partly also in the Excursus.

<sup>25</sup> As it will be discussed in the analytical chapters of the thesis, in most cases practitioners' perspectives are a personal reworking or a direct reproduction of the categories and discourses used by the teachers in the processes of knowledge transmission. This signifies that also in the context of communities characterised by a more democratic and less hierarchical ethos, yoga practitioners are first and foremost training subjects exposed to and partly reproducing specific practical-discursive universes.

<sup>26</sup> According to my reading of Foucault's overall work *subjection* and *subjectivation* are complementary notions which address respectively those "continuous and uninterrupted processes which subject our bodies, govern our gestures, dictate our behaviours etc." (Foucault 1980: 97), or in other words that facet of power implicit in disciplinary



Sloterdijk (2013: 374 [2009]), building on Foucault, names “self-operation” and “having oneself-operated-on”, the two constituting elements of “anthropotechnic behaviour”, of whose yoga practices are only but one example. More specifically, as Sloterdijk (*ibidem*) clarifies:

In the first, I am moulded as an object of direct self-modification through measures of my own; in the second, I expose myself to the effects of others’ operating competence and let them mould me. The interplay of self-operation and having-oneself-operated-on encompasses the entire self-concern of the subject.

It is this this “entire self-concern of the subject”, as she self-moulds herself and as she lets others (e.g., yoga teachers/gurus) mould her, that the ethnographic, micro-sociological, and micro-political exploration of specific pedagogies of salvation and apprenticeship processes allows to capture in its unfolding.

The implications of this object of study are several, extend beyond a mere indexical interest in the two case studies explored, and cut across different areas of sociological inquiry. In the context of these introductory remarks, suffice to say that a focus on the pedagogies of salvation and the processes of apprenticeship of the modern yogi can contribute to a broader understanding of the discourses, practices, and power relations that currently characterise fields as diverse as the wellness and fitness industry and the landscape of contemporary spiritualities, with a specific attention to the interplay between practitioners’ “self-operation” and processes of “having-oneself-operated-on”. More specifically, such a focus exemplifies how the neoliberal and biopolitical ethos of contemporary societies – as reinterpreted and filtered by the lenses of the pedagogical repertoires (both discursive and practical) of specific yoga groups – are socially reproduced (or challenged and resisted) in practice. In fact, as correctly emphasised by Throsby (2016: 14), “...however much a minority social world self-defines through distinction, it remains inextricable from the wider social context within which it is made meaningful”.

The rest of this introduction will give a brief presentation of the structure and main contents of the thesis.

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technologies implemented to control, dominate, and normalise individuals (Foucault 1977); and the processes through which the individual actively relates to oneself and constitutes oneself as simultaneously an ethical subject and an object to be known by oneself (e.g., Foucault 1986, 2005 [2001], 2010, 2011[2008], 2014 [2012], 2018).

## 5. The Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is divided into two parts. Part I, entitled ‘*Theoretical and Methodological Orientations*’, has two chapters. Chapter One provides the conceptual and theoretical backbone of the thesis. It begins by introducing the concept of *pedagogies of salvation*, a “sensitising concept” (Blumer 1954) inspired by a Weberian analysis of “salvation goods” (Weber 1965, 1978; see also Stolz 2006, 2008) and by Sloterdijk’s (2013) analysis of asceticism. It then shortly discusses Bourdieu’s and Foucault’s theoretical projects as invaluable resources for theorising about the teacher-student relationship, the processes of apprenticeship of the modern yogi, and the genealogical roots of the field of modern yoga research, a task fully unpacked in the Excursus. The chapter then offers a preliminary discussion of the creative and generative potential of a combined reading of the theoretical projects of Bourdieu and Foucault and discusses a number of previous attempts in this direction (e.g., Brindisi and Irrea 2017; Callewaert 2006, 2017; Laval 2017; Pedrini 2019; Sassatelli 2002; Shilling 2005). In doing so, it highlights the importance of developing a conceptual framework that can capture the circular and reciprocally reinforcing relationship between discourses and practices, and it illustrates the rationale behind the decision to apply slightly different theoretical frameworks to the two case studies presented: a Bourdieusian approach with Foucauldian influences in the case of Odaka Yoga and a Foucauldian approach with Bourdieusian influences in the case of Mooji’s teachings.

Chapter Two discusses the research design of the thesis. It introduces the overall interpretivist framework and the open-ended nature of the thesis; then it continues with a discussion of some of the most significant “turning points” encountered during the research, that is, serendipitous moments that drastically influenced its unfolding; it then briefly discusses my access to and positioning within Odaka Yoga and Monte Sahaja, preliminary presenting these two case studies; and finally, it introduces the multi-sensorial (Pink 2015 [2009]), carnal and participated approach (e.g., Sánchez García and Spencer 2013; Wacquant 2004, 2015) pursued and the biographical interview method deployed in the thesis.

Part II is entitled ‘*The Social Organisation and Experience of Modern Forms of Yoga*’ and is composed of the remaining five analytical chapters of the thesis and the Conclusion. Chapter Three introduces the philosophical and discursive foundations of

Odaka Yoga in the light of its positioning within the *yoga field*, that is, a “hybrid field” (Pedrini, Brown and Aimini 2020) constituted by spiritual/religious fitness/leisure, and therapeutic/medical practical-discursive registers of what counts as yoga. In so doing, I delineate Odaka Yoga’s “ethos” as inherently hybrid and as emerging at the intersection of the anatomical/biomechanical influence of “fitness culture” and its *medicalised body*, as well as the energetic/esoteric influence of Asian systems of knowledge and their *subtle body model*; then the chapter provides a short discussion of the “Odaka Warrior”, the ideal-typical Odaka Yoga practitioner, framing it following Farah Godrej’s (2017) construct of the “neoliberal yogi”; finally, the chapter also introduces the school’s main teachers, discussing their biographical narratives and charismatic appeal and concludes with a brief analysis of Odaka Yoga’s wider community in the light of a plethora of concepts such as “imagined communities” (Anderson 1983), “neo-tribe” (Maffesoli 1996), and “white utopias” (Lucia 2020).

Chapter Four continues this analysis, showing how the discourses that constitute the ethos of Odaka Yoga are put into practice via the mediation of the teachers and their pedagogical repertoires. This chapter discusses the class format (divided into *tuning in*, *practice*, and *relaxation* phases), exploring how each section of the class is related to the cultivation of a very specific disposition (*focusing/listening*, *flowing/fluid*, and *practical/ascetic* dispositions). Here, I also emphasise that the transmission of esoteric or spiritual knowledge is often conveyed covertly through the use of metaphors and evocative language, focusing on the principles of “*moving from the center*”, “*bending the straight lines*”, and “*rhythm*”.<sup>27</sup> In conclusion, the chapter introduces the concept of “yogic habitus” (Di Placido 2018) underlining the “symbiotic relationship” (Wacquant 2004) that occurs between the ethos of modern postural yoga and an “emerging” middle class ethos (e.g., Altglas 2014a; Bourdieu 1984).

Chapter Five delves deeper into the analysis of the yogic habitus, presenting yoga teachers’ *voices* and *experiences* of their yoga practice as a particular expression of the middle-class “taste” (Bourdieu 1984) for the “exoticism” of Asian religions and spiritual resources (Altglas 2014a; see also Lucia 2020) and their therapeutic, self-actualising, and self-transformative promises. More specifically, the chapter explores how the appropriation (e.g., transmission, acquisition, and mastery) of these exoticised resources

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<sup>27</sup> Roberto Milletti and Francesca Cassia, interview by author, audio recording, online interview, May 22, 2019.

is deployed as a means of reinforcing particular dispositions and attitudes to the self, others, and the world that are already typical of a broader middle-class ethos. In so doing, Chapter Five discusses in turn: practitioners' background and early approach with yoga; their own interpretations and emic accounts of what yoga is; the pivotal role of the teacher-student relationship; their journeys of self-transformation at a physical, emotional/psychological, and spiritual level; and finally, the continuity between their practice "on" and "outside" of the mat.

Chapter Six introduces the philosophical and discursive foundations of Mooji's teachings, again contextualising them in the light of a revisited discussion of the yoga field as a hybrid field. The chapter further explores the neo-Advaita roots of Mooji's teachings, problematising the Advaita-Vedanta notion of the "god-self" and the neo-Vedantic reinterpretation of the tripartite model of yoga presented in the Gita as fostering the conceptualisation of the *contested self*, that is, a self that is simultaneously dismissed as ego and praised as godly, and ultimately regulated by the "truth" postulated by the teacher. In doing so, I also discuss the tension between the therapeutic and the salvific potential of Mooji's teachings and highlight their traditional yet innovative nature. In detail, I make clear how Mooji's teachings contribute to the reproduction, creative use, and innovation of the philosophical and discursive references from which they claim to originate, capitalising on their "exotic" appeal (e.g., Altglas 2014a, Lucia 2014b). I then closely scrutinise the figure of the guru, unpacking Mooji's biography. In this context, I offer some preliminary reflections on the benefits of a dispositional approach to the study of a *guru habitus*, arguing that Mooji became an internationally acclaimed guru due to his previous cultivation of *religious, pedagogical, and popular dispositions*. Finally, I introduce some of his closest devotees and end the chapter with a discussion of Mooji's larger community of followers, in reference to both its ashram and its transnational networks of followers.

Chapter Seven continues to inquire into the ways in which the philosophical and discursive backbones of Mooji's teachings are put into practice during the everyday life of its Portuguese ashram and during his *satsangs*. It provides an analysis of *Monte Sahaja* as a "total institution" (Goffman 1961) where *karma, jñāna, and bhakti* yoga contribute, respectively, to the cultivation of *servicing, contemplative, and devotional dispositions*. I then introduce a Foucauldian analysis of the main *dispositif of veridiction* of Mooji's repertoire, that is, the "Satsang Dispositif", a *disciplinary, confessional, and self-*

*transformative apparatus* designed to guide spiritual seekers towards the direct recognition of their divine nature. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the “transposable” (Bourdieu 1977a: 72, 82, 1984: 170) nature of the serving, contemplative, and devotional disposition in order to theorise about the relationship that occurs between the previous interiorisation and cultivation of certain dispositions by devotees and then their later strengthening or modification through the *dispositifs of veridiction* provided by the ashram. The final part of the chapter further explores the extent to which the internal organisation of the ashram contributes to the reproduction of the division of labour and social stratification of regular society and the ways in which devotees can “climb the ladder” through the acquisition and conversion of spiritual capital.

Finally, the Conclusion summarises the main findings of the thesis epitomised with the formula that yoga practitioners are first and foremost *training subjects* or *subjects in training*. It then briefly contextualises the thesis’ results within and against the dominant tendencies of the contemporary sociology of religion and the sociological study of yoga as a commodified practice. Furthermore, it briefly revises and elaborates on a number of foundational concepts introduced in the thesis, such as *pedagogies of salvation*, *yoga field*, *yogic habitus*, *guru habitus*, *contested self*, and *satsang dispositif*. In so doing, it also introduces the concept of *biopedagogies* as it emerged at the end of three years of theorising with and against the theories of Foucault and Bourdieu. My understanding of biopedagogies stands apart from the mainstream biopolitical interpretation of the concept and other partly overlapping concepts<sup>28</sup> as it provides a dispositional reading of those pedagogical processes and environments characterised by their immersion within the current neoliberal order and articulates a schematisation that categorises biopedagogies alongside several axes such as the *secular – religious*; *bodily – mind* focused; *collectively – individually* performed; and *tight – loosely* organisational contexts. The thesis concludes by suggesting a few possibilities for future research.

At the end of the thesis there are also an Excursus on modern yoga research and four appendixes. The Excursus, titled ‘*The Discursive Construction of Modern Yoga*’ is composed of two parts: the first part provides an archaeological overview of the concepts, typologies, and definitions of modern yoga research, focusing on its birth and development as an autonomous field of study. In so doing, it explores how modern yoga

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<sup>28</sup> Chiefly the concepts of “body pedagogics” (e.g., Mellor and Shilling 2010; Shilling and Mellor 2007; Shilling 2007, 2010, 2016, 2018) and “reflexive body techniques” (Crossley 2004, 2005).

research constitutes itself through a specific kind of “boundaries work” (Gieryn 1983, 1999) with other disciplines and sub-disciplines. Moreover, here I also discuss how the concept of modern yoga, understood as a “boundary object” (Star and Griesemer 1989) that distinguishes itself from a number of parallel and partially overlapping phenomenon, and its related methodological and theoretical developments, dialogue – or not – with other central concepts of the fields of religious studies and the sociology of religion. As a result, I argue that modern yoga research, as currently conceptualised, has the potential to conflate and appropriate a number of already widely used concepts/categories, such as NRMs, neo-Hinduism, neo-guru movements and so on, under the conceptual power of the newly coined term modern yoga; the second part, in turn, analyses the field of modern yoga research as a “discursive formation” (Foucault 1972 [1971]). Once again, it is based on Foucault’s archaeological and genealogical methods and it reveals the discursive references and methodological affinity of modern yoga research with a number of discursive currents typical of the disciplines from which it emerged, such as radical historicism, cultural relativism, modernism, Orientalism and neo-colonialism. Appendix One, titled ‘*Supplementary Material*’, serves the purpose to substantiate the analyses provided in the analytical chapters in the light of further empirical material at my disposal; while Appendix Two and Three provide, respectively, a list of figures and a glossary of Sanskrit terms used in the thesis.

*Part I*

*Theoretical and Methodological Orientations*

# Chapter One

## Theoretical Framework: Theorising Pedagogies of Salvation and Beyond

### 1. Pedagogies of Salvation

In order to introduce the concept of *pedagogies of salvation* is necessary to start from a preliminary analysis of what Weber labels “salvation goods” (Weber 1965, 1978; see also Stolz 2006, 2008) as these goods, in my theorisation, are what regulate the internal articulation of specific pedagogical environments.<sup>1</sup> As Stolz (2006:18) underlines, the concept of salvation goods (*Heilsgut*) is central in Max Weber’s sociology, although its Anglo-Saxon translations as “state of salvation”, “substantively divine salvation”, “highest bliss available” or even “sacred value” do not seem to capture the sense of the original formulation. In fact, while these translations emphasise Weber’s attempt to pursue a comparative understanding of religions (based on textual traditions and specific world-views), they substantially fail to convey his intention to understand how religious world-views and institutions influence social action. Of course, this is problematic as for Weber (e.g., 1965, 1978) religions are the main providers of meaning for human actions, that is, “[s]ocial behaviour – and moreover economic attitudes (or ethics) – are deeply impregnated by religious goals or salvation goods” (Burger 2006: 82). To complicate the issue on how to translate – and as a consequence understand – the concept of salvation

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of salvation goods is also implicitly at the center of the notion of “religious markets” as formulated by the proponents of the “rational choice theory of religion” (e.g., Innaccone 1990, 1994, 1995, Stark and Bainbridge 1985, 1989; Stark and Innaccone 1994; see also Stolz 2006, 2008) and of Bourdieu’s concepts of “capital” and “field” (e.g., Bourdieu 1971a, 1984, 1985, 1986; 1996; see also Schultheis 2008). Although this thesis substantially diverges from some of the core assumptions of the rational choice theory of religion, most notably that individuals act freely, rationally and in a utilitarian manner, it extensively relies on Bourdieu’s theoretical project. More on this in the following pages.



goods, there is also the fact that Weber himself uses different terms, such as “salvation goals” (*Heilsziele*), “salvation means” (*Heilsmittel*) and “promises of the religions” (*Verheissungen der Religionen*) but does not provide a clear-cut definition. Stolz (2006: 18-19) ventures into this, suggesting that:

A salvation good is an end or a means to an end which is offered by a religion, embedded in a specific world-view and a system of life practices, and which may be aspired to or used by an individual or a social group.

Now, I would like to provide an important caveat to this definition, namely displace Weber’s focus on religion and instead apply his notion of salvation goods to the broader sociocultural field. Most notably, I contend that partially overlapping and partially autonomous sociocultural domains such as the landscapes of contemporary spiritualities, the fitness and wellness industry, therapy culture, and popular, consumer culture, are equally deploying a number of salvation goods among which modern forms of yoga figure prominently. This transversal deployment of modern forms of yoga as salvation goods is, to be more precise, a specific declination of Sloterdijk’s (2013) analysis of asceticism as the matrix of all “anthropotechnics”, that is, training regimes through which individuals attempt to perform certain operations on themselves or allow others to do so on their behalf. In Sloterdijk’s (2013: 9) theory, these training regimes represent “symbolic or psycho-immunological practices on which humans have always relied to cope – with varying success – with their vulnerability through fate, including mortality, in the form of imaginary anticipations and mental armour”. In other words, modern forms of yoga as salvation goods are an attempt – among others – to deal with the finitude of life, its unpredictability, and naturally the stressors, complexities, and demands of contemporary neoliberal societies.

It is only in the light of these theoretical considerations that I can introduce the concept of *pedagogies of salvation* as an array of discourses, practices, and relationships mobilised in a pedagogical environment in which the teacher – or the “expert” – is invested with the function to facilitate the salvation of the practitioners. Here, salvation is not merely the religious or spiritual salvation that may be granted by ministers, priests, and other religious authorities, although it shares with it normative and moralising injunctions and a certain teleological orientation to “this worldly asceticism”. Conversely, salvation refers to the successful achievement of whatever end-goal a given pedagogy is

thought to grant, being it spiritual, health-enhancing, leisure, therapeutic and so on.<sup>2</sup> For example, the cultivation and maintenance of a lean body as much as the self-management and optimisation of one's own health can be rightly considered as secularised forms of salvation which nonetheless continue to obey to the religious logics of an ascetic ethos of self-perfection<sup>3</sup> although there are substantial differences between a self-imposed ascetic discipline (e.g., diet) and prescribed forms of religious asceticism (e.g., fasting). In other words, with the concept of pedagogies of salvation I address those pedagogies that are inherently purposive or teleologically oriented to the access, acquisition, and mastery of specific salvation goods and symbolic or psycho-immunological practices, and whose self-transformative promises guarantee to their apprentices the cultivation of a certain "ethical distinction" (Sloterdijk 2013: 217) from their own self, others, and the world. Pedagogies of salvation are, then, all those teleologically oriented pedagogies that prescribe management techniques of self-transformation tailored to tame – and in some cases also subvert – the unpredictability and finitude of life.

As previously mentioned, in this thesis I am particularly interested in the pedagogies of salvation of modern forms of yoga as they grant yoga's availability (as a salvation good or as symbolic or psycho-immunological practice) and micro-sociological transmission in fields as diverse as the landscapes of contemporary spiritualities, the fitness and wellness industry, therapy culture, and popular, consumer culture.<sup>4</sup> More specifically, following a classical Bourdieusian reading (e.g., 1977a, 1984, 1990a), I am interested in the pedagogical environments that contribute to the social reproduction – in practice – of the "objective structures" of these four socio-cultural domains, in which modern forms of yoga strive. The remaining of this thesis is dedicated to the study of these pedagogies of salvation, with a specific focus on the teacher-student relationship and the apprenticeship

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<sup>2</sup> As rightly underlined by Amanda Lucia (personal communication, December 23, 2020), salvation is an inherently Christian term and its conceptualisation as the end-goal of any teleologically oriented pedagogy could be problematic. However, although I agree with her and I am currently thinking about alternative labels for this theoretical formulation (pedagogies of the self and pedagogies of freedom are now the most promising alternatives), I contend that my conceptualisation of pedagogies of salvation is at least coherent with its theoretical roots (largely inspired by Weber and Sloterdijk) and it is also adequate to capture the salvific goals inherent in "this worldly asceticism" of modern forms of yoga.

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of the pervasiveness of an ascetic ethos of self-perfection in Western culture see Peter Sloterdijk's (2013) *You Must Change Your Life: On Anthropotechnics*.

<sup>4</sup> There is a growing body of literature that explores these specific sociocultural domains, sometimes also in reference to modern forms of yoga (e.g., Atlgals 2008, 2014a; Godrej 2017; Jain 2014a, 2020). I have decided to avoid an in depth discussion of these four sociocultural domains and their role as privileged settings for modern forms of yoga's transcultural diffusion as I have partly discussed the issue in the introduction and I will extensively unpack these dimensions in the four analytical chapters of the thesis.

processes of the modern yogi. To put it differently, the primary aim of the thesis is the micro-sociological and micro-political study of the dynamics and power struggles that characterise specific pedagogies of salvation and their promises of realisation, acquisition, and mastery of the salvation goods that they promote.

## 2. Bourdieu's Theoretical Project

Bourdieu's intellectual production, one that spans over five decades of detailed empirical investigations, is characterised by the rigorous refinement and consistent application of the same theoretical framework largely composed of his conceptual arsenal of habitus, field, capital, doxa and reflexivity. In this section I do not intend to revise the entirety of Bourdieu's intellectual production, a task that would be ill suited even for a book project.<sup>5</sup> On the contrary, I simply provide an overview of Bourdieu's theoretical contributions. I will then turn to a similar treatment of Foucault's intellectual project.

One of the distinctive features of Pierre Bourdieu's sociology is the attempt to overcome "objectivism" and "subjectivism", or in other words, to bridge the gap between epistemological approaches that privileged the study of macro-structural processes and conversely of individuals' consciousness and experiences, as the determinants through which a specific social order reproduces itself or ought to be understood. Of course, the oversimplistic separation between structures/society and agency/social actors, is one of the classical issues that haunts sociological theorising since its inception (e.g., Bourdieu 1977a; Giddens 1984; Shilling 2005; Stones 2005). More specifically, Bourdieu's sociology develops within and against structuralism and phenomenology, the two dominant paradigms in France during the formative years and early career of Bourdieu.<sup>6</sup> His praxeological sociology<sup>7</sup> develops simultaneously as an alternative, a synthesis, and

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<sup>5</sup> For a comprehensive review of Bourdieu's sociology I refer the reader to Bourdieu's and Wacquant's (1992) *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*; Swartz's (1997) *Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu*; Reed-Danahay's (2004) *Locating Bourdieu*; and finally, Robbins' *Sociology as reflexive science: on Bourdieu's project* (2007).

<sup>6</sup> For instance, in an *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977a), which could be rightly considered Bourdieu's programmatic manifesto, he takes the distance from the structuralism of Levi-Strauss' anthropology and Saussure's linguistic on the one hand and from Sartre's phenomenology on the other. His refusal to submit to the dominant logics of these paradigms and conversely his choice to theorise in the interstices and grey spots of these positions granted the flourishing of Bourdieu's praxeological sociology.

<sup>7</sup> Bourdieu's (1977a: 72 emphasis in original) praxeological theory could be defined as an attempt "to construct the theory of practice, or, more precisely, the theory of the mode of generation of practices, which is the precondition for establishing an experimental science of the *dialectic of the internalization of externality and the externalization of internality*, or, more simply, of incorporation and objectification".

a refusal of these paradigms, and attempts to objectively inquiry into the “homology” between the “objective structures” of a given society (e.g., language, culture, economy, laws and so on) and the “subjective structures” constituted by social actors’ “scheme of dispositions” (Bourdieu 1977a, 1984, 1990a), that is, the manners in which the practical-discursive logics of the formers are socially reproduced – largely unconsciously – within the latter. It is largely following these theoretical and methodological coordinates that I mobilise Bourdieu’s conceptual arsenal in the following chapters. Most notably, I am particularly interested in the ways in which Bourdieu’s dispositional approach could emphasise some of the core dynamics that characterise the processes of apprenticeship and the pedagogies of modern forms of yoga not to mention a theorisation of the “elective affinities” and “symbiotic relationships” that occur between the ethos of a given modern yoga group and the broader middle-class and neoliberal ethos of contemporary society.

### 3. Foucault’s Theoretical Project

Foucault’s theoretical project is characterised by a multiplicity of interests, methodological strategies, conceptual tools, and areas of investigation. Any attempt to provide an exhaustive and ordered overview of his thought is bound to face its complexity and non-linear developments.<sup>8</sup> In this section, I simply try to provide a concise but informative overview of some of the most important elements of Foucault’s intellectual legacy, with a focus on those conceptual and methodological devices that are of particular importance to open up a dialogue between his work and this thesis. To begin with, it is useful to remind ourselves that Foucault’s intellectual project developed within and against “the grand theorising of Karl Marx, the essentialist thinking of Sigmund Freud, Saussure’s structuralist quest for a science of language, and the ‘terroristic’ existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre” (Markula and Pringle 2006: 5), of course, next to an intimate refusal of Kantian’s aprioristic philosophy. In fact, as much as Foucault criticised these traditions

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<sup>8</sup> According to Deleuze’s (1986) “architectonic” reading of Foucault, his work can be divided in three phases: first, the archaeological phase, mainly concerned with the conditions of possibility of knowledge and the relations between specific field of knowledge and the constitution of certain types of subjects; second, the genealogical phase, with a heightened focus on the power-knowledge nexus, disciplines, technologies of power, and modernisation; and finally, the ethical or aesthetic turn, focused on the study of the constitution of the subject as the ethical subject of reason. Of course, this reading is partial and oversimplistic as it is mainly based on Foucault’s published books and does not take into account his lectures and a number of essays and interviews that have been instrumental to clarify and enrich Foucault’s intellectual legacy. For four different overviews of Foucault’s work I refer to Rabinow’s *The Foucault Reader* (1984); Markula’s and Pringle’s *Foucault, Sport and Exercise: Power-Knowledge and Transforming the Self*; Nilsson’s and Wallenstein’s (2013) *Foucault, Biopolitics and Governmentality*; and finally, Kelly’s *Foucault, Subjectivity and Technologies of the Self* (2013).

he also drew on their legacy and traced new possibilities to think with and against them. As Markula and Pringle (2006: x) underline, Foucault did not consider his work “as a global systematic theory”. Similarly, Wallenstein (2013: 10) notes that:

If there is a unity [in Foucault’s intellectual production], it must rather be sought on the level of questioning, in the necessity of never remaining satisfied with the answer just given, and of constantly returning to the starting point in order to frame the investigation differently.

As much as these comments capture the complexity – and even a certain restlessness – that characterise Foucault’s thought, I believe it is possible to identify a series of focal points that represent the red thread of his intellectual production. As Foucault (2011: 8) comments – almost in the guise of an *ex post* programmatic statement – at the outset of ‘*The Courage of the Truth*’,<sup>9</sup> “[c]onnecting together modes of veridiction, techniques of governmentality, and practices of the self is basically what I have always been trying to do”.<sup>10</sup> This is an important consideration, as “these three axes” (Foucault 2010: 42), functioning as the premises and aims of his work, should be the primarily ground through which examine, comment and criticise it.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, it is attempting to emphasise these three lines of inquiry that I understand and deploy Foucault’s conceptual toolbox in this thesis

In this thesis I attempt to build bridges between Foucault’s different theoretical tools and my objects of analyses, unpacking how neoliberal imperatives and their dominant discourses translate into practice via specific pedagogies of salvation. More specifically,

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<sup>9</sup> *The Courage of the Truth: Lectures at the College the France in 1983-84* (2011) represents Foucault’s last course. He died shortly after in the June of the same year.

<sup>10</sup> At the beginning of the third lecture of ‘*The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the College the France 1982-1983*’ he similarly states that: “I have, if you like, devoted myself mostly to studying each of these three axes in turn: that of the formation of forms of knowledge and practices of veridiction; that of the normativity of behavior and the technology of power; and finally that of the constitution of the subject’s modes of being on the basis of practices of self” (Foucault 2010: 42).

<sup>11</sup> Speaking of criticisms, it is worth mentioning that Habermas (1981) charges Foucault of being “irrationalist”, giving rise to the so called “Foucault-Habermas debate” (e.g., Ashenden and Owen 1999; Habermas 1982, 1986; Mayes 2015) which contraposes Foucault’s understanding of power and genealogy with Habermas communicative rationality and discourse ethics. Writing within this climate, and partaking for Habermas’ critical theory, Nancy Frazer (1981: 272) argues that Foucault’s work is a mixture of “empirical insights and normative confusion”. Others, as rightly underlined by Colin Gordon (1991) criticise Foucault’s genealogies of punishment and sexuality as devoid of any analysis of the relationships between the State and society, the potential for social transformation, and the recognition of individual freedom; or, as mentioned by Wallenstein (2013: 10), take issue with his published work and his “mode of presentation” as “panoptical and totalizing” and thus mirroring “the forms of discipline that he wants to uncover” immobilising us “in the face of an irreversible dystopia”. Finally, feminist scholars such as Ramazanoglu (1993) and McNay (1992), among others, argue that Foucault fetishises the (male) aesthetic practice of self-constitution thus failing to frame his analysis within gendered social relations. Nevertheless, whether accurate or not, these criticisms have been mostly waved against Foucault prior to the publication of his lectures. As a consequence, they inevitably provide only a partial correction to Foucault’s intellectual production.

a focus on the pedagogies of salvation of modern forms of yoga may allow to show, in practice, how hegemonic discourses about health, the fit body, and practitioners' self are enacted within specific power relationships in the attempt to shape or self-fashion oneself into desired types of subject. In other words, I emphasise the processes through which specific discursive constructions and philosophical references translate into localised yoga practices through the guidance of the teachers and how they are then interiorised, embodied, and socially reproduced by yoga practitioners' themselves. In so doing, next to Foucault's attention to the centrality of discourse, a biopolitical interpretation of modern forms of yoga, and the possibility for an ethical self-constitution of the subject, I also revitalise Foucault's earlier conceptualisations of disciplinary power as particularly productive in exploring the centrality of the body in these processes of knowledge transmission, normalisation, self-management, and social reproduction.

In the next section, I provide a concise, closing reflection on a joint reading of Bourdieu's and Foucault's theoretical projects.

#### **4. Bourdieu and Foucault: A Productive Encounter?**

I would like to conclude this theoretical chapter with a preliminary reflection on the fruitfulness of theorising about modern forms of yoga relying on a joint reading of Bourdieu's and Foucault's theoretical projects. Of course, the theoretical and analytical potentials that derive from an encounter between these two authors have been preliminary explored by a number of scholars (e.g., Brindisi and Irrera 2017; Callewaert 2006, 2017; Laval 2017; Pedrini 2019; Sassatelli 2002; Shilling 2005), although an organic presentation of their relationships and connections is still largely missing. Perhaps, one of the main reasons why Bourdieu and Foucault are seldomly employed simultaneously in the processes of construction of analytical frameworks by today's social theorists, is that these authors remained substantially silent or expressed overt criticisms towards the intellectual production of the other<sup>12</sup> (e.g., Brindisi and Irrera 2017; Callewaert 2006;

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<sup>12</sup> To be more accurate, is Foucault that remained substantially silent regarding Bourdieu's intellectual production while Bourdieu was eager to differentiate his own work from Foucault's. For example, Bourdieu (2002: 245) argues in '*Le bal des célibataires*': "I would like to underscore the whole difference which separates the theory of symbolic violence as misrecognition based upon the unconscious adjustment of the subjective structures to the objective structures from the theory of Foucault concerning domination conceived of as discipline and dressage, or in another domain, the whole difference which separates the metaphors of Foucault like the open and capillary network from the concept of field". Or again, in a passing remark in '*Pascalian Meditation*' Bourdieu (2000: 102) further comments on Foucault's conception of power, stating that "[c]easing to be embodied in persons or institutions, power is differentiated and

Laval 2017). A notable exception to this general trend is the special issue ‘*Bourdieu/Foucault: un rendez-vous mancat?*’ (2017) published by ‘*Cartografie Sociali*’. In their editorial, Gianvito Brindisi and Orazio Irrera (2017: 9 my translation) discuss how the similarities and the differences of the thoughts of these authors “could be prolonged in epistemological and political terms”. In so doing, they argue about the fruitfulness of reading Bourdieu through Foucauldian categories, and the other way around, “with the aim to loosen the ambiguity of their relationship, measuring it in biographical and conceptual terms, but also to produce innovative and meaningful combinations, without remaining imprisoned within a more or less determined or totalising conceptual framework” (Brindisi and Irrera 2017: 10, my translation).

Other authors have followed a similar rationale, attempting to read Bourdieu and Foucault, respectively, through the theoretical lenses of the other, and in so doing, building also new possibilities of analyses. For example, Staf Callewaert (2006) provides a Bourdieusian critique of Foucault’s thought, emphasising how according to Bourdieu, Foucault epitomised the “double game” of philosophy, that is, “[the philosophical] critique of the very possibility of empirical science, without paying the price of learning the craft, and without turning the same critique against philosophy as well” (Callewaert 2006: 76).<sup>13</sup> Moreover, Callewaert (2006: 96) argues that although Bourdieu and Foucault shared similar fields of inquiry and at times provided similar problematisations to their respective objects of analysis:

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dispersed (this is probably what Michel Foucault meant to suggest, no doubt in opposition to the Marxist vision of the centralized, monolithic apparatus, with his rather vague metaphor of ‘capillarity’). Other references to Foucault’s theoretical projects and positioning within the field of academic production are discussed by Bourdieu in ‘*An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*’ (1992) and ‘*Homo Academicus*’ (1988).

<sup>13</sup> For instance, in the preface of ‘*Homo Academicus*’, Bourdieu (1988: xxiii–xxiv) discusses how, for the philosopher (read Foucault), “...the acknowledgment of the social sciences implies no unconditional surrender . . . the philosophers constantly mark . . . their statutory distance from the ordinary practitioners of the ‘so-called social sciences’ . . . . And they deploy all the resources of their culture in order to transfigure, perhaps above all in their own eyes, the ‘historicist’ philosophy which they borrow from social science along with many of its themes, its problems and its mode of thought. Thus is it that Foucault finds in Nietzsche an acceptable philosophical sponsor for the socially improbable combination of artistic transgression and scientific invention that he achieves and for the screen concepts which, like that of genealogy, help to provide a cover for an ambitious enterprise in social history or genetic sociology”. Or again, in the introduction of ‘*Science of Science and Reflexivity*’ (2004 [2001]) Bourdieu argues that: “[A]re sociology and historiography, which disclose the relativity of all knowledge by reporting these knowledges to their historical conditions, not condemned to recognise their own relativity as well, and by the way obliged to condemn themselves to a nihilist relativism? . . . in my opinion it is possible to combine a realist vision of the scientific world and a realist theory of knowledge . . . the relativistic arguments are only that forceful if they address a dogmatic and individualistic epistemology, that is to say a knowledge produced by an individual scientist who is confronting nature alone with his instruments (in opposition to a knowledge produced by a scientific field by means of dialogue and argument)” (Bourdieu 2001: 13 cited in Callewaert 2006: 79).

Bourdieu is comprehending both agent and structure, both discourse and action, respecting not only their different but their antagonistic logic, and therefore he is not, like Foucault, exposed to the danger of promoting the devastating trend in the social sciences today, where the everlasting need to tone down science, positivism and behaviorism lead to the absurd idea that social practice is nothing but free construction of meaning.

Similarly, in his review article of Foucault's concept of *dispositif*, Callewaert (2017) relies extensively on Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus, and dispositions to explore the similarities and the differences between these two authors' conception of power and of its workings. Here, Callewaert (2017: 47) underlines that, contrary to Bourdieu:

Foucault is not interviewing people, he is interpreting the texts people have left behind who were governing/conducting people to govern/conduct themselves. Because he is not interested in the factual implementation of peoples' thoughts in practices, does not want to know if they are acting upon their thoughts, doing what they taught one should do.

In other words, according to Callewaert and contrary to Bourdieu's praxeological sociology, Foucault is first and foremost interested in texts and their discursive injunctions, largely neglecting the study of actual practices. Nevertheless, Callewaert (2017: 49) concludes mentioning how "[b]oth Foucault's social history and Bourdieu's analysis of the structures of a field and the dispositions of habitus, insist upon the historical discontinuity, upon thinking in relations instead of in terms of substances". This is one of the landmarks of their theoretical projects, which in fact are devoted to unveiling any presupposed naturalism and instead reveal the historical contingencies of specific practical-discursive universes.

Christian Laval (2017), in turn, discusses Bourdieu's and Foucault's understanding of neoliberalism, tracing the similarities and the differences implicit in Bourdieu's sociology and in Foucault's history of neoliberalism. Laval (2017: 72) emphasises how these authors developed their respective interests for neoliberalism and the different methodological strategies that they mobilised to account for it, attempting to "move



beyond a purely exegetical operation”.<sup>14</sup> Conversely, he suggests that to trace “a concrete articulation [of Bourdieu’s and Foucault’s thought] cannot be made without addressing the all too unilateral viewpoints expressed by each of the authors” and therefore, that “[t]he task is to play the two authors off against each other, identifying what each one lacks” (ibidem). However, as Laval concludes, Bourdieu and Foucault had a very similar understanding of the critical role that intellectuals ought to play in society and “[t]he intellectual model they embody is entirely contrary to all the forms of submission imposed on the researcher” (ibidem), urging us to resist the “de-politicisation” of scholarly production disguised as its “professionalisation” and as the construction of “expert” knowledges.

Lorenzo Pedrini (2019), Roberta Sassatelli (2002), and Chris Shilling (2005), also, provide three different examples of fine sociocultural theorising through a coupled reading of Bourdieu’s and Foucault’s conceptual tools. Pedrini (2019: 343), in the attempt “to contribute to the advance of the “carnal ethnography” of martial arts and combat sports (MACS)”, relies on Bourdieu’s concept of habitus to discuss the workings of Foucault’s *dispositif*, focusing on the “sparring *dispositif*” that shape “a *localised pugilistic habitus*” in boxers’ bodies, while simultaneously configuring the *boxe popolare cosmos*” (Pedrini 2019: 433 emphasis in original). In so doing, Pedrini is capable of masterfully showing how despite their specificities, the conceptual tools of these two authors could be fruitfully juxtaposed in the process of constructing new frameworks of analysis. Similarly, Sassatelli (2002) explores the manners in which Foucault’s account of discipline, Bourdieu’s praxeological approach, and Goffman’s interactionism, can be complemented in the micro-sociological study of “fitness culture”. More specifically, Sassatelli (2002), following the invitation of Shilling’s sociology of the body (2012 [1993]), attempts to read these three theoretical streams of research in the light of an embodied paradigm where disciplining, social reproduction, and interaction

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<sup>14</sup> As rightly argued by Laval (2017: 64 emphasis in original), “[w]hile Bourdieu is concerned with neoliberalism’s main coming of age at the end of the 1980s and throughout the 1990s, Foucault demonstrates great foresight in his detection of the phenomenon by focusing on its earliest expressions. The revelation of a clear discontinuity in the political practices of the 1970s had not yet been emphasized in the intellectual and political *milieux*, and almost nobody had seriously considered the renewal of liberal ideas in certain spheres... Bourdieu’s sociology of neoliberalism developed under an extremely different set of circumstances, taking shape a decade later than Foucault’s, during a time when the effects of neoliberal politics had come to inform the world’s immediate realities, particularly those concerning labor, public services, housing, and cities. This strand of sociology therefore focuses more on the *social effects* of neoliberalism, as demonstrated by Bourdieu’s (1993) publication ‘*The weight of the world*’. Neoliberalism’s sociological construction is based on its objectifiable effects, according to a method that traces the causes from the effects”.

can be productively waved together in order to provide a multilayered understanding of fitness culture not solely based on a disciplinary reading, on a praxeological understanding of the gym, or on localised social interactions. Lastly, Shilling (2005) develops a theoretical framework centered around social actors' bodies, where Bourdieu's and Foucault's theoretical projects, alongside Goffman's interactionism and a phenomenological focus on social actors' experience and agency, are articulated within a single theoretical proposal. Here, Shilling (2005) underlines the strengths and the limitations of each one of the three major contemporary approaches to the study of the body (e.g., phenomenologists, social constructionists, and structuralists) and he proposes a new account able to embrace the significant advancements prompted by these lines of investigation. It is following this project, that Shilling (2005) develops "a theory of the body as a multi-dimensional medium for the constitution of society", where the body is simultaneously understood as a *source of*, a *location for*, and a *means to* the constitution of society. Here, as much as in Shilling's theorising more in general, Bourdieusian and Foucauldian echoes are prominent influences.

Overall, what emerges from my overview of Bourdieu's and Foucault's theoretical frameworks, coupled with the literature here briefly reviewed, is that both authors share a substantial refusal for any naturalism and face-value acceptance of the dominant paradigms that characterised the intellectual milieus of the France of the second half of the twentieth century. They distance themselves from Marxism and its understanding of ideology, deify the subjectivism of philosophies of consciousness such as phenomenology, which posit the subject as a self-originating source of meaning and action, and question – although they also substantially build on – various declinations of structuralism as applied to linguistic, sociology, and anthropology. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, Bourdieu and Foucault share also a relational, productive, and embodied understanding of power. In fact, as underlined by Gabriella Paolucci (2017: 139), "disciplines and norms as much as [habitus and] symbolic violence do not come into place via external conditions in reference to the subject, but operate "within" it".

Conversely, as Foucault's genealogical method reveals, different historical periods are characterised by great discontinuities rather than linear and progressive evolution, forcing Foucault to discuss a multitude of singular – although partially overlapping and partially divergent – forms of power and structures of knowledge as he moves across historical periods and fields on inquiry. On the contrary, Bourdieu's work seems to be

based on a more canonical understanding of history and on the assumption that symbolic forms of domination and social structures are inherently inert and only subject to gradual shifts. Of course, there are important methodological consequences deriving from these two different conceptions of history and understandings of the social order. Most notably, while Bourdieu's work is characterised by systematicity and the continuous refinement of the same conceptual tools tailored to account for a variety of fields and contexts of analysis, Foucault's methodology pushes him to constantly revisit what previously stated, thus opening new avenues of research and asking for more conceptual developments. Another crucial difference is that Bourdieu's reflexive sociology is an attempt to work within and against the social sciences emphasising the importance of methodological rigor, a search for objectivity, and the liberatory potential of sociological analyses from misrecognition and symbolic violence; while Foucault's archaeologies and genealogies presuppose a problematisation of all forms of knowledge, thus granting Foucault the fame of being substantially skeptical of any claim of and for objectivity, especially by the so called human sciences, that is, sciences that have man as their privileged object of analysis.<sup>15</sup>

However, after a close and extensive scrutiny of Bourdieu's and Foucault's bodies of work and of the secondary literature, I came to realise that what I dare to argue is perhaps the most distinctive feature of these thinkers in relation to the other: Bourdieu is primarily concerned with the study of social *practices* while Foucault's privileged objects of analysis, even when he studies practices, are *discourses*. Of course, this can be explained by the fact that Bourdieu, despite his proficiency and direct engagement within the philosophical field, is first and foremost a sociologist interested in the explanatory power of the social sciences; while Foucault, writing at the intersection of history and philosophy, largely made of the social and human sciences his own field of inquiry. Nevertheless, the fact remains that Bourdieu's sociological analyses focus predominantly on social practices while Foucault's historical explorations are concerned with the study

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<sup>15</sup> To reframe this point, it can be said that according to Bourdieu's reflexive sociology the social sciences are oriented to capture what of objective can be found in the production and reproduction of the social order and in so doing they are equipped to unveil the misrecognition that moves behind, or better, that constitutes the symbolic violence that is at the core of any mechanism of domination. On the contrary, we know that Foucault is suspicious of any forms of knowledge, especially scientific ones, as for him we could say that "misrecognition" is produced within those mechanisms of knowledge production (the sciences) oriented to provide their specific regimes of veridiction. In other words, for Foucault more than for Bourdieu, truth and power are inherently related and there is not truth behind power. As subtle as it might appear this is a tremendous difference that has drastically influenced the reception of Bourdieu's and Foucault's thought in the social and human sciences.

of discourses. Unfortunately, none of the literature that attempts to bridge Bourdieu's and Foucault's theoretical productions seems to sufficiently spell out this important difference, a difference that, it can be argued, epitomises both the incommensurability of Bourdieu's and Foucault's thought as much as the productive potentials of a coupled reading. It is following this intuition, or better, this understanding, that I decided to employ a coupled reading of these authors with the intention to inquire into the *circularity between discourses and practices*. In other words, the pedagogies of salvation studied in this thesis ought to be understood as the nesting point between discourses and practices as enacted within specific teacher-student relationships and processes of apprenticeship, and therefore as an invaluable ground to test the fruitfulness of a coupled reading of Bourdieu's and Foucault's respective projects.

Finally, I would like to provide a short note on my choice to apply different elements of this overall framework to the two case studies of the thesis. More specifically, I decided to apply a Bourdieusian approach with Foucauldian influences in the case of Odaka Yoga and a Foucauldian approach with Bourdieusian influences in the case of Mooji's teachings. The reason of this methodological and analytical strategy lies in the different ethos of these two groups: Odaka Yoga, as most modern postural yoga schools, makes of practice, its routinised performance, and repetitive interiorisation, one of its distinctive features, thus calling for a perfect match with Bourdieu's praxeological sociology; Mooji's teachings and his quasi-monastic ashram, Monte Sahaja, instead, are first and foremost the expression of the "truth" spoken by the teacher and therefore of devotees' attempt to devotedly comply with his true discourse, thus suggesting the feasibility of a Foucauldian interpretation as particularly productive. Nonetheless, the application of these two slightly distinct variations of a coupled reading of Bourdieu's and Foucault's theoretical projects should be understood as two possible declinations of the same framework whose distinctive feature is, as previously hinted at, the attempt to capture the circular and reciprocally reinforcing relationship between discourses and practices within the context of specific pedagogies of salvation.



# Chapter Two

## Research Design

### 1. Introduction

This chapter dissects the research design of the thesis, providing a detailed reflexive account of the epistemological reflections and methodological tools that guided the construction of this research. First, it starts discussing the overall interpretivist framework of the thesis and its open-ended nature; second, it provides a discussion of some of the most significant turning points encountered during the research; third, it offers a preliminary discussion of the two case studies selected; fourth, it turns to a presentation of the ethnographic and interview based methods of data collection and analysis implemented, arguing for the suitability of these methods in relation to the objects of study of this thesis.

### 2. Interpretative Social Sciences

In this thesis, I largely follow an interpretivist epistemology to the study of society, social action and social actors' experiences and everyday life. The roots of an interpretative epistemology are usually traced back to what Weber addressed as *verstehende soziologie*, namely a sociology that would give priority to the "understanding" of actors' social action, and Dilthey's earlier programmatic outline for the *geisteswissenschaften*, the positing of the human sciences as an independent epistemological field from the natural sciences.<sup>1</sup> Interpretivism, however, is only one among a series of influential social

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<sup>1</sup> This general orientation to social actors' worldviews and interpretations found progressive legitimisation in the social and human sciences through phenomenological and hermeneutical approaches and their sociological translations via

scientific “paradigms” commonly used within the social sciences, such as positivism, critical realism, and postmodernism, among others. Following the pioneering work of Thomas Kuhn (1970: 10 [1962]), scientific paradigms can be defined as “universally recognized scientific achievements that, for a time, provide model problems and solutions for a community of practitioners”. In Foucauldian terms, we can think of a paradigm as the expression of a specific “episteme”, that is, “...the total set of relations that unite, at a given period, the discursive practices that give rise to epistemological figures, sciences, and possibly formalized systems” (Foucault 1972: 191).

Scientific paradigms are not of exclusive domain of the social sciences. They cut across – and in certain cases even originate within – the human and the natural sciences. As a consequence, scientific paradigms are particularly difficult to neatly categorise and their systematisation is often times arbitrary. Moreover, to add a degree of complexity to these processes of systematisation and categorisation, there is the fact that scholars tend to mistakenly conflate a given paradigm with other building blocks of social scientific inquiries, such as theory and methodology (e.g., della Porta and Keating 2008). Of course, there is a symbiotic correspondence between different epistemological perspectives,<sup>2</sup> analytical frameworks and research methodologies, but these elements should not be reduced to one another. For the purpose of this chapter, however, it suffices to rely on the most common categorisation of social scientific paradigms, that is, a simplified juxtaposition of the macro categories of interpretivism and positivism<sup>3</sup> (e.g., Bevir and Blakely 2018; Rubinow and Sullivan 1979; Steinmetz 2005). More specifically, in what

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Schütz’s (see for example ‘*Collected Papers I*’ 1962 [1940]) sociological project, the pragmatist, symbolic interactionist and ethnographic orientation of the Chicago school (e.g., Becker 1963, 1984; Blumer 1969; Goffman 1959, 1961, 1967), ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967) and conversation analysis (Sacks 1995). Moreover, some of the most influential contributions to an interpretivist epistemology as it is usually framed in contemporary debates have been offered by anthropology’s (e.g., Clifford and Marcus 1986; Geertz 1973; Marcus and Fischer 1999 [1986]) quest to challenge the crises of representation and question the realist and objectivist claims of validity of ethnographic accounts together with postmodern critiques of scientific knowledge as inherently socially constructed (e.g., Lyotard 1979; Latour 1979; Latour and Woolgar 1986). Without attempting to conflate the methodological and analytical differences between these influential schools and approaches, it is accurate to underline that they all share a sensitivity towards a problematisation of the study of society and its face-value and taken for granted nature. They in fact reject the study of individuals’ behaviors and social structures within the framework of “a natural science of society” and instead give epistemological priority to the understanding of social actors’ experiences and actions through a close explorations of their processes of meaning attribution, use of symbols, language, practice and interaction. Finally, it is important to mention that the interpretative epistemology here mobilised is partly mitigated by and owns a share of its critical potentials to Durkheim’s structuralism or structural functionalism and its concerns for the prominence of society over social actors’ actions, beliefs and values and Foucault’s groundbreaking analyses of discourse.

<sup>2</sup> I employ the expression epistemological perspectives as a synonymous for paradigms.

<sup>3</sup> Interpretivism and positivism ought to be understood as macro-umbrella categories which are in turn internally differentiated in a number of more nuanced accounts and sub-categories. See also note 1.

follows I briefly discuss how interpretivism and positivism differ in terms of their respective conceptualisations of objectivity, the researcher's role and the historicity of knowledge, before introducing the pivotal notion of reflexivity.

In a nutshell, it could be argued that interpretivism, in its broadest formulation, is primarily concerned with the study of society through an appreciation of social actors' actions, experiences and worldviews<sup>4</sup> and of texts and their underlining discourses. An interpretivist epistemology is also particularly sensible to the role of the scholar in interpreting – and to a certain degree also in constructing – the object of his or her study<sup>5</sup>. Here, the relationships between the object of study, the methodologies of inquiry and the role of the scholar, are reflexively explored, problematising – to say the least – any claim of objective knowledge as existing independently from the processes of data collection and analysis, that is, from scholars' interpretations of the phenomenon explored (e.g., Bevir and Blakely 2018; Rubinow and Sullivan 1979; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2013). As a consequence, an interpretative epistemology acknowledges the context bounded nature of knowledge and the complementary potentials of different epistemologies.

Conversely, a positivist epistemology in the social sciences aims to study society and all its variegated manifestations through the application of the scientific method as developed within the natural sciences. Schematising, the scientific method functions as the means through which scientists objectively inquiry into an external and independent

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<sup>4</sup> Of course, although remaining within this general domain of interest, serious interpretative inquiries ought to problematise social actors' narratives and claims as expressions of specific historical, cultural, and social conditions and conditionings rather than simply take them as face-value renditions.

<sup>5</sup> These reflections are well exemplified by James Clifford's and George Marcus's (1986: 6-7 emphasis in original) introduction of their classic *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, as they discuss the fictional character of ethnography: "Ethnographic writings can properly be called fictions in the sense of "something made or fashioned," the principal burden of the word's Latin root, *ingere*. But it is important to preserve the meaning not merely of making, but also of making up, of inventing things not actually real...Even the best ethnographic texts – serious, true fictions – are systems, or economies, of truth. Power and history work through them, in ways their authors cannot fully control. Ethnographic truths are thus inherently partial – committed and incomplete. This point is now widely asserted – and resisted at strategic points by those who fear the collapse of clear standards of verification. But once accepted and built into ethnographic art, a rigorous sense of partiality can be a source of representational tact". As a consequence of the crises of representation epitomised by the previous quote, the last few decades of social scientific production have been characterised by a diffuse "...uncertainty about adequate means to describe social reality" (Marcus and Fisher 1999: 8), which brought to the exploration and experimentation of alternative forms of representation. For instance, essays (e.g., Geertz 1973), fictional accounts/narratives (e.g., Clifford and Marcus 1986; Mitchell and Charmaz 1996), autoethnography (e.g., Anderson 2006; Denshire 2014; Ellis and Bochner 2000, 2006; Rambo 2005; Wall 2016) and post-qualitative inquiries (e.g., Giardina 2017; St. Pierre 1997, 2017, 2019; Taylor 2017; van Ingen 2016), although still at the fringe of academic production, are increasingly accepted means of communicating research findings also in the social sciences. These non-conventional approaches demystify, first and foremost, the research process as a linear, subject-to-object relationship of discovery of an external objective knowledge and instead help to underline the central role of the researcher's own theoretical and emotional standing in his or her understanding, interpretation, and construction of the social world.



object of analysis. In turn, this object of analysis is framed as the uncontroversial location of an objective reality which simply awaits to be discovered and explained. Following a positivistic epistemology, in fact, the researcher is considered as a detached observer which through the application of the scientific method and its procedures is supposed to gain an objective knowledge of his or her object of study. This knowledge, in principle, should then be replicated and thus validated or falsified by other researchers given the same “external” conditions (e.g., Popper 2002 [1935]). In general terms, a positivist epistemology tends to favor the postulated universality of the scientific method it advocates and in so doing it claims hegemonic status within the sciences as their sole legitimate epistemology (e.g., Kincheloe and Tobin 2009; St. Pierre 2012, 2014, 2017, 2019; Wardell and Fuhrman 1981). Therefore, a positivist epistemology is ill equipped to account for the context-based nature of knowledge and its own historicity.

Social scientific research, in practice, is much more messy and unruly than a positivistic epistemology allows us to capture (e.g., Clifford and Marcus 1986; Feyerabend 1975; Lather 2007; St. Pierre 1997). Interpretive approaches such as hermeneutics, phenomenology and pragmatism, among others, could then be thought of as correctives to the misleading application of the natural scientific method to the human and the social sciences. Nevertheless, it is also important to underline that the strict adherence to the scientific method advocated by a positivist epistemology, as much as interpretivists’ concerns for social actors’ experiences and scholarly constructions, are equally the expression of specific scientific paradigms. Consequently, neither interpretivism or positivism – or any of their variations – should be taken as natural, ahistorical, or even as superior to other epistemologies. In line with a pragmatist position on “epistemological pluralism” in the social and human sciences (Dewey 1938), in fact, I contend that it should not be a blind subscription to a particular epistemology or school of thought to guide the research process but that epistemological preferences ought to be mitigated by a pragmatic concern for the most suitable methodological strategy for the thorough investigation of specific objects of study.

From this short and schematised juxtaposition of interpretivist and positivist epistemologies it emerges that the former presupposes a reflexive problematisation of the researcher’s chosen paradigm of inquiry and of his or her own personal history and point of view; while one of the main shortcomings of the latter, is, arguably, its substantial curtailing of the researcher’s own positioning and interpretative biases on the ground of

their postulated subjective and thus unscientific character<sup>6</sup>. On the contrary, as Bourdieu's (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 36-37; see also Bourdieu 1990b) reflexive sociology suggests, "reflexivity", defined "as the inclusion of a theory of intellectual practice as an integral component and necessary condition of a critical theory of society...aims at increasing the scope and solidity of social scientific knowledge" and not to challenge or vilify it. As Georgia Warnke (2013: 77) further suggests following Gadamer's hermeneutics, our historical situatedness as researchers:

means that the issues we bring to the process of interpretation are not our preoccupations alone but rather refer to issues and concerns that have developed within the historical tradition to which we belong...our understanding stems from the way in which the event or work has previously been understood and is thus rooted in the growth of a historical and interpretative tradition...these prejudices are not our personal property alone.

In other words, following Bourdieu and Warnke, the reflexive acknowledgment of one's own positioning in relation to the research process and the object of inquiry transcends a simple focus on the researcher's own history and point of view but it connects with broader methodological and disciplinary concerns. In fact, as postulated by Bourdieu's (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 46) reflexive sociology:

Far from encouraging narcissism and solipsism, epistemic reflexivity invites intellectuals to recognize and to work to neutralize the specific determinisms to which their innermost thoughts are subjected and it informs a conception of the craft of research designed to strengthen its epistemological moorings.

These reflections are the all more important as interpretive social scientists themselves tend to either accept face-value renditions of social actors' experiences and narratives or conversely brutally oppose any interest towards objective knowledge. In the former case, scholars are usually ideologically aligned with the "truth" conveyed by social actors and fail – through a poorly performed reflexive praxis – to problematise the "illusio" of the scientific field, that is, their involvement in what they study (e.g., Bourdieu 1984, 1988 1990a; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). The latter scenario – especially when exacerbated – falls into extreme forms of cultural relativism, ignoring, for instance, the tangible manners in which the objective structures of a given society have very practical

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<sup>6</sup> As rightly noted by Richard King's (1999: 76) reflections on Gadamer's hermeneutics, "those within the humanities and 'social sciences' (including philosophers) should object to the positivist hegemony of the paradigm of 'objective' knowledge and ahistorical truth furnished from the natural sciences and focus instead upon the historical givenness and particularity of our being-in-the-world".

repercussions for its inhabitants. In fact, I agree with Karen O'Reilly (2009: 2) as she argues that:

It is crucial that we conduct ethnography reflexively with constant awareness of our role in the research enterprise. However, this does not mean abandoning any sense that there is a real world we wish to learn about, and which our research participants live in, experience, feel constrained by, and help create.

Summarising, the interpretative epistemology followed in this thesis does not reject scholars' reliance on the scientific method *per se* or their attempts to grasp what of objective can be found in our societies. Conversely, it simply problematises the unquestioned notion of objectivity and of ahistorical knowledge promoted by a positivistic epistemology as applied to the social sciences.

In the following section I will expand on the open-ended and processual nature of interpretative research.

### **3. The Open-Ended Nature of the Research**

The object of study and the aims of this thesis required an interpretative and open-ended, or processual approach to research. This signifies that the study of the pedagogies of salvation of modern forms of yoga has been designed through a constant dialogue between the researcher's direct observations and interpretations of empirical data and theoretical knowledge. Else said, this approach can be labeled as "iterative-inductive" (O'Reilly 2005: 27), that is, a flexible approach to research design where the empirical reality investigated, theoretical considerations and tentative interpretations are interwoven together in each phase of the research process.

Such open-ended, iterative-inductive approach requires a specific form of reasoning which is neither based on the theoretically-driven approach typical of deductive reasoning, which searches in empirical reality for the validation or the falsification of a given hypothesis or theory; or the naturalistic observations that characterise inductive reasoning, which instead attempt to avoid imposed and thus potentially misleading theoretical constraints. This form of reasoning is known as "abduction"<sup>7</sup> (e.g., O'Reilly 2009; Pierce 1931; Shank 2006). Abductive reasoning forces us to recognise that whether we are more inclined to start our research from a given hypothesis or theoretical

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<sup>7</sup> It is important to state that I refer to abduction or abductive reasoning in its weak sense and merely as a heuristic device mobilised to emphasise the movement and circular relationships between theory and analysis, data, and interpretation and to question the existence of these elements as self-standing, independent parts of the research process.

consideration, or instead from a set of observations, these two domains are inextricable from one another and require a constant dialogue which is often multidirectional, circular and open-ended. In fact, as O'Reilly (2005: 38) underlines:

You start somewhere and end somewhere, but in the meantime you can go round in a few circles; in other words, design is continuous (Rubin and Rubin 1995). I have called this iterative-inductive research. I would argue it constitutes the crucial difference between quantitative and qualitative research and is what sometimes can make it so difficult to explain qualitative research to researchers used to quantitative methods”.

Others have used the label “emergent” (e.g., Charmaz 2008; Pailthorpe 2017) to address these features of qualitative research designs. However, whether addressed as open-ended, processual, iterative-inductive, abductive or emergent, the core of this approach to research is that it is always open to methodological, conceptual, theoretical and analytical redefinitions on the ground of new insights and unforeseen directions of inquiry. As a consequence, although I relied on a number of “sensitising concepts” (Blumer 1954) since the inception of this research, I have also attempted to constantly question my understanding and framing of the object of study, the research questions posed and the analytical frameworks mobilised on the ground of newly acquired conceptual proficiency and empirical evidence.

In the next section, I will reflexively explore some of the most dramatic moments that contributed to re-adjust the research design of the thesis and abandon some of the misleading ideological understandings on modern forms of yoga that I previously embodied in order to show the potentials and flexibility of this open-ended, interpretative approach for qualitative research, and more specifically for ethnography.

### ***3.1. Significant Turning Points***

During the past three years, I have serendipitously encountered several turning points that drastically influenced the re-focusing of the overall design of the thesis and changed profoundly my own life course. In this section, I discuss only two among these instances as a means of example of the reflexive and open-ended nature of the research. In order to contextualise the impact of these turning points on the research design of the thesis, however, I would like to begin with a very short biographical note. As I formally began this research in November 2017, I moved to Milan, Italy, away from Mooji's Portuguese ashram, Monte Sahaja, where I previously resided for about six months. Moreover, it is

also important to notice that before moving to Portugal I worked as a yoga instructor in a variety of centers in my own hometown, Genoa, for about two years. These biographical elements are relevant, since, I am myself a “scholar-practitioner” (Newcombe 2009; Singleton and Byrne 2008; Singleton and Larios 2021), as most scholars currently studying modern forms yoga. Moreover, my specific positioning in reference to yoga’s practical-discursive universe signified that at the moment of my enrolment as a PhD candidate in Sociology and Social Research at the University of Milan – Bicocca, I was strongly involved within my own field of study. In Bourdieusian terms, I was inextricably entangled with the “illusio” (e.g., Bourdieu 1977a, 1984; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) of the field, that is, the “belief, and involvement in the game that produces the game” (Bourdieu 1984: 86). Therefore, as I started the research, I inevitably approached the study of modern yoga through the ideological lenses of the devoted practitioner, positing yoga’s spiritual character and salvific potentials as unsurpassable truths that I was setting myself up to prove through my own sociological investigations. However, this perspective was short lived, as the recollection of the following episodes attempts to clarify.

The first significant turning point that I would like to discuss dates to the very beginning of the research. Between the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> of November 2017 Milan hosted the 12<sup>th</sup> edition of the ‘*International YogaFestival*’, a three-days gathering of international, national, and local teachers, yoga enthusiasts, curious and peripheral observers.<sup>8</sup> The festival was held at the Fabbrica del Vapore, a complex of ex warehouses in the middle of the city, today chiefly used for cultural events such as concerts, art exhibitions and fashion shows. The main showroom of the festival was dedicated to local yoga schools and their activities of recruiting, promotion, and advertising. Another saloon was staged to present activities and products closely related to the wellness and self-care

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<sup>8</sup> Now in its fourteenth edition, Milan based ‘*International YogaFestival*’ is the largest yoga gathering in Italy and among the biggest events in Europe. It usually unfolds in a three-days program characterised by a multitude of classes and lectures on different aspects of yoga. As the name suggests, it gathers prominent yoga figures from outside Italy as well. Most notably in the 2019 edition, next to legendary Italian teachers such as Antonio Nuzzo and Gabriella Cella, there were internationally renowned teachers such as the London based David Sye, founder of ‘*YogaBeats*’, an approach that merges yoga practices with rockmusic and that started when Sye was teaching in Belgrado as a means to alleviate the intense discomfort and stress brought by the war and to cover up its noises; and finally, the Scottish Stewart Gilchrist, one of the most important teachers in the London scene, where he teaches to soccer players, rockstars and aristocratic middle-age ladies. Also the founders of Odaka Yoga, Roberto Milletti and Francesca Cassia participated to the 2019 edition, where I conducted three days of fully immersed and participated field work. For an overview of the most important guest of the 2019 edition and their biographies see <https://www.yogafestival.it/milano/ospiti/> accessed October 11, 2019. Due to the current Covid-19 global pandemic there are still uncertainties regarding the modalities of the next edition of the Festival.

industry, such as massages of different kinds, biological food stuff, self-help books and so on. There were also: a space where the most renowned teachers held their master classes for a price ranging from 25 to 50 euros a hour; a series of smaller rooms dedicated to other yoga classes; a conference room; an expensive eatery serving rigorously only organic products; and finally, a spacious ground floor room staging a “traditional” Hindu ashram, labeled for the occasion as ‘the ashram in the city’.<sup>9</sup> More specifically, the participation to the 2017 edition, approached through the lenses of my research interests, was significant in several regards: first, I had a chance to attend a lecture on Patañjali’s ‘*Yogasūtras*’ delivered by Prof. Federico Squarcini, the major Italian scholar in the field of modern yoga research and the director of one of the four existing masters in Yoga Studies currently available worldwide.<sup>10</sup> The lecture was directed to demystify some of the major popular (mis)understandings surrounding the ‘*Yogasūtras*’, a text usually considered by modern yoga teachers and practitioners as the “bible” of yoga philosophy. At the end of the lecture, as I introduced myself to Prof. Squarcini and briefly summarised my main ideas for the, by then about-to-start PhD project, he directed me to some reading which proved to be essential for my subsequent framing of the thesis<sup>11</sup>. Second, this was my very first encounter with what could be readily addressed as an actual “spiritual marketplace” (Roof 1999), that is, a space dedicated to the exposition, promotion and consumption of yoga, related yoga brands and wellness products. Third, at the festival I had also the chance to introduce myself to a number of yoga schools’ representatives and make contacts for a series of preliminary interviews to yoga teachers which I then undertook in the following weeks.

Through the literature suggested by Prof. Squarcini I quickly gained a different understanding of yoga compared to what I previously held true. In fact, contrary to the

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<sup>9</sup> ‘*The ashram in the city*’ was organised in partnership with the Matha Svami Gitananda Ashram, one of the most prominent Hindu realities in the Italian context. Matha Svami Gitananda Ashram is located in the inland of Liguria, a North-Western region at the border with the Mediterranean Sea and France. The ashram was funded in 1984 by Yogananda Giri, a disciple of Swami Gitananda Giri (1907-1903), an important figure in the transnational development of modern yoga and neo-Hinduism, although not often discussed in academic literature. Yogananda Giri, besides being a worldwide authority in the field of yoga and tantra, is also the founder and president of the Italian Hinduist Union, ‘*Sanata Dharma Samgha*’ and honorary president of the ‘*Italian Federation Gitananda Yoga*’ and of the ‘*International Siddha Siddhanta Yoga*’.

<sup>10</sup> These four masters in Yoga Studies are offered respectively by the University Ca’ Foscari of Venice, Italy (of which Prof. Squarcini is the director); the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) of the University of London, UK; Layola Marymount University, Los Angeles, California; and finally, Naropa University, Boulder, Colorado.

<sup>11</sup> Most notably, he referred me to Carrette’s and King’s (2005) ‘*Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion*’ and Jain’s (2014a) ‘*Selling Yoga: From Counterculture to Pop Culture*’. These reading proved instrumental in equipping me with a critical and non-essentialising understanding of modern forms of yoga.

ideological understanding of the dedicated practitioner, I was finally exposed to an alternative reading of yoga, this time focused on its radically modern, transnational, historically bounded and surely commodified character. Moreover, through the series of preliminary interviews to yoga teachers (five in total) that followed to my participation to the festival, I was forced to reflect on the manners in which I was projecting my own understanding of yoga as an intrinsically spiritual practice into other practitioners' experiences, thus failing to acknowledge that yoga has a variety of meanings and is practiced for a variety of purposes by contemporary practitioners (e.g., Jain 2014a, 2014b; Newcombe 2018, 2019). For instance, I discovered that for some of these teachers, yoga had very little to do with anything spiritual and it was not necessarily perceived as a path towards self-realisation. On the contrary, yoga emerged as something closer to a self-care, therapeutic and leisure-oriented activity, something that for me was simply unconceivable until that moment. These "wake up calls", coming from both the voices of scholars such as Federico Squarcini and from yoga teachers themselves, were crucial allies in realising – and thus reflexively acknowledging – my own inextricable involvement within the discourses, philosophies and practices studied. Again, following a Bourdieusian framework, this proved invaluable in liberating myself – at least partially – from the "symbolic violence" (e.g., Bourdieu 1977a: 192, 237, 1984; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) and the subtle domination informing the "doxing relation to the social world" (e.g., Bourdieu 1977a: 168, 1984; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) characterising the yoga field. Consequently, after a series of self-reflexive explorations I was able to re-focus the aim of the thesis and its overall rationale away from the "misrecognition" (e.g., Bourdieu 1977: 168, 1984; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) and the partial and ideological understanding of yoga typically held by devoted practitioners. On the contrary, I reformulated the thesis towards a more critical appreciation of yoga's historically constructed nature and malleable character, attempting also to remain sensible to the variety of meanings that yoga holds for social actors, alongside its possible deployments as a pacifying and disciplining device. In so doing, I came to realise that it is also on the ground of its commodified, branded dimensions that the study of modern forms of yoga is a very relevant sociocultural phenomenon worth of sociological investigations, thus directing my attention to Odaka Yoga, one of the two case studies of this thesis. Odaka Yoga, in fact, as I will discuss in more details in the following chapters, presents itself as a poignant case of the changing nature of modern yoga and its adaptation to different

sociocultural environments. Also, it is a fitting example of the legitimising and differentiating strategies that contemporary yoga brands follow in the attempt to conquer a share of the yoga market in the context of an already saturated and highly commodified field.

A further serendipitous moment of re-focusing of the thesis is represented by a meeting that occurred with Dr. Amanda Lucia during the early phase of my visiting period at the University of Riverside California (UCR) in the Spring of 2019. Having heard that Mooji's teachings and ashram were one of the two main case studies of my research she asked me if I knew anything about the "scandals" and accusations about Mooji's sexual misconduct with some of his young followers. I did not. So, once back in my office I carefully read Be Scofield's (2019) anti-cult investigation '*Becoming God: Inside Mooji's Portugal Cult*' and although the article in question was clearly written in an accusatory tone and presented some inadequate information regarding Monte Sahaja and its social organisation, it gathered some evidences regarding the fact that more than one person had recently spoken out against Mooji. This brought me to search the internet for more detailed accounts and personal narratives. I discovered several anti-cult blogs and platforms and familiarised myself with a counter-narrative regarding the illegitimate, unethical, and even criminal behaviors of the guru I felt strongly devoted to until very recently. This discovery was crucial, to say the least, as it allowed me to gather a plethora of useful information that it would have been hardly possible to access during my field work in Portugal. Furthermore, together with the ashram's denial to conduct interviews with some of its members, it definitively pushed me outside of the community. Consequently, as prospects of further fieldwork vanished, I came to spend significantly less time focusing on Mooji's teachings and instead I prioritised a dedicated reflexive analysis of my own positioning as a "scholar-practitioner". It is at this point that I finally ceased to see Mooji as an embodiment of the truth I was after and begun to problematise his message of salvation. In other words, I finally understood Mooji's teachings as the outcome of very specific historical and sociocultural conditions and their translation and adaptation West, or to say it with Bourdieu (e.g., 1977a, 1984; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), as disguising very specific forms of dominations and symbolic violence under their spiritual and religious framings. This represented a drastic shift from my previous adherence to the legitimate discourse towards self-realisation promoted in the ashram, which posits enlightenment as an ahistorical and universal category that eludes rational



scrutiny, to a critical understanding of it as a “mere” cultural construct.<sup>12</sup> In fact, I came to the following conclusion, masterfully epitomised by Alter’s (2004: 238) discussion of yoga and self-realisation:

All claims to Universal Truth that purport to transcend the domain of culture are seductive. But because these claims always emerge from situated social and time-bound knowledge they are, in many ways, based on a profound contradiction. Social science is designed to study the manifestations of this contradiction on different levels, and in different forms, by coming to understand all knowledge as a social construct. However, the unself-consciousness of claims to Universal Truth found in religion and science are of particular interest as forms of knowledge, because they provide a means by which to engage in critical social analysis on a scale that extends beyond situated knowledge and the cultural form of any given construction.

Of course, it should be needless to say that a skepticism towards “all claims to Universal Truth” and their “seductive” power is at the base of any serious sociological study, especially in the field of religious and spiritual disciplines. Nonetheless, as underlined by scholars such as Veronique Altglas (2014a), among others, there seems to be a tendency in contemporary sociology of religion to take social actors’ claims of self-realisation and self-determination at a face-value, without inquiring into their socially constructed and disciplining nature. Fortunately, my own biographical trajectory from devotee to scholar allows me to fully understand both worlds, that is, to capture the importance of certain discourses and practices for contemporary yoga practitioners without failing to see them in the light of their socially and discursively constructed nature.

Finally, the reflections provided in this section played a central role in guiding me to re-focus the research design of the thesis towards a more critical and multilayered appreciation of the social organisation of modern forms of yoga and their pedagogies of salvation, with a specific interest in the teacher-student relationship and the apprenticeship processes of the modern yogi. In the following two sections, I am going to introduce the two case studies of the thesis before providing a rationale for their selection.

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<sup>12</sup> For similar, although not identical, processes of re-positioning in relation to religious and spiritual matters see Stefania Palmisano’s (2012) *La Sindone, Lo Yoga e il Tofu*, for a scholarly account of an interrupted conversion into an Italian religious movement; and Emmanuel Carrère’s (2014) *Le Royaume*, a stinging biographical account of the author’s discovery and rejection of his Christian faith. I would like to thank my friend Federico for suggesting me to read the latter. Finally, also Remski’s (2019) *Practice and All is Coming* is instructive in these regards.

#### 4. Odaka Yoga

*Odaka yoga* is style or brand of yoga developed by the internationally acclaimed Italian yoga teachers and entrepreneurs Roberto Milletti and Francesca Cassia. On their website, Odaka Yoga is introduced as launching a “new concept”, that is, “Live Centered, Liquefy Your Limits, Embrace The Power”,<sup>13</sup> thus positioning Odaka Yoga at the intersection of a series of popular discourses about health and wellbeing, flexibility and performativity, self-control and self-actualisation, among others. Odaka Yoga finds its philosophical foundations in the traditions of Bushido (the way of the warrior), Zen and yoga. Furthermore, the natural rhythm of the ocean waves and biomechanics are crucial to Odaka Yoga’s philosophical and discursive self-representation.

As I will explore in more details in Chapters Three and Four, Odaka Yoga innovates modern postural yoga on a number of points, most notably including a strong emphasis on martial arts elements and biomechanics within its discursive and practical repertoire. Simultaneously, it also waves these distinctive practical-discursive universes within some of the tropes of modern postural yoga, that is, yoga’s representation as a health enhancing practice targeting practitioners’ minds and bodies, grounded in ancient Indian indigenous knowledge and whose authenticity and efficacy can be further supported by Western science and medicine. In other words, Odaka Yoga is a perfect example of hybridity and entrepreneurial bricolage between different Asian and Western systems of knowledge. As I will expand in the analytical chapters of the thesis, fitness and wellness, spiritual, and therapeutic instances are successfully blended together in Odaka Yoga, thus creating a unique product able to satisfy the exotic taste for health enhancement, self-care and self-actualisation of it largely middle-class audiences.

I gained access to the field in March 2018 after having conducted preliminary participatory observations in other four postural yoga schools in the city of Milan, Italy (from November 2017 to February 2018). Access to all the five schools, Odaka Yoga included, has been gained through preliminary e-mail and/or phone contact to the schools, which, nonetheless, represented only a fourth of the twenty schools that I initially contacted. I choose to contact these twenty schools as they represented an heterogeneous array of postural yoga styles and approaches, ranging from more “traditional” ones, such as the Milanese branches of Sivananda Society and Satyananda School of yoga, to more

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<sup>13</sup> <https://odakayoga.com/en/about/concept/> accessed May 11, 2019.

fitness oriented and “commodified” schools, such as the glamorous studios Revolution and YogaMilan. Also, during these preliminary explorations, I have attended smaller, home like classes located in the basements or living rooms of teacher’s home. Finally, I decided to conduct my research focusing on Odaka Yoga because contrary to more “traditional” schools, based on a rather ideological and sectarian understanding of what yoga is and how it ought to be practiced, it offers a perfect example of the changing nature of modern yoga and its adaptation strategies to different sociocultural environments. In fact, its eclectic philosophical backdrops make of Odaka Yoga a poignant example of the legitimising and differentiating strategies that contemporary yoga brands follow in the attempt to conquer a share of the yoga market in the context of an already saturated and highly commodified field. In other words, although more traditionally inclined schools are certainly still relevant sociocultural milieus worth of sociological exploration, I consider Odaka Yoga as more paradigmatic of the latest developments of the field of modern postural yoga, that is, of its simultaneous increasing hybridity and internal differentiation dynamics.

As I have previously hinted at, Odaka Yoga situates itself at the intersection of the fitness and wellness industry and the landscape of contemporary spirituality, thus somehow functioning as a middle point between more traditional schools and those completely focused on fitness and performativity. In this guise, Odaka Yoga offers a particularly privileged viewpoint on postural yoga malleability, that is, its ability to adapt, accommodate to and integrate different discourses regarding practitioners’ health, body-mind balance, and projects of self-constitution and self-actualisation. Of course, another element that I considered when selecting the case studies for this thesis is that although there has been a fair amount of research on different styles of modern postural yoga such as Iyengar, Ashtanga, Bikram, and Sivananda, among others, Odaka Yoga is to date completely unexplored despite its growing popularity and its innovative approach to yoga.

Most of the Odaka Yoga teachers and practitioners that I practiced with are women. During my participatory observations of weekly classes, I usually was the only man in the yoga hall. Moreover, while during master classes and events the number of male practitioners increases, men remain a small portion of the total number of practitioners. The average age of Odaka Yoga practitioners ranges between 25 to 50 years old. Most of them are professionals working in fields as diverse as the fitness and wellness industry,

service provision and business, from administrative to managerial positions. Regarding the ethnic constitution of the Odaka Yoga community explored, the greatest majority of the practitioners I have met, interviewed or practiced with are of Caucasian origins, indeed mostly native Italian.<sup>14</sup> A more detailed analysis of Odaka Yoga practitioners' sociodemographic constitution is provided in Chapter Five.

Between March and June 2018 I have participated twice a week to the Odaka Yoga classes conducted at the Yoga and Pilates Studio '*JustB*', whose owner, Beatrice Morello, is one of the most prominent Odaka Yoga teacher next to Roberto Milletti and Francesca Cassia. This studio is located at the intersection of one of the most popular shopping streets of Milan, Corso Buenos Aires, and Piazza Loreto, right at the center of a number of Milan shopping, business and residential districts. Moreover, I have also attended several special events such as master classes, charity classes and teacher training classes in the period ranging from June to December 2018. Most of the interviews to Odaka Yoga teachers have been carried out in this period. I also conducted a three days intensive participated observation of Odaka Yoga during the '*Milan YogaFestival*' 2019 edition. Finally, it is worth mentioning that my original research plan included the participation to an Odaka Yoga intensive teacher training during the summer 2020. However, due to the Covid-19 global pandemic and the complexity of collecting a new body of material at an advanced stage of the analysis process,<sup>15</sup> I simply decided to postpone this specific development of my research. Nevertheless, in date 29/06/2020, this summer intensive, to

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<sup>14</sup> However, Odaka Yoga has a very strong following in Australia, Japan, and China. Whether this is due to its martial arts components or simply to the social networks and the market opportunities that its founders were able to pursue is something that ought to be studied in more details. Moreover, although within the framework of this thesis I lacked the resources to inquiry more deeply into other Odaka Yoga sociocultural milieus besides the Italian one, there are good reasons to believe that they would have a rather similar sociodemographic constitution, with the notable exception of the ethnic dimension.

<sup>15</sup> This became increasingly clear, as, even before Covid-19 hit Europe, I was reflecting together with Prof. Gianmarco Navarini and Dr. David Brown on the best course of action. On the one hand, I thought that attending a teacher training course would have added a deeper understanding of the pedagogies of Odaka Yoga, allowing me to study the processes of apprenticeship of the Odaka Yoga teacher within its formal protocol. This is something I set myself to do in the future, and that, surprisingly, is still completely neglected by the literature on modern forms of yoga. On the other hand, exploring the analytical potentials and directions of the thesis on the ground of the material at my disposal and the stage of the analysis in February 2020, it became increasingly clear that I already had sufficient ethnographic material to provide detailed and multi-layered analyses of the pedagogies of modern postural yoga, the teacher-student relationship and the apprenticeship process. As a consequence, I thought that to participate to a teacher training only two months before the formal submission of the thesis could have been a counterproductive approach and a methodologically unwise choice as it could have potentially forced me to re-read all my empirical data and analyses in the light of new information without having the sufficient time to do it satisfactorily.

be carried out between July 26<sup>th</sup> to August 9<sup>th</sup> at the Paros Island, Greece, was finally confirmed.

## 5. Mooji's Teachings and Monte Sahaja

Mooji (born Anthony Moo-Young in 1954-) is a neo-Advaita, Jamaican born teacher. He is considered by himself and his followers as a direct representative of the lineage of the Indian sage Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950) through his relationship with the teachings of H.W.L. Poonja (1910-1997), also known as Poonjaji or Papaji, Mooji's own teacher. The core of Mooji's teachings postulates, as hinted at in the introduction, is that individuals' "true self" (*atman*) is one and the same with ultimate reality (*Brahman*) and that the purpose of existence is to realise one's own "god-self" (*brahmajñāna*, literally god-realisation). He proposes two ways to experientially confirm the spiritual salvation he advocates for: self-inquiry (*jñāna* or *atma-vichara*), a contemplative practice thought to grant instant enlightenment; and '*The Invitation*' (his own simplified method of self-inquiry).

*Monte Sahaja* is Mooji's sole ashram, a quasi-monastic community located in Alentejo, a rustic region of Southern-Portugal. The area is known for its rural heritage, its eucalyptus forests prone to fires during the extremely hot summers, and lately for hosting Mooji's ashram. The village of São Martinho, as much as a series of villages and small towns nearby, in fact, were in the mist of dramatic demographic decline. However, thanks to the growing flow of Mooji's devotees moving in the area in order to be closer to their teacher, these villages are now regaining life. Monte Sahaja is structured following a neo-Vedantic rendition of the tripartite model of yoga advocated in the '*Bhagavadgita*' (III B.C.E.—I C.E.). Here, devotees are immersed in a quasi-monastic lifestyle organised around work, contemplation, and prayer.

The ashram hosts people from all over the world and its official language is English. The permanent residents are about two hundred but during the Winter this number significantly decreases. However, during retreats (4–5 per year lasting from 7 to 10 days each) the ashram hosts up to thousand people. Most of the permanent residents are Europeans (mostly from UK, Italy, Spain, Portugal, and France) between 25 to 45 years old of age, although there is no lack of notable exceptions, both in terms of age and country of origin. Among the other geographies represented in the ashram's socio-demographic constitution figure with a certain prominence Russia and USA. The number

of Indian residents is also increasing. The gender constitution of the ashram is rather balanced, while Caucasian seems to be the prevalent macro-ethnic group.

I choose Mooji's teachings and ashram as the second case study of this thesis as they offer a perfect example of contemporary gurus' attempts to modernise, adapt, and innovate traditional Hindu and yoga practices to the cultural and epistemological frameworks of their mostly Western followers. Also, this case study is a poignant example of how the guru-disciple relationship – and the exercises of power, charismatic authority, surrender, devotion, and obedience that it implies – unfolds into the context of Western neo-guru movements. Moreover, Mooji's teachings gather an international community of seekers both within the ashram's premises and through the internet. Thus, exploring this case study contributes to build on the previous scholarship that has already begun to investigate the changing nature of the guru-disciple relationships in the context of transnational networks of devotion. Finally, although there have been several studies exploring different modern yoga gurus and their communities of devotees, Mooji's teachings have to date remained almost completely unmapped, despite his international prominence. It is also important to underline that considering the complexity of accessing a research field such as a spiritual community, I considered my own internal positioning within this group as a serendipitous fact that could well serve the development of this ethnographic inquiry.

I formally began my field work within the ashram's premises in the Spring of 2017 (6 months stay) and since then I have returned to Portugal twice (April 2018 for one week and September 2018 for one month). In April I only participated in a 7 days silent retreat organised in a nearby echo village, '*Zmar*'; while in September I resided in the ashram for three weeks and spent the final week participating, once again, in a 7 days silent retreat, still in '*Zmar*'. In both cases, I served as part of the ashram's translation team, offering simultaneous translation of Mooji's teachings from English to Italian. Although I originally planned to come back for more observations and gather a number of interviews with Mooji's devotees sometimes in 2019 or 2020, my distance with Mooji and his teachings grew apart when I discovered about the accusations of sexual abuse and other scandals surrounding his figure and when I have been denied the possibility to freely interview his devotees.

To be more precise, in January 2019 I began a close correspondence with the ashram's publication office aimed at obtaining formal consent to conduct interviews in

Monte Sahaja. I presented to them an overview of my research project, a link to a copy of my article ‘*Serving, Contemplating and Praying*’ (Di Placido 2018) – where I provide a series of ex-post autoethnographic reflections on my experience in Mooji’s ashram – and a formal request to come back to the ashram later the same year to interview around 10 devotees. Together with this initial query I also provided a preliminary interview grid and a list of concepts that I intended to use to analyse the interview material. I was first told that my request would be brought to Mooji but I had to solicit the ashram twice before being able to set up a skype talk with the ashram’s publication office which finally took place the 2<sup>nd</sup> of April 2019, after being re-scheduled a couple of times due to their last minute unavailability. The talk, although always friendly, was slightly uncomfortable, as my researcher’s positioning was clashing with the devotee’s mindset of the two persons I was taking to. As I presented to them the main research focus on my PhD they found it simultaneously intriguing but also potentially inappropriate as it aimed to bring under critical scrutiny the teachings of their guru and the manners in which his community was organised. For instance, as I jotted down during our talk, one of the them commented: “I would not want to convey Mooji’s teaching as a process of socialization since the way we are moving in Sahaja springs naturally from everybody’s heart”, or again. “I see as problematic to bring something that is beyond concepts into a conceptual framework”. Nevertheless, the main outcome of this talk was that I was reassured, once again, that my request to interview Mooji’s devotees would be brought to Mooji as soon as possible. However, the ashram’s publication office also put a series of conditions for this to happen: first, the ashram itself wanted to select the informants and keep a copy of the transcripts of the interviews; second, they requested access to the final manuscript of the PhD thesis with the right to revise it, asking for two months to revise the whole manuscript; and third, they suggested that I signed a paper where I would subscribe to the ashram’s terms and conditions regarding how to dispose of the data gathered. This, I was reassured, was a normal procedure as Mooji’s teachings – or better, its videos and books – were under copy right and so the circulation of any material pertaining to them ought to be checked by the ashram’s publication office.

Naturally, I felt that my positioning as a researcher was in check and that my previous involvement in the community as a devotee was finally over. I immediately wrote to my supervisor explaining to him the situation and together we decided that it was better to not sign any paper even if this would have meant not being able to carry out any interview

with Mooji's devotees. My correspondence with the ashram slowed down and I only heard back from them at the beginning of July when I was notified by a short WhatsApp audio message – from one of the two people I previously talked to – that Mooji decided to deny me any type of interview to his devotees. More specifically, the core of the audio was: “We very much love you and regard you as part of the Sangha but the PhD itself does not feel like a strong enough reason to come and spend time here in Sahaja”.

It is possible to read Mooji's resistance to allow me to interview some of his devotees as one of the consequences of the heated attacks and accusations directed towards Mooji and his ashram which culminated with the publication of Be Scofield's article '*Becoming God: Inside Mooji's Portugal Cult*'. I will expand on this in Chapter Six. For now, I would simply like to add that I only heard from the ashram once more, in October 2020, this time from the ashram's translation team of which once I was a proud member. They asked me if I was available to continue my seva, that is, translate Mooji's teachings from English to Italian so as to make them more readily intelligible to his Italian followers. I politely declined. I never heard from them since.

To compensate for the impossibility to gather fresh interviews with Mooji's devotees I then traced some biographical narratives regarding Mooji's devotees following a number of secondary sources such as a series of twelve interviews conducted in 2015 by Bill Free (Mooji's devotee and spiritual teacher in his own right);<sup>16</sup> a recent piece on the online Spanish newspaper '*El Confidencial*',<sup>17</sup> where a number of Mooji's devotees were interviewed with a focus on their life before and after meeting him; and finally, a section of Mooji's website called '*Voices from Satstang*'<sup>18</sup> where a total of seventy-seven videos and written testimonials are gathered among Mooji's closest devotees, ashram's residents and retreat' participants. Naturally, this type of material is far from ideal as it is not gathered with scholarly concerns in mind but it either uncritically advocates for Mooji's teachings as in the cases of Bill Free's interview series or the '*Voices from Satsang*' or it portrays a colourful journalistic account of devotee's biographical trajectories.

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<sup>16</sup> <https://soundcloud.com/billfree/sets/a-journey-with-mooji> accessed April 30, 2020.

<sup>17</sup> [https://www.elconfidencial.com/mundo/europa/2019-09-02/ganaba-120-000-euros-en-endesa-pero-soy-mucho-mas-feliz-en-esta-comuna-espiritual\\_2204499/](https://www.elconfidencial.com/mundo/europa/2019-09-02/ganaba-120-000-euros-en-endesa-pero-soy-mucho-mas-feliz-en-esta-comuna-espiritual_2204499/) accessed April 20, 2020.

<sup>18</sup> <https://mooji.org/voices-from-satsang> accessed April 30, 2020. Interesting enough, this section, together with Mooji's own biography were added to Mooji's official webpage only sometimes during the second half of 2019, probably as an attempt to counterbalance the very negative rumors that started to colonise the internet after White's earlier accusation of sexual promiscuity and abuse and Scofield's anti-guru reportage.



#### **4. Ethnographic Research Methods, Data Collection, and Analysis**

I now turn to the presentation of the actual research methods of data collection and analysis implemented in this thesis. More specifically, I discuss the sensorial (Pink 2015), carnal and participated approach (e.g., Sánchez García and Spencer 2013; Wacquant 2004, 2015) to ethnographic data collection and analysis and the biographical interview method here followed. I will also provide a note on the suitability of these methods in relation to their respective objects of analysis. However, before exploring these research methods in some more details, I would like to provide a short contextualisation of what ethnography is, as both a research method and as a representational strategy.

As Hammersley and Atkinson (1995: 1) put it:

In its most characteristic form...[ethnography] involves the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions – in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research.

In this guise, ethnography is an inherently multilayered research method that cannot be confined to the mechanical reproduction of specific methodological steps. On the contrary, it requires a flexible and pragmatic attitude on the side of the ethnographer. In other words, the ethnographer must closely engage with specific communities, skillfully moving between “detached” observations and active participation in the activities and practices studied. In fact, as Karen O'Reilly (2005: 109) underlines, echoing Bronislaw Malinowski, “[p]articipating enables the strange to become familiar; observing enables the familiar to appear strange”.

Ethnography is not only a specific method of data collection but is also a “hybrid textual activity” that “traverses genres and disciplines” (Clifford 1986: 26). Ethnography is bound to the writing process and its final product, the ethnographic text. In fact, as Geertz (1973: 19 emphasis in original) underlines, “[t]he ethnographer “inscribes” social discourse; he writes it down. In so doing, he turns it from a passing event, which exists only in its own moment of occurrence, into an account, which exists in its inscriptions and can be reconsulted”. Of course, in line with the overall interpretative approach of this thesis, the representations that the ethnographer provides have to be considered as “inherently partial – committed and incomplete” (Clifford 1986: 7) and not as realist accounts of a social world that lies out there waiting to be discovered and objectively

described by the researcher. However, such a critical understanding of the objective or realist claims of ethnographic writing should not discourage the researcher from emphasising the materiality of social actors' everyday life (O'Reilly 2009: 2) and link it with broader sociopolitical processes and concerns (Marcus and Fischer 1999: 43-44). In other words, even maintaining a critical stance towards the supposedly objective character of ethnographic representations, there are no excuses for failing to thoroughly make sense of social actors' experiences, whether from their own perspective or from the standpoint of professional theorising. Ethnography, and for that matter qualitative research more in general, in fact, loses its meaning when it lacks a concrete grounding on empirical reality, though uncertain and tentative this grounding might be in the first place.

Finally, it is important to notice that the participant observations that characterise this ethnographic work are conducted within short and intense field work periods, typical of "focused ethnography" (Knoblauch 2005; Wall 2015). Contrary to classical, or traditional ethnographies, where the researchers would spend years in the field, this project relies on several, shorter visits.

In the next two sections, I will discuss the multisensorial, carnal, and participated approach to ethnography and the biographical interview method used in this thesis.

### ***6.1. Multisensory, Carnal, and Participated Ethnography***

In this thesis, I largely rely on Sarah Pink's (2015) "multisensory ethnography" and Loïc Wacquant's (e.g., Sánchez García and Spencer 2013; Wacquant 2004, 2015) "carnal" and "participated" approach to the ethnographic trade.<sup>19</sup> These two perspectives to fieldwork share a commitment to rethink the dominance of the visual, representational, and literary dimensions of "traditional" approaches to ethnography – and the social sciences more in general – emphasising the centrality of the senses, the body and embodiment as useful tools of data collection and precious aids in the theorising process. In other words, they are particularly instrumental in competently dissect the micro-political and micro-sociological processes that constitute the pedagogies of salvation and the apprenticeship processes of the modern forms of yoga investigated in this thesis. In the following, I delineate my understanding of a multisensorial, carnal, and participated ethnography as

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<sup>19</sup> See also Wacquant (2013b, 2014).

emerging at the intersection of three ethnographic pitfalls, namely *apprenticeship*, *emplacement*, and *full participation*.

“Apprenticeship” can be defined as “the process of developing from novice to proficiency under the guidance of a skilled expert” (Downey, Dalidowicz and Mason 2015: 183). In line with a long-standing ethnographic tradition of participant observation, its deployment as a research method enhances the ethnographer’s ability to collect, in practice, multilayered information regarding the phenomenon studied and to actively theorise using one’s own body (e.g., Downey 2005; Downey, Dalidowicz and Mason 2015; Jakubowska 2017; Sánchez García and Spencer 2013; Wacquant 2004, 2005, 2011). Here, the ethnographer’s body functions as “the empirical window through which to understand better lived experience, meanings, practices, and how those experiences are articulated in socio-cultural relations” (Sossa 2017: 2), or as a tool “to navigate and chart interpersonal power, access to emic types of knowledge, first-hand experience of the pedagogical milieu, and avenues to acquire cultural proficiency” (Downey, Dalidowicz and Mason 2015: 183). Moreover, the ethnographer’s body is also a powerful instrument for “carnal knowledge” (Wacquant 2011: 81), a form of scholarly theorising aligned with “the imperative of epistemic reflexivity” (ibidem). In simpler terms, apprenticeship allows the researcher to learn how one learns, that is, to learn what he or she is studying through practicing it. As Pink underlines (2015: 107):

Learning through apprenticeship requires an emplaced engagement with the practices and identities that one seeks to understand. This involves a reflexivity and self-consciousness about this learning process, establishing connections between sensory experience, specific sensory categories and philosophical, moral and other value-laden discourses (and the power relations and political processes they might be connected to) and creating relationships between these and theoretical scholarship.

As a consequence, apprenticeship allows to approach the “social nature of epistemic, affective, and moral dimension of embodied practice” (Sánchez García and Spencer 2013: 1) and “the apprenticeship of the researcher can be adopted as a mirror of the apprenticeship undergone by the empirical subjects of the study” (Wacquant 2011: 81). Of course, this is particularly important, when, as in the case of this thesis, the object of research itself is the apprenticeship process of the modern yogi as regulated by specific teacher-student relationships and pedagogies of salvation.

Integral to the concept, or method of apprenticeship are the ones of “emplacement” and “full participation”. The former can be defined as the “sensuous interrelationship of

body-mind-environment” and is a crucial aid in providing ethnographic descriptions and analyses able to “reposition ourselves [and the research participants] in relationship to the sensuous materiality of the world” (Howes 2005: 7). Emplacement, echoes with the principle of “immersive fieldwork” (e.g., Throsby 2016; Wacquant 2015), “through which the investigator acts out (elements of) the phenomenon in order to peel away the layers of its invisible properties” (Wacquant 2015: 5). Again, as Karen Throsby (2016) underlines in her autoethnographic account of marathon swimming, poignantly titled ‘*Immersion*’:

my own immersion in the social world of marathon swimming disallows any innocent critique, forcing me instead to consider my own complicity in those values and their associated practices as inextricable from both the intense, consuming corporeal and social pleasures that immersion offers and the social privileges that facilitate those pleasures.

The latter, in turn, is “an unrestricted affective and relational commitment on the part of the ethnographer doing fieldwork” (Halloy 2016: 7). However, as Halloy (2016: 10) continues:

full participation is in no way a panacea for all ethnographic inquiries. I understand it as both a relational attitude towards oneself and the others and a useful methodological toolbox for ethnographers interested in topics such as emotions, the senses, experience or, more broadly speaking, cultural subjectivities.

As a consequence, the ethnographer that embraces a full participation technique, that is, that decides to organise his or her observations around the principle of participation rather than the one of “detached” observation, should be particularly careful in balancing his or her “unrestricted affective and relational commitment” with the field. This is possible only through a rigorous reflexive praxis involving diary writing and theoretical and methodological rigor. Full participation overlaps with what Wacquant (e.g., 2004, 2015) has famously labelled “observant participation”, namely the attempt to explore specific relationships, practices and social processes as unfolding in social actors’ “natural habitat”, thus avoiding the danger of gathering “dramatized and highly codified (re)presentation” (Wacquant 2004: 6) of the phenomenon studied. More specifically, as Wacquant (2013a: 27-8 emphasis in original) further comments:

My position, on the contrary, is to say, ‘go native’ but *go native armed*, that is, equipped with your theoretical and methodological tools, with the full store of problematics inherited from your discipline, with your capacity for reflexivity and analysis, and guided by a constant effort, once you have passed the ordeal

of initiation, *to objectivize this experience and construct the object*, instead of allowing yourself to be naively embraced and constructed by it. Go ahead, go native, but come back a sociologist!

A presupposition of Wacquant's observant participation is his reliance on Bourdieu's concept of habitus, as both a "topic and tool" (e.g., Wacquant 2004, 2013a). Habitus, defined as "[a] structuring structure, which organises practices and the perception of practices" (Bourdieu 1984: 170) is here simultaneously mobilised as: first, a topic of investigation in itself as it allows to inquire into how modern yoga practitioners acquire the specific "yogic habitus" that characterises the ethos of their school (in turn related to the broader ethos of the yoga field), exploring the permeability and circular relationship between discourses and pedagogical practices and the homology between practitioners' positioning in the yoga field and in the broader sociocultural field; second, a research tool, that is, a privileged instrument "to decipher action and meaning from the body and with the body" (Sánchez García and Spencer 2013: 5).

It is important to consider the advantages that a joint use of apprenticeship, emplacement (or immersive field work) and full participation (or observant participation) can give to ethnographic explorations, more specifically to an ethnographic study of the social organisation of modern forms yoga through their pedagogies of salvation and processes of apprenticeship. Taken together, apprenticeship, with its focus on practices and situated learning; emplacement, with its focus on the sensuous, bodily, carnal and material dimensions of field work; and finally, full participation, with its predilection for participation and direct involvement, contribute to position the role of the body as something to think with (Haraway 1997) when doing ethnography. Here, the "scholarly body", as Pierini and Groisman call it, (2016: 2), is openly recognised as a crucial tool through which not only observe but also engage and immerse oneself in the everyday life or social world of modern yoga practitioners, thus also facilitating an experiential appreciation of those elusive yet crucial facets that characterise the disciplining and self-transformative pedagogies here investigated. In fact, as Pierini's and Groissman's argue (2016: 3), "[i]n practices in which knowledge is accessed by means of the body, ethnographers should tackle their own bodiliness in the process of knowing in the field, exploring concepts through the cultivation of cognitive and bodily skills".

Finally, it is important to at least briefly mention how I collected and worked with the field notes that constitute the backbone of the ethnographic explorations discussed in the analytical chapters of the thesis: first, considering the fully participated nature of the

research, while engaged in activities I relied almost exclusively on head notes, that is, I tried to minutely memorise events and/or discussions to then transcribe them as soon as possible afterwards. In certain occasions, when the situation allowed it, I would send an email to myself – especially when in need to remember a precious conversation. Otherwise, I usually wrote down, first in forms of jottings or sketches, the most important happenings or conversations of the day and right after developed each jotting in as great details as I was capable of and my memory allowed. Moreover, it is also important to say that my field notes are somehow inextricably linked with self-reflexive explorations, in the guise of a personal diary and move freely between the “realist”, “confessional” and “evocative” writing styles (Van Mannen 1988). Finally, and in line with the overall interpretative, open-ended, and iterative-inductive approach of this thesis, I also often began to note down and explore plausible theoretical implications already while transcribing the field notes. Therefore, my actual research praxis challenged and partly subverted the tradition dichotomous understanding of research activities in data collection phase and analysis phase.

## ***6.2. Biographical Interviews***

There is a plethora of biographical interview methods available to social scientists. Some of these methods are exclusively concerned with the exploration of subjective narratives and their discursive construction; others attempt to capture the relationships between precise historical events and social actors’ biographies; others, still, focus on social actors’ everyday life, or specific aspects of it, such as work, family, religious involvement and so on. Of course, the specificities of these methods vary greatly in relation to their disciplinary and theoretical commitments (e.g., Bornat 2008; Bron and Thunborg 2015; Demazière 2011; Gomensoro and Burgos Paredes 2017). However, it is possible to individuate, schematically, two macro tendencies within this overall biographical approach: first, a “contextual approach” to biographical interviews, primarily concerned with the “realism” of the narrative gathered; second, an “interpretative approach” which poses its emphasis on the social constructed nature of the narratives and their fictional character (e.g., Gomensoro and Burgos Paredes 2017: 157; Nilsen and Brannen 2010; Roberts 2002). As poignantly summarised by Andrés Gomensoro and Raúl Burgos Paredes (2017: 157):

The first one, the “contextual approach,” emerged in France (Daniel Bertaux) and Germany (Fritz Schütze) after the rediscovery of the “realism” of the Chicago School approach and under the influence of symbolic interactionism and also phenomenology. Researchers who use this analytical focus study the lived life (which is composed of the biographical events of one’s life) and the told story – the self-interpretation of the life (Wengraf 2000) in context, in relation to time and space. The second approach, the “interpretative approach,” emerged under the influence of hermeneutics and narrativism. In this approach, researchers such as Norman Denzin and Ulrich Overmann consider life stories as fictions created by interviewees from real and sometimes imagined events. The analytical focus is more on the construction of the story.

The biographical interview method used in this thesis situates itself at the intersection of these traditions. As the “contextual approach” is concerned with the “lived life”, the “told story” and “self-interpretation” of social actors’ life, although it is critical of its realist epistemology and of any naïve reading of social actors’ narratives of self-determination. While in agreement with the “interpretative approach” it recognises the importance of the researcher’ own interpretation of the narratives gathered, their socially constructed nature and fictional character.

Moreover, the biographical interview method used in this thesis is characterised by a series of elements, most of which apply also to qualitative interview methods more in general: it is interactional, that is, biographical interviews happen in the context of the meeting between a researcher that elicits, and when necessary guides the narrative, and the interviewer’ self-disclosure; it is concerned with people’s stories and experiences of everyday life, and as such it gives “...the researcher rich material to analyse while the interviewees have an opportunity to learn about themselves” (Bron and Thunborg 2015: 2); and finally, it is characterised by temporality, meaning that biographical interviews “...capture past experiences through the person’s perspective of a present understanding together with future expectations and potentials. Consequently, a person’s story changes over time” (Bron and Thunborg 2015: 2). In other words, the biographical interview method here discussed is of support to the broader ethnographic explorations of the social organisation of modern forms yoga as it aims to explore social actors’ learned identities as yoga practitioners as they are constructed over time through the teacher-student relationship and their participation and involvement within their respective communities. In this guise, it offers a valuable entry point into the life of modern yoga practitioners, allowing to theorise at the intersection of practitioners’ point of view and the broader sociocultural context in which they are located. In fact, as Bron and Thunborg (2015: 3) put it, “[w]hen people freely tell their stories without being interrupted, we can get a rich

account of their lives, attitudes and values, as well as how life events and experiences have influenced and might influence their lives”. This plentitude of information, when competently coupled with methodological and theoretical rigor, can be truly precious for advancing our understanding and providing informed interpretations of a specific portion of the social world.

The biographical interviews conducted were semi-structured, open-ended interviews. Each interview begun with the questions (or an equivalent one): “Would you like to tell me something about yourself?”, followed by “How did you arrive to yoga?”, and “What is the role of yoga in your life?”. Usually, these questions were sufficient to elicit complex and detailed biographical narratives. However, I reserved myself to redirect the interviews using a series of follow-up questions framed around the analytical focus of this thesis in case the interviewees themselves were not spontaneously elaborating on them. Moreover, right before each interview, and also at the moment of recruiting the interviewees (whether in presence, via phone or email), I always stated clearly that what I was interested in was the practitioner’ own experience with yoga. In so doing, I also elaborated on my view of the interview process as being closer to a space of sharing what for the person is meaningful in relation to their yoga practice rather than being a standardised meeting composed by a set of pre-made questions. These preliminary considerations, although subtle, are important ones. On the one hand, they allowed interviewees to have a clearer sense of the focus and style of the interview; while and on the other hand, they already begun to elicit, consciously or unconsciously, a process of recollection of one’s own experience and history with yoga, thus facilitating the interview process itself.

I have conducted 22 interviews for a total of 25 practitioners interviewed. Almost half of these practitioners (12) are actively teaching and practicing Odaka Yoga, the main postural yoga school explored in this thesis. Of these, 8 are part of the Milanese branch of the school where I conducted my ethnographic observations; 2 belong to the Japanese branch; and the remaining 2 are the school’s founders. The other 13 practitioners interviewed are actively teaching a variety of styles and traditions in Milan (6) and in Riverside, Southern California (7). All the practitioners interviewed are qualified yoga teachers with different degrees of experience: 5 are studio owners (2 in Italy, 2 in USA and 1 in Japan); 1 is the organiser of the ‘*Milan YogaFestival*’; 1 is a high profile member of the Italian Yoga Teachers Association (YANI); 20 are women and 5 men. I will provide



a more detailed overview of the sociodemographic constitution of the practitioners interviewed in Chapter Five. Here I would simply like to mention that all the interviews have been conducted between November 2017 and February 2020; the longest interview lasted approximately three hours while the shortest forty-five minutes with the majority of the interviews lasting around one hour and a half. All the interviews conducted have been transcribed verbatim. In so doing, and in line with the most common strategy of data analysis in qualitative research, “thematic analysis” (e.g., Braun and Clarke 2006, 2012, 2013, 2014; Castleberry and Nolen 2018; Charmaz 2006; Glaser and Strauss 1965; Veal 2011), I have begun to look for “emerging themes”. Most notably, I identified six different narrative threads common to all of the interviews conducted, that can be preliminary identified as follows: practitioners’ encounter with yoga and motivations to continue the practice; practitioners’ lay definition and understanding of yoga; the centrality of the teacher-student relationship in the process of apprenticeship of the modern yogi; practitioners’ journeys of self-transformation; the permeability between the practice on the mat and practitioners’ broader life outside of it; and finally, the importance of the communitarian dimension. Of course, most of these narrative threads, or themes, are in turn internally differentiated in a number of more specific sub-themes. For a detailed analysis of practitioners’ narratives and experiences see Chapter Five. Also, it is important to clarify that in line with the interpretative, open-ended and iterative-inductive approach of the thesis, I have begun to preliminary interpret and theorise about the material at my disposal already while transcribing the interviews, if not when conducting them. Moreover, the interviews with the Japanese and American teachers have been conducted in English while all the others were conducted in Italian and later translated into English.

Next to these formal, semi-structured interviews, I have also heavily relied on “opportunistic interviews” or “informal conversation” (Swain and Spire 2020), namely more or less casual and/or guided talks where the researcher attempts to learn about matters of his or her interest while doing fieldwork. Typical examples of opportunistic interviews are the “small-talks” between the researcher and the participants as they naturally unfold before and after yoga classes or during the everyday life and activities at the ashram. More specifically, these “small-talks” proved particularly instrumental in gathering useful information regarding Mooji’s devotees’ values, ideas, and perspectives on a number of themes such as devotion, authority, and self-realisation, something that

as previously discussed I did not have a chance to explore through formal interviews. In fact, this type of material is particularly important in adding “context” and “authenticity” to the data gathered and “unlock otherwise missed opportunities to expand and enrich data” (Swine and Spire 2020: 1).

Finally, I would like to conclude this chapter with a reflection on the ethical considerations that accompany, unavoidably, any research process in which social actors are involved as active contributors, whether through ethnographic methods, biographical interviews or more casual conversations. More specifically, ethical reflections, especially regarding consent, visibility, anonymity, and the delicate balance between the researcher’s duty of critical scrutiny and social actors’ right of being represented in a manner that matches their self-understanding of themselves and their social world are particularly sensitive issues. Unfortunately, there are not ultimate answers for how to navigate these complexities, but only good practices. For instance, I informed all the participants interviewed about my project and about the fact that what they would share with me may be used as part of one or more publications in specialised journals. In so doing, I also specified that I was not advocating for their specific perspective but that I simply attempted to study it through the tools of the sociological trade. However, I agreed with them that once the manuscript would be completed I would provide them with a copy and they would have the right to ask me to revise or even to avoid mentioning what they told me in the first place during the interview. All the informants have been given pseudonyms with the notable exceptions of public figures such as the Odaka Yoga founders’ Roberto Milletti and Francesca Cassia and the head of Monte Sahaja, Mooji.

***Part II***

***The Social Organisation and Experience of Modern  
Forms of Yoga***

# Chapter Three

## Introducing Odaka Yoga: Philosophical and Discursive Foundations

### 1. Introduction

Chapter Three introduces the first empirical case study of this thesis, namely Odaka Yoga, a particular school of modern postural yoga defined by its hybrid character and bricoleurs of different systems of knowledge such as a variety Asian religious resources and Western scientific conceptions of the body. This chapter focuses on several “discursive representations” of the school (such as webpages and other promotional material), interviews with the founders and other key teachers and ethnographic observations, although ethnographic data will be mostly mobilised in the next chapter and used with reference to the study of Odaka Yoga’s pedagogical repertoire. The main rationale behind this chapter is to discuss how Odaka Yoga’s “ethos”<sup>1</sup> – that is its discursive and philosophical foundations and their role in guiding Odaka Yoga practice – is nested at the intersection of different practical-discursive universes, chiefly the anatomical/biomechanical register of “fitness culture” (Sassatelli 1999, 2000, 2002, 2014) and the energetic/esoteric register of “contemporary spiritualities” (Palmisano and Pannofino 2021). Conversely, in the next chapter I will explore how these discursive and philosophical foundations are translated into practice and embodied by practitioners giving rise to a specific habitus.

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of *ethos* starts of as an attempt to bridge the seemingly irreducible gap between culture and society and the individual typical of classical structural-functionalist thought (e.g., Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown). It was originally introduced to contemporary sociocultural theory by Gregory Bateson (1958: 119), that defines it as the “expression of a culturally standardized system of organization of the instincts and emotions of the individuals”.

Chapter Three is structured as follows: first, it provides a short discussion of the social organisation of modern postural yoga through the theorisation of the *yoga field* as a “hybrid field” (Pedrini, Brown and Aimini 2020) constituted at the intersection of the “spiritual/religious” (e.g., Bourdieu 1971a, 1971b; Dianteill 2003; Streib and Hood, 2013), “fitness/leisure” (e.g., Maguire 2008; Sassatelli 2014) and “therapeutic/medical” (e.g., Furedi 2004; Illouz 2008; Wright 2008) fields; second, the chapter introduces Odaka Yoga, with a specific focus on its philosophical and discursive foundations. Here, it discusses the school’s simultaneous presence within - and reliance on - different “discursive modes” belonging respectively to the fitness and wellness industry and the landscape of contemporary spiritualities; it zooms into the philosophical and discursive foundations of the school, and most notably its simultaneous reliance on the “subtle body model” of Asian traditions and a medicalised understanding of the body typical of Western science and medicine; and it sketches an analysis of the “Odaka Warrior”, the ideal-typical practitioner whose dedicated practice of self-care aligns with normative neoliberal ideals such as health maintenance, self-transformation and self-growth; third, the chapter introduces Odaka Yoga’s founders, Roberto Milletti and Francesca Cassia and another important teacher, Beatrice Morello, exploring the importance of their charismatic figures in the birth, development and expansion of the school. More specifically, this section relies on Jennings’ (2019) “theory of martial creation” in order to reveal the manners in which Odaka Yoga founders’ biographical trajectories functioned as a bricolage of various experiences in different social fields that proved instrumental to the creation of this hybrid style of postural yoga; fourth, the chapter provides a brief discussion of the broader community of teachers and practitioners mobilising a plethora of analytical tools such as Anderson’s (1983) “imagined communities”, Maffesoli’s (1996) “neo-tribe” and Lucia’s (2020) “white utopias”;

the chapter will then conclude with a preliminary note on the “yogic habitus” (Di Placido 2018), subsequently elaborated in more details in the following of the thesis.

## **2. The Social Organisation of Modern Postural Yoga**

Postural yoga styles are largely composed by a mixture of physical postures (*āsana*), today increasingly performed in sequences (what is usually referred as flow or *vinyasa*); different types of breathing exercises (*prāṇāyāma*); and a final relaxation phase (*savasana*) (e.g., De Michelis 2004; Singleton 2005, 2007). Occasionally, beside these three elements, it is also possible to find the repetitive recitations of specific sounds (*mantra*) or devotional chants (*kirtan*); moments of meditations (for instance vipassana inspired meditations on the breath, Zen inspired meditation on one’s own awareness or tantric inspired meditations based on the visualization of *yantras*, or sacred symbols); cleansing practices of various kind (*kriyas*, for instance of the nostrils or the intestine); the study of sacred texts and yoga philosophy (chiefly Patañjali’s ‘*Yogasūtras*’, the ‘*Bhagavadgītā*’, part of the Indian epic the ‘*Mahabharata*’ (IV B.C.E—IV C.E.), and the ‘*Haṭhayoga Pradīpikā*’); and finally, a certain devotion towards the teacher, in some cases considered like a *guru* (e.g., Singleton and Goldberg 2014). As De Michelis (2007: 6) rightly comments, it is the postural yoga type that have contributed the most to the development and codification of a relatively sophisticated canon of postural yoga theory and the common usage of the term “yoga” in everyday English refers exactly to this type of yoga.

As this short description of the typical practices of modern postural yoga clarifies, the boundaries between postural yoga and other types – such as for instance the meditational or denominational yoga types, to follow De Michelis’ (2004, 2007) terminology – and other partially overlapping domains such as the fitness industry and New Age spiritualities, are more porous than categorisations and typologies initially suggest. Moreover, to add a further layer of complexity to these descriptive remarks there is the fact that this combination of practices, coupled with the practical-discursive and technical specificities of each postural yoga schools and the “pedagogical style” of different teachers, contributes to the proliferation of a variety of postural yoga types, each one characterised by its own “ethos”. A useful strategy to account for the social

organisation of postural yoga and its appreciation as a polysemic practice whose sociological understanding necessarily passes through an exploration of its symbolic power, contested status and multiple deployments, is to mobilise Bourdieu's theory of the social field.

### ***2.1. The Yoga Field***

Bourdieu (1996: 231) defines a field as “a network of objective relations (of domination or subordination, of complementarity or antagonism, etc.) between positions... [where] [e]ach position is objectively defined by its objective relationship with other positions”. More specifically, according to Bourdieu these “objective relations between positions”, that is, the structure of a field, are determined by the distribution of capital among social actors, where capital is in turn defined “as a form of accumulated labor composed of both material and symbolic resources” (Di Placido 2018: 7). The possession, acquisition and conversion of capital, whose types we will see in more details below, regulate social actors' role of domination or subordination vis-à-vis other social actors, from which it then emerges the struggle over the definition of the legitimate culture and the most valued type(s) of capital of a given social field. “In other words”, as correctly emphasised by Swartz (1996: 79), “fields are arenas of struggle for legitimation: in Bourdieu's language, for the right to monopolize the exercise of “symbolic violence.””. Habitus, famously defined by Bourdieu (1984: 170) as “[a] structuring structure, which organizes practices and the perception of practices”, is within this framework, the culture of the field at an embodied level.

It is following these theoretical remarks that I formulate the concept of the *yoga field*, that is, that fragment of the social world organised around shared representations and agonistic conflicts over “what yoga is”, its purposes and possible deployments. More specifically, the yoga field operates according to “a logic and a necessity” that is “irreducible to those that regulate other fields” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 97). This signifies that the yoga field is substantially autonomous from the broader social field, as testified by its high level of specificity, its definite history and configuration of social actors – both individuals and institutions – that through strategic alliances or oppositions with one another contribute to the practical-discursive construction of the “shared representations” and “agonistic conflicts” that animate the field. Finally, the yoga field establishes its autonomy and distinguishes itself from other fields also thanks to its ability

to instill in social actors a very specific habitus (Peillon 1998: 215). As McNay (1999: 109) puts it, in fact, “the embodied potentialities of the habitus are only ever realized in the context of a specific field”. Consequently, the yoga field is tightly connected to the cultivation of a “yogic habitus” (Di Placido 2018), or more specifically, a series of partly overlapping and partly divergent yogic habitus that contribute to the social reproduction – at a pre-conscious, pre-reflective and embodied level – of the ethos of different yoga schools and organisations and of the overall yoga field.

The network of objective relations between positions that characterises the yoga field – here preliminary explored only in reference to postural yoga – could be schematically mapped accounting for: a plethora of mainstream postural yoga schools, such as Iyengar, Ashtanga and Bikram Yoga, of course alongside other countless emerging styles and brands such as Odaka Yoga; national and transnational institutions and organisations, such as Yoga Alliance International, the Yoga Journal and other yoga magazines, the Ministry of Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homoeopathy (AYUSH) of the Indian Government, the British Wheel of Yoga and so on; specific resources, or in Bourdieu’s (e.g., 1986) terminology capitals, whose strategic possession, acquisition, circulation and conversion determine the configuration of the field; and naturally, all those individuals that in a capacity or another (e.g., as “professional cultural producers” and “amateur consumers” or “receivers”) inhabit – continuously or sporadically and intermittently – the yoga field, for instance belonging to a certain school (e.g., Ashtanga), partaking to the functioning of a given institution (e.g., Yoga Alliance) or simply practicing yoga in their spare time. According to Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992: 108-109), these individuals are:

...bearers of capitals and, depending on their trajectory and on the position they occupy in the field by virtue of their endowment (volume and structure) in capital, they have a propensity to orient themselves actively either towards the conservation of the distribution of capital or towards the subversion of that distribution.

Finally, these different elements – and their continuous interactions – contribute to the constitution of the symbolic structure of the field, that is, the social reality of the yoga field (e.g., Bourdieu, 1977a).

As previously hinted at, the struggle over the definition of the legitimate culture of the yoga field is largely defined by the types and the amount of capital held by social actors. Following Bourdieu’s (e.g., 1986) theoretical schemata, capital primarily



circulates in “economic” (e.g., money, access to goods and services), “social” (e.g., interpersonal networks that allow individuals to draw on the help/resources of others) and “cultural” (e.g., educational qualifications and other type of credentials such as yoga teacher trainings’ (TTs) certificates) forms. However, also “bodily” (Wacquant 1995) or “physical capital” (Shilling 2004), such as yoga practitioners’ flexibility, balance and body size, and certain varieties of “symbolic capital” (e.g., Bourdieu 1986), such as practitioners’ charisma, “spiritual” (e.g., Guest 2007; McDonald and Hallinan 2005; Verter 2003; Wortham and Wortham 2007) and “religious capital” (e.g., Bourdieu 1971a), that is, practitioners’ authority and spiritual/religious proficiency of the practices performed in a given yoga group, are instrumental in determining social actors’ trajectories (for instance from newcomers to instructors or from relatively unknown teachers to internationally renowned ones) and define the development of specific organisational repertoires which in turn may also alter the dynamics and internal functioning of the broader yoga field. In other words, the possession of capital and its acquisition, circulation, and conversion into other types (for instance from cultural or economic into symbolic capital or the other way around), help social actors – whether individuals or organisations – to maintain their positioning within the field or possibly acquire a more valuable one. This also translates into occupying a more dominant position vis-à-vis other social actors and thus into being more influential in determining the overall orientation of the yoga field at a given point in time.

Finally, I contend that despite its relative autonomy the yoga field cannot be fully comprehended if not in relation to broader social and cultural fields that simultaneously contribute to its constitution and compete for colonising ever-increasing portions of it. In fact, as much as the circulation of capital influences – from within – the changefulness or relative stability of the yoga field, its social organisation and internal articulation are also determined – from without – by its intersections, overlaps and contested boundaries with neighboring fields and their central practical-discursive references.

### *2.1.1. The Yoga Field as a Hybrid Field*

A particularly useful concept to help us theorise about the simultaneous autonomy and porosity of the yoga field, is the concept of “hybrid field” (Pedrini, Brown and Aimini 2020). This concept was coined to discuss – starting from a micropolitical exploration of the coaching environment – how “boxe popolare”’s (a style of boxing codified by Italian

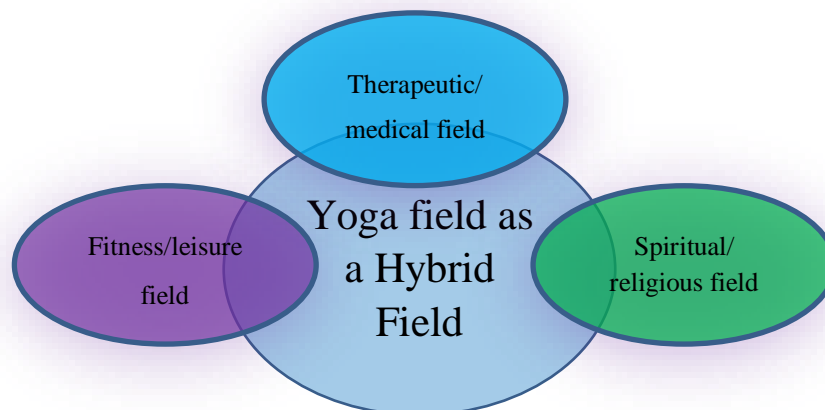
leftist grassroots groups) (Pedrini 2018, 2020) coaches negotiate the boundaries of the field relying on the practical-discursive logics of different fields, such as the sporting and the political fields. Here, I would like to briefly reflect on its heuristic potential in shedding light on the partial overlaps and shared boundaries that the yoga field has with a number of neighboring social fields, which in turn determine, at least partially, the conflictual and agonistic nature of postural yoga' social organisation as presently articulated.

As Pedrini, Brown and Aimini (2020: 900) argue:

Undoubtedly, the category [of hybrid field] requires further elaborations and research in various coaching domains, involving contextualisation and comparison of sporting and physical cultures – in particular, considering the connections with the fields of religion (see Jennings et al., 2010; Watson & Parker, 2014), health (Jennings, 2014), consumption, power and media (Hargreaves, 1987). Furthermore, the hybrid coaching field may illuminate ambivalences in areas where both reproduction and change concomitantly occur.

Taking these considerations seriously, the concept of “hybrid field” (Pedrini, Brown and Aimini 2020) may be then used to posit how an autonomous social domain such as the yoga field is harbinger of specific “rules of the game” that are constituted by the meeting of instances originating in disparate locations of the yoga field itself and/or that are also imported from outside of its boundaries. Yoga is for instance, through a selective reliance on different practical-discursive references, constantly mobilised, reinvented and invoked by different actors, for different purposes, across geographies and social domains. As a consequence, depending on one's own investment and positioning within the yoga field yoga can be framed as anything from an important aspect of one's own religion to a spiritual practice, a landmark of Indian-ness, a fitness regime or a fruitful business, among other things. Let us simply think of, evoking the introduction of the thesis, the massive medicalisation that yoga is undergoing; its deployment within hospitals, schools, and prisons; its pervasiveness within the fitness and wellness industry; and the central part it occupies within the landscape of contemporary spiritualities; not to mention its strategic role within Narendra Modi's nationalist project. In the light of this complex scenario, it would be reductive to ascribe to the yoga field a set of rules of the game only pertinent to its internal articulation and not, for instance, central also to the “spiritual/religious” (e.g., Bourdieu 1971a; Dianteill 2003; Streib and Hood 2013), “fitness/leisure” (e.g., Maguire

2008; Sassatelli 2014) and “therapeutic/medical” (e.g., Furedi 2004; Illouz 2008; Wright 2008) fields. In this guise, the yoga field presents itself as a hybrid field par excellence.



**Figure 1:** The Yoga Field as a Hybrid Field.

Such theorising, I believe, allows sociologists to account for the diversity of interpretations of “what yoga is”, emphasising that the yoga field and its contours are continuously being redefined, depending on the particular position inhabited in the field or the vantage point adopted in its study. For instance, the spiritual/religious field contributes to the widely circulating social representation of yoga as a “ancient” spiritual practice – whether this is a historically accurate vision is not of my concern here – sometimes also explicitly linked to Asian religions such as Hinduism. More specifically, the practical-discursive logics of the spiritual/religious field infiltrates the yoga field to the point that certain segments of it promote practitioners’ religious dedication to the practice, an ascetic lifestyle and sometimes also a search for self-realisation or enlightenment as some of their teleological orientations. Here, social actors’ possession of – or effort to acquire – “religious” and/or “spiritual capital” is pivotal to their positioning of dominance (e.g., success, recognition, accomplishment) within those schools and organisations that privilege an understanding of yoga alongside the lines of the practical-discursive influences of the religious/spiritual field. Similarly, the fitness/leisure field, itself organised around logics of self-care, self-reflexive body projects and the cultivation of enjoyment, influences the yoga field, and more specifically those schools, organisations and practitioners prone to frame yoga as a fulfilling and self-actualising physical practice. Again, the type of capital that matters the most to those segments of the yoga field particularly close to the practical-discursive logics of the fitness/leisure field is “bodily” or “physical capital” as it determines practitioners’ ability to perform and enjoy the often-acrobatic demands of certain forms of postural yoga.

Naturally, also economic capital plays a pivotal role, as yoga classes and courses are usually offered in exchange for financial compensation. Finally, also the therapeutic/medical field, with its emphasis on health, healing and self-transformation is pivotal to the internal organisation of the yoga field. In fact, while practitioners, schools and organisations may diverge in their specific understandings of yoga, they all seem to share what De Michelis (2020) has rightly labelled as a “healthiest idiom”, namely the tendency to frame yoga practices in terms of their health benefits. Here, one’s own health is the primary capital at stake.

Naturally, social actors and organisations draw selectively from these different practical-discursive logics, contributing to construct a series of representations of yoga where spiritual/religious, fitness/leisure and therapeutic/medical instances are inherently connected to one another, or opposed thereto, thus giving rise to that complex, multifaceted and ever-changing landscape of different positions here accounted for by the theoretical tool of the yoga field.

However, these considerations are too general and uprooted from empirical reality to be sufficient. Therefore, in the next few sections of this chapter I will present a closer discursive exploration of Odaka Yoga where I will implicitly draw on the notion of hybrid field discussing how yoga teachers mobilise practical-discursive repertoires belonging to different fields in order to frame the discursive and philosophical foundations that constitute Odaka’s Yoga doxa and ethos. In the next chapter, I will bring this analysis to a conclusion, showing how this ethos is conveyed in practice through specific pedagogical repertoires, thus contributing to the constitution of a yogic habitus that although distinct in its schema of disposition, is also partially overlapping with the habitus central in other fields (e.g., the fitness/leisure, spiritual/religious and therapeutic/medical fields). This, as we will see in the conclusion of the next chapter, is an important finding, as these fields are chiefly dominated by “middle class” social actors, and so tend to reproduce, although transposed in their specific idioms, a series of partly overlapping values where the subject and its supposed ability to freely choose and navigate the complexity of life are central (such as self-care, self-determination, self-actualisation, self-responsibility and so on).<sup>2</sup> Finally, with these two chapters, we will be able to link a

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<sup>2</sup> As Bourdieu (1984: 217-218) poignantly argues in *Distinction*, “[t]he simple fact that, at different times, albeit with a change in meaning and function, the same practices have been able to attract aristocratic or popular devotees, or, at the same time, to assume different meanings and forms for the different groups, should warn us against the temptation of trying to explain the class distribution of sports purely in terms of the ‘nature’ of the various activities. Even if the

macrosociological interest in the social organisation of the “yoga field” – assisted by a discursive exploration of the philosophical foundations of Odaka Yoga – with a microsociological appreciation of some of its mechanisms of social reproduction, thus attempting to make sense of one of sociology’s most taxing issue, the relationships between structure/society – agency/social actors.

### **3. Odaka Yoga**

Odaka Yoga is a relatively recent style of postural yoga founded in Rome in the mid-nineteen nineties by the Italian teachers and entrepreneurs Roberto Milletti, (also known as *Sensei*) and Francesca Cassia (*Niji*). As we have seen in the introduction, this style, or brand (as it is subject to copy right), finds its philosophical foundations in the traditions of Bushido, zen and yoga. Further, central inspirations of Odaka Yoga are the natural rhythm of the waves of the ocean and biomechanics. The former are emulated during the practice in order to bring the practitioner to acquire fluidity of movement, a “topos” in several Asian martial arts; the latter is the study of the structure and functioning of the mechanical aspects of biological systems, more specifically of the human body in motion. The official website of the school introduces Odaka Yoga as:

an innovative style of yoga with over thirty years of experimental research. Roberto Milletti and Francesca Cassia give life to a new concept: “Live Centered, Liquefy Your Limits, Embrace The Power,” which finds inspiration by observing the movement of the ocean and its waves. This is where in bringing together the idea of Bushido (the way of the warrior), zen and yoga, the principles of transformation, adaptability and interior strength are expressed physically and emotionally. The natural rhythm of the ocean waves are emulated during an Odaka Yoga practice in order to acquire the

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logic of distinction is sufficient to account for the basic opposition between popular and bourgeois sports, the fact remains that the relationships between the different groups and the different practices cannot be fully understood unless one takes account of the objective potentialities of the different institutionalized practices, that is, the social uses which these practices encourage, discourage or exclude both by their intrinsic logic and by their positional and distributional value. We can hypothesize as a general law that a sport is more likely to be adopted by a social class if it does not contradict that class’s relation to the body at its deepest and most unconscious level, i.e., the body schema, which is the depository of a whole world view and a whole philosophy of the person and the body”. Accordingly, despite social actors’ specific interpretations of yoga and their positioning within the yoga field, the yoga field as a hybrid field is substantially tailored to match middle-classes “taste”.

yielding nature of the water. Biomechanics and fluid movement of the Odaka Warrior allows one to live centered in the middle of chaos.<sup>3</sup>

This school presents itself as an emblematic case of the changing nature of modern yoga and its adaptation to different sociocultural environments, or social fields. More specifically, the eclectic philosophical backdrops of Odaka Yoga – based on a mixture of “exotic” resources such as Bushido, zen and yoga, the reference to nature and its elements (chiefly water) and finally to western science (biomechanics) – make of it a poignant example of the legitimising and differentiating strategies that contemporary yoga brands follow in the attempt to conquer a share of the yoga market in the context of an already saturated and highly commodified field. Here, the concept “Live Centered, Liquefy Your Limits, Embrace The Power” – inspired by the “natural rhythm of the ocean waves” and supported by Odaka Yoga’s philosophical reliance on Zen, yoga and Bushido – is expressed through the three principles that guide the school’s ethos: “transformation, adaptability and interior strength”, which acting both at the “physical” and at the “emotional level”, promise to give birth to the “Odaka Warrior”, the prototypical Odaka Yoga practitioner, somebody able to “live centered in the middle of chaos”, that is, somebody able to self-responsibly take care of him or herself even in the midst of adverse situations.

In other words, and as we will see in greater details in this and in the next chapter, Odaka Yoga sells a recipe of successful self-cultivation whose primary ingredients are: zen (live centered – adaptability), yoga (liquefy your limits – transformation) and Bushido (embrace the power – inner strength), of course skillfully blended with the main ingredients, just enough ocean water and biomechanics. Consequently, we could correctly define Odaka Yoga as a hybrid system whose philosophical and discursive references are represented by the contraposition, merging and re-interpretation of different – and in part incommensurable – systems of knowledge. More specifically, this hybrid system emerges from Odaka Yoga founders’ experimentations and bricolage of various experiences in different social fields (chiefly the martial arts and fitness fields) and their ability to capitalise, convert and channel their previously acquired expertise into the birth and development of a new hybrid system of postural yoga.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://odakayoga.com/en/> accessed February 2, 2020.

As predictable as it might be, at the heart of this hybrid system of knowledge and the type of self-cultivation it advocates for there is the centrality of practitioners' bodies: the "Odaka Warrior", in fact, needs to closely engage, work hard and manipulate one's own body in order to "acquire the yielding nature of the water" and "live centered in the middle of chaos".

### ***3.1. The Yoga Body: Between Fitness and Spirituality***

The yoga body is not a univocal thing. Taking into account the previous analysis of the yoga field as a hybrid field then we can rightly conceptualise the yoga body as a hybrid body, a body that embodies, simultaneously, characteristics that make up the ideal-typical – not to say normative – body of other fields. In what follows, I will delve deeper into the philosophical and discursive foundations of Odaka Yoga, exploring their influences in contributing to a specific hybrid representation of the body at the intersection of Asian and Western systems of knowledge. Conversely, in the next chapter I am going to explore how these philosophical and discursive foundations are actively translated into practice, that is, how they are transmitted, transposed to, and embodied by Odaka Yoga practitioners.

#### ***3.1.2. Biomechanics and the Medicalised Body***

Odaka Yoga re-educates the body to move in its entirety by reawakening the intelligence of our bodies. Specific sequences are created for different areas of the body while working on postural alignment in order to prevent muscle, skeletal and tissue injury. During an Odaka Yoga session, muscles are activated with balanced and functional movement that simultaneously strengthen and elongate.<sup>4</sup>

The body that emerges from this short fragment is a body approached from a biomechanical perspective. As briefly mentioned, biomechanics is the study of the structure and functioning of the human body in motion. Since its introduction in the fitness and wellness industry biomechanics has drastically changed the manners in which fitness equipment and accessories are engineered as much as training protocols are

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<sup>4</sup> <https://odakayoga.com/en/> accessed February 7, 2020.

delivered by coaches and performed by athletes. Its two main aims are to enhance performances and prevent injuries (McGinnis 2020).

Biomechanics implies a specific idea of the body: an object to be closely scrutinised for the discovery of its most functional (read natural and effective) movement patterns. The result of this reification is that the body, seen through the lenses of biomechanics, becomes a “medicalised body” (Robbins 2018), understood as that specific body amenable to scientific scrutiny and thus exposed to certain “medical gaze” (Foucault 1973 [1963]). As Foucault has poignantly shown, between the end of the eighteenth century and then throughout the nineteenth century, the body was substantially re-casted as an object of knowledge at the intersection of science and medicine. From this perspective, biomechanics can then simply be considered as a later development of the epistemic transformation traced by Foucault in his genealogical study of the emergence of modern medicine. The medicalised body is then dissected by the medical gaze which penetrates its secrets, uncovers the mysteries of its functioning and translates them into a visible system of representation where bones, muscles, tendons and organs are simultaneously: (a) seen as self-standing objects; (b) seen as the parts that form the medicalised body.

The primary consequence of this displayable body is that through the lenses of disciplines such as biomechanics, the body is potentially detached from its experiential dimension to acquire instead a more visual, object-like, anatomical identity (e.g., Foucault 1973; Robbins 2018). This is precisely what grants the suspension of the body as the locus of personal experience and promotes the legitimisation of different areas of expertise to emerge, where doctors, scientists, coaches, and yoga teachers become the holders of the once hidden truth of the body.

This body then responds simultaneously to the “law of fragmentation”, that inspired by science and modern medicine sees the body as constituted by a set of different parts that can be treated separately; and to a “holistic logic”, that posits that cure, or betterment of one specific area of the body comes from an integral consideration of the body as a whole. Of course, this “holistic logic” is particularly dear to contemporary interpretations of disciplines such as Zen and yoga, which are in fact often re-casted as very effective therapeutic interventions (e.g., Alter 2004; De Michelis 2007; Di Placido 2020; Kabat-Zinn 1990).



As Francesca, co-founder of Odaka Yoga, clarifies during an interview with the author, these two manners of framing the medicalised body corresponds to two different anatomical models:

*Francesca:* there are two ways to frame the body, anatomically. One, as if the bones were one on the other, imagine like a power alignment of the bones. Or at the level of the structure, as [the bones] floated in the band, in the tendons, and so as they could in some way always adjust around a central point while undergoing continuous reorganisation in order to maintain a state of wellbeing. This is the specificity of the band.

*Matteo:* a bit like if the skeleton wasn't structured once and for all but you could re-educate it through movement?

*Francesca:* Exactly. Exactly...it is called tensegrity.<sup>5</sup>

Whether framed as composed and thus decomposable in several parts or as a unified entity that must be accounted for in its entirety, the body of Odaka Yoga is first and foremost constructed through a medicalising idiom. Here, next to “re-education”, “alignment” and “protection from injuries”, Odaka Yoga wants to cultivate, this time through the “activation”, “balancing”, “strengthening” and “elongation” of the muscular band, a very specific declination of the medicalised body. However, as we will see in more details in the following section, Odaka Yoga blends the medical register with the spiritual and psychological registers, giving rise to its specific hybrid conception of the body.

From this short discursive exploration, we can preliminary claim that anatomy, through an applied reference to biomechanics, guides the framing of the body found in Odaka Yoga. Let us now see, again relying on Francesca's perspective, if this specific focus is somehow common in the world of postural yoga or if instead it is a specificity of Odaka Yoga:

*Matteo:* to better understand, when it comes to other schools, according to you, do they also make such a central use of an in-depth study of anatomy?

*Francesca:* good question. Some more, some a bit less. Let's say that in yoga you have to study anatomy, [although] not everybody [does]. Often you study

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<sup>5</sup> Roberto Milletti and Francesca Cassia, interview by author, audio recording, online interview, May 22, 2019.

subtle anatomy, more at the level of energies, but anatomy at the end violently begins to become part of this world otherwise you injury yourself.<sup>6</sup>

In this fragment Francesca beside re-stating the foundational role of anatomy in injury prevention and its almost inevitable role within the world of postural yoga, hints to the interesting opposition between anatomy and subtle anatomy. After having explored the former at some length in this section let us now move to a closer exploration of the latter in the next.

### 3.1.3. *Yoga, Martial Arts, and the Subtle Body*

Odaka Yoga classes are conducted through a “liquid” style approach by merging the martial arts flow of inner energy and the Zen spirit of quieting the mind. The practice becomes an unremitting motion, a wave-like movement, a process where no interruption occurs between one pose and another. It is a union that aims to dissolve physical, mental and emotional tensions, while soothing the mind with immediate action. Odaka Yoga helps overcome barriers or limiting beliefs because emotional flexibility opens students up to endless possibilities for both body and mind. For Roberto and Francesca yoga is a lifestyle, energy in motion and this methodology has produced a vast transformation for people worldwide.<sup>7</sup>

In reading this fragment with the critical eyes of the scholar as well as with the socialised eyes of the yoga practitioner, it is possible to immediately individuate an “absent presence”, to borrow Shilling’s (2012) expression. What is talked about here, although without explicit mention, is the “subtle body” model, that specific understanding of the body where its energetic structure interacts with and “affects” the anatomical or physical body of the practitioner (Johnston and Barcan 2006). This model, first popularised in the West in the nineteenth century by the esoteric writings of the Theosophical Society, has its origins in the ‘*Upanishads*’, a collection of Sanskrit sacred texts, more specifically the ‘*Bṛhadaranyaka Upanishad*’ (IX – VI B.C.E), the ‘*Katha Upanishad*’ (V B.C.E) and the ‘*Taittiriya Upanishad*’ (V – VI B.C.E) (e.g., Mallinson and Singleton 2017; Samuel and Johnston 2013).

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<sup>6</sup> Roberto Milletti and Francesca Cassia, interview by author, audio recording, online interview, May 22, 2019.

<sup>7</sup> <https://odakayoga.com/en/about/concept/> accessed February 10, 2020.

The ‘*Taittiriya Upanishad*’ describes a subtle body model composed of five sheaths (*koshas*). These *koshas* are, in the context of yoga soteriology, a series of interconnected layers that range from gross energy (matter) to progressively more refined, or subtle qualities, the subtlest being associated with the states of dreamless sleep and liberation (*samadhi*). These *koshas* are in turn, from the grossest to the finest: *anna-maya-kosha* (physical body), *prana-maya-kosha* (energy body), *mano-maya-kosha* (mind body), *vijñana-maya-kosha* (consciousness body), and finally *ananda-maya-kosha* (bliss body) (Samuel and Johnston 2013: 33).

The subtle body model presented in the Upanishads, and later re-elaborated by the yogic, tantric and other Asian traditions, is constituted by a series of focal points (*chakras*) connected by specific conduits or channels (*nadis*) through which the subtle breath (*prana*) moves. According to this subtle body model, the flow of *prana* – within and across these sheaths – determines not only the physical and mental state of individuals, that is, their health, but also their plausible acquisition of supernatural powers, immortality or liberation (White 2009). In other words, according to this theory, when yoga practitioners perform physical postures (*āsana*) or breathing exercises (*pranayama*), among other practices, they are not merely engaging or manipulating the physical body. As Johnston and Barcan (2006: 30) rightly underline:

[i]ntervention in one [sheaths] of necessity means intervention in others. The dominant belief is that changes in this energy (in this subtle body) at any level – mentally, physically, emotionally, spiritually – will bring about changes to all other aspects of the individual.

It is then possible, in the light of the subtle body model presented, to understand its centrality within Odaka Yoga’s philosophical foundations. In fact, what is implied in the description of Odaka Yoga as “a union that aims to dissolve physical, mental and emotional tensions” through the “flow of inner energy” is exactly this subtle body model or one of its later re-interpretations.

More specifically, the subtle body of Odaka Yoga is not purely derived from the yoga tradition just discussed but is rather a hybrid as it presents two main, although interconnected, differences in metaphors from the traditional yogic model: first, it downplays the importance of the breath as a conduit for *prana* emphasising instead the importance of fluid movements; second, it ascribes specific importance to the energetic reservoir known in many Asian martial arts as *tanden* (or dantian). In relation to the former, Odaka Yoga subdues yoga’s traditional emphasis on the breath to the importance

of fluid movements. Here, “through a “liquid” style approach” obtained “by merging the martial arts flow of inner energy and the Zen spirit of quieting the mind ... [t]he practice becomes an unremitting motion, a wave-like movement, a process where no interruption occurs between one pose and another”. It is through this liquid style and its fluid movements that energy circulates across the different koshas, allowing practitioners to transform their physical, energetic, mental, emotional, and even spiritual make up. In relation to the latter, Odaka Yoga reframes yoga’s traditional subtle body model focused on chakras through the idiom of Asian martial arts. Here, the tanden, or more specifically the lower tanden<sup>8</sup> (hereafter simply tanden), becomes the most prominent energy center of practitioners’ body. The tanden corresponds to the first two chakras of yoga’ subtle anatomy (*muladhara* and *svadhistana*). According to Asian martial arts it indicates the reservoir of one’s own vital energy, what in the yoga tradition is usually known as *kundalini*, a dormant snake coiled in the muladhara chakra whose stimulation, awakening and vertical rising across the other six main chakras is seen as bearer of supernatural powers, longevity and/or enlightenment (Eliade 1969 [1954]). Partly following this model, the tanden is simultaneously understood as an energetic and spiritual center: it is not only the main source of *ki* (the Japanese equivalent of prana) but the center of gravity of the body itself, the center from which all movements spring from. Especially in the context of Japanese martial arts, the tanden is closely related to another important energetic/anatomical center positioned in the lower abdomen, the *hara*, where the samurai believed their spirit resided. Finally, it is important to notice how the tanden and the hara closely resemble the sheaths model previously discussed as they both function as points of intersection and mutual influence between the physical body, the qualities of one’s inner energies and one’s spirit. It is then not a surprise to notice that the cultivation of these energetic centers, which grant psycho-physical balance and from which movements are generated, is often the focus of practitioners’ attention in Zen Buddhism, as much as in certain styles of karate and Aikido, for instance.

Nonetheless, the most important elements of this model, whether it being the traditional model introduced in the Upanishads or a later re-interpretation imported from

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<sup>8</sup> According to a variety of martial arts there are three to five tanden. The first and most important is the lower tanden discussed in the text. The median tanden is located in the upper chest area in the heart region and roughly corresponds – in positioning and functions – to the fourth chakra, *anahata*. The higher tanden is in turn located in between the eyebrows and corresponds to the sixth chakra *ajna*. For an in-depth discussion of the main chakras and their functions see Samuel and Johnston (2013).

Chinese medicine or the martial arts, is that it displays a model of the body that is substantially antithetical to the anatomical and biomechanical conception of the medicalised body previously discussed. This signifies that if the medicalised body – as a whole or in its parts – responds to a meta-narrative where scientific and medical discourses are woven together making of the body an object to be closely scrutinised by a plethora of experts; the subtle body is instead regulated by the flows and functioning of energy, which is itself comprised – according to yogic philosophy – by the constant interplay between the grosser and the finest koshas. This specific conception of the body, then, gives rise to a very specific conception “...of embodied subjectivity in which matter and consciousness are not understood as ontologically distinct but as varieties of ‘energy’ resonating at different densities” (Johnston and Barcan 2006: 25). Here, the medical gaze described by Foucault loses all its representational and explanatory power and the truth of the body returns to become a mystery which science and modern medicine cannot competently understand just yet. On the contrary, where the medical gaze fails to bring into light the invisible, practitioners’ direct experiences of this invisible flow of energy becomes the primary epistemological ground on which the subtle body model should be understood and made sense of. It is perhaps also for this reason that Odaka Yoga teachers hardly engage in complex philosophical discussions of this model but instead equip practitioners with the necessary tools to access experientially their inner reservoir of energy and be potentially transformed by its discovery, as the following chapter will discuss in more details.

However, it seems to me that it would be a misunderstanding to simply oppose these two conceptualisations of the body. In fact, as contradictory as it may seem, at a practical-discursive level the body proposed by Odaka Yoga is simultaneously: (a) a medicalised body understood through the lenses of biomechanics; (b) and a subtle body, framed according to traditional yogic and martial arts subtle anatomy. This tension<sup>9</sup> is well exemplified in the following fragment by Beatrice, studio owner and main teacher of the Milanese branch of the school:

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<sup>9</sup> As rightly underlined by David Brown (personal communication), this is a tension only epistemologically, and I would like to add, for our scholarly perspective. On the contrary, from an ontological perspective, “this seems unproblematic for practitioners who absorb this blend of discourses and use it to describe their realities of practice”, as we will see in more details in Chapter Five.

*Beatrice*: with this practice modality that is fluid but not too fast we work exactly on prana, on the energetic quality. It is an energetic quality where you are not exhausted, it [the practice] is tiresome, but never extremely tiresome. You sweat but not too much. The body is always thermoregulated and is never over heated. Also, when you sweat a lot, you actually sweat a lot because outside is really hot, so you are self-regulating. [This style] creates a sort of energetic charge. In this way we work a lot on the connective tissue. And [to work] on the connective tissue means working on the emotions, because it is in the connective tissue that the strongest emotions pass through.<sup>10</sup>

Beatrice's narrative clarifies how, according to the subtle body model, the "liquid style approach" of Odaka Yoga and its primary focus on "energy work",<sup>11</sup> is inextricably connected with the manipulation of the connective tissue of the practitioners' bodies, that in turn is linked to practitioners' emotions. We can then clearly see how this model, thanks to the constant interplay across sheaths, offers the philosophical foundations to frame a practice where energy work, physical work and emotional work are unavoidably overlapping and on an epistemological level, experientially accessible by the practitioners. What is perhaps of greater interest is that this interconnectivity among sheaths is here reframed through the language of modern medicine and science as terms such as "thermoregulates", "self-regulating", "connective tissue" testify. Therefore, it becomes almost impossible to disentangle these two registers. The anatomical/biomechanical and the subtle/energetic models are conjoined to the point where the medicalised and the subtle body are no longer recognisable as separate bodies. Discourses belonging to these two different registers effectively become a new hybrid discourse, which is then mobilised to: simultaneously legitimise each one of its discursive components, with, for instance, the medicalised body being approached through the esoteric lenses of the subtle body model and the subtle body model being depicted as functioning according to a scientific logic; and, as I will argue in the next section, is co-opted within the broader sociocultural practical-discursive logic of neoliberal societies

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<sup>10</sup> Beatrice Morello, interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 16, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> The concept of energy work is pivotal to a number of contemporary alternative therapies, healing arts and also to what Catherine Albanese (2007) has labelled "metaphysical religions". More specifically, it involves the holistic idea of the interconnections between mind, body and spirit and the possibility to affect individuals' health through the management, manipulation and understanding of their own inner energies and/or also through the reliance on external energies (e.g., from the healer, nature, the cosmos, non-human entities and so on).

and their therapeutic and self-actualising framing of the body. Naturally, this form of hybrid blend between Western and Asian concepts, methodologies and systems of knowledge is not only peculiar to Odaka Yoga but transversally characterises the overlapping fields of “contemporary spiritualities” (Palmisano and Pannofino 2021), the “holistic milieu” and the growing scientific, medical and professional interests for complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) (e.g., Balboni and Peteet 2017; Brosnan, Vuolanto and Brodin Danell 2018; Timmins and Caldeira 2019), fields which in turn, are not extraneous to the influence of the practical-discursive logics of contemporary neoliberal societies.

#### 3.1.4. *The Neoliberal Yogi*

As previously hinted at, the Odaka Warrior is the ideal-typical practitioner capable “to live centered in the middle of chaos”.<sup>12</sup> This signifies that the Odaka Warrior maintains her “center” and a “calm mind”; it seeks to “transform” herself cultivating “new balance” and “inner strength” while embracing the adversities of life and its “challenges”. For the Odaka Warrior:

Challenges should be thought of as opportunities, because that is exactly what they are. Without challenges, we cannot attain inner power. This makes challenges essential to growth. When we give into challenges without any fight, *we embrace the empowerment* (emphasis in original).<sup>13</sup>

This ideal-typical practitioner emerges at the intersection of the practical-discursive logics of Western medicine (with its anatomical and biomechanical principles) and Asian systems of knowledge (and their fluid movement and inner flow of energy) next to their respective models of the body and conceptions of health. Moreover, I also contend that the Odaka Warrior is simultaneously a product and a “solution” to the uncertainties, flexibility demands, and challenges of contemporary Western societies. Having already laid out the foundations of the medicalised and subtle body models informing Odaka Yoga’s conceptualisation of the body, I devote the remaining of this section to a discussion of the affinity between the Odaka Warrior and a neoliberal mode of thought. As the Odaka Yoga’s website argues:

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<sup>12</sup> <https://odakayoga.com/en/> accessed February 7, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> <https://odakayoga.com/en/in-defence-the-way-of-the-urban-warrior-2/> accessed August 10, 2020.

Once transformation occurs, restraints, habitual patterns of movement, and thoughts dissolve and create space for a new balance and inner strength. Strength may be defined as the ability to act, balance and adapt to circumstances: this is a precious gift found in Odaka Yoga which comes from martial arts. To become an Odaka Yoga warrior means to become adaptable, flexible and fully integrated: a complete fluid and transformative body-mind entity. When moving in the Odaka flow, muscles are invited to engage in a new way which strengthens them and, in turn, creates movement in the mind. If the connective tissue is tense, muscles are no longer able to move freely because the entire body tenses and tightens, and so does our mind. As humans, we begin our lives in a fluid environment as is found in the Rig Veda 10.125: “My origin is in the water, in the ocean” and with Odaka Yoga this flow continues throughout life.<sup>14</sup>

The body cultivated by the Odaka Warrior is not merely the hybrid outcome of the meeting between the practical-discursive universes of Western medicine and Asian systems of knowledge but is also the expression of the particular ethos of contemporary neoliberal societies. In fact, “[t]o become an Odaka Yoga warrior means to become adaptable, flexible and fully integrated”, or in other words, “a complete fluid and transformative body-mind entity”. This depiction of the Odaka Warrior – as much as its “elective affinities” (Weber 2011 [2005])<sup>15</sup> with challenges, growth and empowerment – I argue, substantially adheres to the normative biopolitical injunction of self-care, flexibility and self-responsibility that characterises contemporary neoliberal societies across social domains, such as higher education, sport and the labour market (e.g., Andrews and Silk 2012; Bélanger and Edwards 2013; González-Calvo and Arias-Carballa 2018; John and McDonald 2020). Understood in this light, the Odaka Warrior is – thanks to her self-control, self-mastery, and constant work of self-cultivation – able to

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<sup>14</sup> <https://odakayoga.com/en/about/concept/> accessed February 13, 2020.

<sup>15</sup> “Weber uses it only three times in *The Protestant Ethic*, but it appears also in several of his other writings, mainly concerning sociology of religion. Weber does not define it, but one could propose the following definition, based on the Weberian use of the notion: elective affinity is a process through which two cultural forms – religious, intellectual, political or economical – who have certain analogies, intimate kinships or meaning affinities, enter in a relationship of reciprocal attraction and influence, mutual selection, active convergence and mutual reinforcement” (Löwy 2004: 6). Similarly, Bourdieu (1984: 141-144) rehabilitates Weber’s notion of “elective affinities, arguing that “the seemingly most immediate ‘elective affinities’ are always partly based on the unconscious deciphering of expressive features, each of which only takes on its meaning and value within the system of its class variations ( one only has to think of the ways of laughing or smiling noted by ordinary language).



fruitfully merge the central tenets of the medicalised and subtle body models within a unified therapeutic framework of fluid self-care and self-actualisation. If this analysis is correct, then the Odaka Warrior is a particular declination of the “neoliberal yogi” discussed by Farah Godrej (2017), that is, a yoga practitioner whose conduct is substantially in alignment with the dominant paradigms of self-care, self-conduct and self-responsibility of contemporary neoliberal societies. Here, Foucault’s (2008) concept of “biopolitics”, defined as the control of the welfare, wealth, longevity, and health of the population through the pervasive government of individuals’ conduct, becomes a useful heuristic tool to theorise about the interconnections between Odaka Yoga’s discursive focus on self-cultivation, health and self-transformation; its practical repertoire (discussed in the next chapter); and the type of power – or in Foucault’s terminology governmentality – that dominates our everyday conduct as much as the ethos of our contemporary societies. Following this line of reasoning, I agree with Altglas (2014a: 282) as she states that “exotic religious resources”, especially when coupled by a legitimising narrative grounded in modern medicine and science:

...are popularized as authentic and efficient means to manage emotions and attitudes, in relation to an increasingly pervasive ideal of self-realization. This ideal, while desired by social actors, also reflects increasingly strong demands of autonomy and flexibility made upon them. Thus, exotic religious resources, along with other religious and therapeutic techniques, contribute to the wider trend of the psychologization of contemporary social life.

In this way, not only the medicalised body of biomechanics, but also the subtle body of Asian traditions, are colonised by a tension – partly already inherent in their own epistemic structure – towards betterment, self-care, and self-cultivation. Here, the therapeutic ethos that has contributed to shape fields as different as fitness, sports, and the landscape of contemporary spirituality, finds in modern yoga a particularly fertile environment where to thrive (e.g., Jain 2014a, 2020). As a preliminary conclusion to this discursive exploration of the philosophical foundations of Odaka Yoga and the type of hybrid body it conceptualises we can notice, in line with the previous analysis of the yoga field as a hybrid field, that the Odaka Yoga body responds simultaneously to the logics of different fields: it is a medicalised body, that can be scrutinised, manipulated and corrected; it is also a subtle body, where inner energy flows reframe the body from an object to be scrutinised to a subject inhabited by a diffused type of subjectivity; and finally, it is also a neoliberal body, where both the medicalised and the subtle body models

are commodified and bended towards a constant therapeutic work of fluid self-care, forcing practitioners to achieve an ever greater level of self-control, as we will see in more details in the next chapter. In the next sections, I provide a short biographical introduction of the main teachers of Odaka Yoga and a brief overview of its community.

#### **4. Odaka Yoga's Founders: Sensei and Niji**

I have met Roberto and Francesca during a master class held in a four stars hotel in Milan eight months into my fieldwork with Odaka Yoga. At that point of my research I had already heard a lot about them by other practitioners, and it was becoming increasingly clear that I had to meet them in order to fully understand the style I was studying. In the following extract, I briefly recall how we met and my first impressions about them:

We are all hungry after a rather intense two hours master class. The buffet looks rather rich and delicious. As I approach it, a bit dazed by the long practice and by the crowd of teachers and practitioners swarming around, I notice Roberto and Francesca on the other side of the room. I am excited by the chance of meeting them, the main reason why I came in the first place. However, I confess that my ethnographic eye is now competing with my ethnographer's appetite. Yet, I can't fail to notice how teachers and practitioners gather around the founders to greet them, say hi. They are very composed and smiling and do not fail to give a portion of their attention to all those approaching them. There are kisses, hugs, and chatters, it looks very much like a family meeting in Christmas time. There is nothing in their mannerisms or in their looks – perhaps beside their posture (straight backs, grounded and relaxed) – that separate them from the other practitioners, visibly chattier and more hectic to some degree. However, the more I observe and the more I notice that beside a façade of horizontality there is a certain “aura of leadership” emerging from their interactions with the other practitioners. It is not their posture. It is this “aura of leadership” that draws a distinction between them and the others. I suspect that a less informed or more naïve observer would not notice their “special status”, their charismatic qualities. As I am noticing all of this, while filling in my plate with all sorts of delicacies, Beatrice comes to me and asks: “Have you met them yet?”. I say no, so she takes me arm in arm and walks me there. She introduces me as

“The guy I told you about”. We greet each other exchanging compliments, it was easier than I thought. I am touched by their calmness, the kindness that comes through their smiles and shining eyes. They really have a humble approach. We chat casually for a few minutes.<sup>16</sup>

**Figure 2:** Roberto Milletti (Sensei).<sup>17</sup>

Roberto Milletti is an Italian yoga teacher and entrepreneur with a past as a successful martial artist (more on this in the following). Roberto is commonly addressed by other Odaka Yoga teachers and practitioners as *Sensei*, an honorific title that testifies to both the martial arts influences that characterise the Odaka Yoga system and Roberto’s standing within the school. More specifically, the Japanese martial arts - as well as some Chinese and Korean martial arts - addresses their masters/teachers with the expression

sensei, which translates as “one who comes before”<sup>18</sup>. This term is not only used to address a martial arts’ lineage



literally “person born another” or comes. This term is address a arts’ holder or a

particularly skilled practitioner, but also, for instance, an older person, a

<sup>16</sup> Field note, Italy, Milan, December 15, 2018.

<sup>17</sup> <https://odakayoga.com/en/roberto-milletti/> accessed February 14, 2020.

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.tofugu.com/japanese/sensei/> accessed October 2, 2020.

successful sport man, a politician or an academic, that is, anybody holding a position of authority of some sort (Ratti and Westbrook 1973). However, although sensei can be used interchangeably to address a teacher or a proper master, it implies, similarly to the Sanskrit guru, the ability of an individual to transmit his or her knowledge beyond mere technical or notional elements. In the context of Japanese martial arts, a sensei is an experienced martial artist whose teachings are grounded on wisdom derived from age and experience.

Most notably, Roberto is the founder of Odaka Yoga. He teaches at studios and festivals worldwide and “has been featured in “Om Yoga Magazine UK” as one of the three world leaders in new, contemporary forms of yoga”<sup>19</sup>. According to the Odaka Yoga website, Roberto is “one of the 14th Yoga Alliance International Australia: Master Yoga Platinum, the highest recognition in the industry by a Yoga Organisation”<sup>20</sup>. Moreover, as the website continues:

He is a Master of how to embrace flow and move Ki (the inner power) to open students up to endless possibilities, living by the mantra “We are not here to do yoga, we are here to become yoga”.<sup>21</sup>

As a consequence, Roberto is not simply described as a particularly expert yoga teacher and innovator, but as a “Master” capable to deeply transform his students, or has the website puts it “open students up to endless possibilities”.

Francesca Cassia, also known as *Niji*, is the co-founder of Odaka Yoga and Roberto’s lifelong partner. *Niji* is an archaic Chinese term that addresses the recognition of time, or better the awareness that time has come for a specific action to be undertaken. To my knowledge, Francesca received this name by Roberto himself, when, under his tutelage, she earned a First Dan Black Belt in Karate Shotokan.

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<sup>19</sup> <https://odakayoga.com/en/roberto-millett/> accessed February 14, 2020.

<sup>20</sup> <https://odakayoga.com/en/roberto-millett/> accessed February 14, 2020.

<sup>21</sup> <https://odakayoga.com/en/roberto-millett/> accessed February 14, 2020.



**Figure 3:** Francesca Cassia (Niji).<sup>22</sup>

As Roberto, Francesca is one of the 14th Yoga Alliance International Australia Master Yoga Platinum, the highest recognition issued by the yoga industry.<sup>23</sup> Together with Roberto, “[s]he has been teaching yoga and running teacher trainings for over 20 years in Europe, USA (United Nations New York City), Australia, Japan” and has recently become the chief editor of “the world’s largest and most influential yoga brand”<sup>24</sup>, the Yoga Alliance International online Journal.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, Francesca is also involved in a number of other activities and projects. For instance, she “collaborates with the medical team of Mater Dei and Paideia (private clinics for pregnancy) to prepare the body and mind to labor, birth and motherhood” and she “is Member of the board of European movement for yoga and Ayurveda and she is specialized in Women Self defense training courses”.<sup>26</sup> Finally, her biography underlines her special relationship with the practice of yoga in the following terms:

With yoga it has been love at first posture, and since then her life has been dedicated to the empowering and transformative process of placing the body and mind in a dynamic interplay to reach the perfect alignment. Students call her the “Queen of Psoas”.<sup>27</sup>

As it emerges from these portraits, Odaka Yoga is not simply another of the countless postural yoga styles that have been flowering in the “post-Iyengar” era. On the contrary,

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<sup>22</sup> <https://odakayoga.com/en/francesca-cassia/> accessed February 14, 2020.

<sup>23</sup> <https://odakayoga.com/en/francesca-cassia/> accessed February 14, 2020.

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.yogajournal.com/page/about-us> accessed October 6, 2018.

<sup>25</sup> <https://odakayoga.com/en/francesca-cassia/> accessed February 14, 2020.

<sup>26</sup> <https://odakayoga.com/en/francesca-cassia/> accessed February 14, 2020.

<sup>27</sup> <https://odakayoga.com/en/francesca-cassia/> accessed February 14, 2020.

it is an innovative and hybrid style whose founders are among the top “celebrity instructors” of the landscape of contemporary postural yoga. Naturally, successful teachers such as Francesca and Roberto, in addition to having dedicated decades of their lives to the careful study and practice of yoga – among other disciplines – have also been able to competently navigate the recent booming of the “yoga market” with its branding and marketing dynamics. This is particularly evident from the types of credentials that both teachers held: Roberto was recently featured as one of the “three world leaders in new, contemporary forms of yoga” by the ‘*Om Yoga Magazine UK*’. Moreover, in his youth he won the European Championship of Karate and went on to found two different styles of martial arts from which Odaka Yoga subsequently emerged, as I will discuss in more details in the following; while Francesca, in turn, is the editor in chief of another yoga magazine, the ‘*Yoga Alliance International online Journal*’, she collaborates with different private clinics for pregnancy, is specialised in woman self-defence training courses, and finally, she is also a member of the board of European movement for yoga and Ayurveda. To conclude, both Roberto and Francesca have travelled extensively across the globe to disseminate their hybrid system of yoga and are two among the 14th Master Yoga Platinum recognised by Yoga Alliance International Australia. This collection of credentials could be fruitfully framed through the lenses of “credentialism”, a social phenomenon that:

refers to reliance upon formal credentials conferred by educational institutions, professional organizations, and other associations as a principal means to determine the qualifications of individuals to perform a range of particular occupational tasks or to make authoritative statements as “experts” in specific subject areas”.<sup>28</sup>

More specifically, as rightly underlined by Randall Collins (1979) in his ‘*The Credential Society*’, credentialism expresses the ideology that qualifications reflect either the expertise or attributes necessary for social ascent or the occupancy of élite roles and is intrinsically connected with specific political, economic and social systems and the social reproduction of inequalities inherent in them. Coming back to the case study of Roberto and Francesca, we can confidently state that their collection of credentials grants them the authority and the legitimacy to hold a specific position as innovative yoga teachers and popularisers. Moreover, the concept of credentialism helps us to connected Odaka Yoga founders’ positioning in the yoga field to an understanding of the latter as a yoga

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<sup>28</sup> <https://www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences-and-law/sociology-and-social-reform/sociology-general-terms-and-concepts/credentialism#3045300482> accessed October 3, 2020.

market characterised by branding and marketing dynamics. From this perspective, credentialism appears as a new form of *neo-liberal charisma* developed at the intersection of the processes of development, change and internal articulation of the yoga field as a hybrid field and as a market regulated by an economic logic, that is, simplifying, the demand and offer ratio for certain goods. This is an important point, as it allows to contextualise Francesca's and Roberto's biographical remarks as expert and qualified practitioners within the contours of the ever changing yoga field and the broader social field, or field of power, which in turn is largely dominated by an economic logic. Reframing this analysis of credentialism through Bourdieusian lenses, we can say that credentialism is a form of "educational" and/or "symbolic capital" (Bourdieu 1986) that Roberto and Francesca actively use to secure their positioning within the yoga field. Moreover, credentialism is also instrumental in elucidating some of the dynamics that characterise the processes of development, change and the internal articulation of the yoga field as a market nested within the broader logic of neoliberal economies and actively shaped by different drivers, such as, for instance, a quest for diversity, innovation, celebrity and credentialism.

Following this suggestion then, and as hinted in the next extract, Roberto and Francesca have been able to fully capitalise on – or brand – their own persona and convert previously acquired capitals into this flourishing business:

*Roberto:* look, I started very young with martial arts. At the age of seven. I approached martial arts because I was, in between brackets, a little bit bullied, at school, in the courtyard and so I was looking for self-confidence, I was trying to win my fears, my shyness. So, my grandpa suggested me martial arts, and from there, in short, all my path. Martial arts became integral part of my existence, and then I met yoga when I was twelve, thirteen years old. And so, two great loves that I cultivated until they merged one with the other. So martial arts elements with the traditional poses of yoga, and then the meeting with Francesca, that comes, in short, from the world of fitness.

*Francesca:* Yes, I take a slightly different route. I am the generation of Jane Fonda. I did not have any intention whatsoever to do yoga. I love movement, I come from aerobics and suits, you know those eighties style, in lurex and when I was studying at university I also started to teach aerobics and then there was this gym in Rome where they were doing some yoga courses, and

my sister who was studying psychology told me: “Look, let’s go, I want you to have this experience”, [she said it] once, twice, three times, and in the end I said: “Ok, let’s go”. It has been really like a revelation for me. From there on I have never abandoned the yoga mat. This incredible contact with the body, that was not only a tool for movement but that really talked to you, it was really like, oh yeah, I found my way, so to say. I found what I wanted to do in the world. And with Roberto we have, I love anatomy, all that more structured part that concerns movement that married very well with Roby<sup>29</sup>’s creativity and this fusion with martial arts and yoga. And so slowly, slowly everything gained structure.<sup>30</sup>

Importantly, as Francesca approached the practice of yoga she was also struggling with anorexia. Luckily, thanks to her dedication to the practice and “the physical realization of certain things”, as she says in our interview, Francesca managed “to overcome it”.

The founders provide here a short genealogical account of the philosophical and discursive foundations of the school contextualised within their biographical trajectories. Simplifying, Odaka Yoga’s hybrid character is then the expression of Roberto’s and Francesca’s respective experience and proficiency with martial arts and fitness and their subsequent bricolage of the practical-discursive logics pertaining to these different fields. More specifically, Odaka Yoga is constituted by two different but parallel pillars: one is the discursive and practical reference to Asian systems of knowledge such as yoga, Zen, and martial arts, whose main influence comes from Roberto’s experience, experimentations and creativity; the other, is a focus on Western science and medicine, and more specifically on anatomy and biomechanics, primarily inspired by Francesca’s background in the fitness world.

When Roberto and Francesca met and began their lifelong journey together, Odaka Yoga, as we know and practice it today, was not yet formalised. It was only in 1993 that the word “Odaka”, as much as Odaka Yoga’s teachings, were subjected to copyright. However, “Odaka” was already used as an acronym of the martial art and yoga studio founded in Rome and run by Roberto since 1984 (later also in partnership with Francesca) which was called ‘*Oriental Disciplines Arashi Kyo Academy*’ (O.D.A.K.A). As Francesca further explains:

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<sup>29</sup> Affectionate term that stands for Roberto.

<sup>30</sup> Roberto Milletti and Francesca Cassia, interview by author, audio recording, online interview, May 22, 2019.



Arashi Kyo is the name of Sensei, of Roby, when he was European champion of Karate. I mean [we taught] many styles but the acronym adopted was Odaka, and so everyone [said]: “I am going to Odaka”, “I am going to Odaka”, “Odaka”, “Odaka”.<sup>31</sup>

O.D.A.K.A functioned as a hub, a place for practical experimentation and philosophical discussion over the meaning and purpose of martial arts, understood by Roberto “as Dao, as the way, as science of the self”.<sup>32</sup> Its main goal was the diffusion of specific disciplines as means of inner knowledge and spiritual search to favor the perfect mind and body harmony development of each individual.<sup>33</sup> Most Notably, Roberto was teaching two martial arts systems he had created: *Shin Jitsu Ryu* and *Wi Yoga Wakan*. These martial systems emerged at the intersection of Roberto’s experience and experimentation with Karate Shotokan, Ju Jitsu, Zen, Hatha and Raja yoga and offered already the philosophical and practical bases for what later on would develop and evolve as Odaka Yoga. Of course, Francesca was also instrumental to the development of Odaka Yoga through her extensive experience in the world of fitness and yoga and her martial arts apprenticeship under Roberto’s guidance.

Odaka Yoga further developed internationally because of a serendipitous happening, or more specifically an epiphany, that brought Roberto and Francesca to drastically re-imagine their life. After their martial academy shook due to internal conflicts, its key members took different routes, and Roberto and Francesca moved to Australia where they were planning to open a new studio and continue their work of dissemination and martial explorations. As discussed by Francesca, watching the ‘*The Last Samurai*’ (2003)<sup>34</sup> at the cinema represented a turning point in their life:

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<sup>31</sup> Roberto Milletti and Francesca Cassia, interview by author, audio recording, online interview, May 22, 2019.

<sup>32</sup> As Roberto continues: “So, not learning how to fight but how to not fight, so through the achievement of that mental peace, that equability, that state of equability. And this is I think that fascinating aspect of martial arts understood as the way and not only as sporting competition, competitive”. Roberto Milletti and Francesca Cassia, interview by author, audio recording, online interview, May 22, 2019.

<sup>33</sup> <http://web.tiscali.it/odaka/odaka.htm> accessed August 8, 2020.

<sup>34</sup> ‘*The Last Samurai*’ narrates the story of Nathan Algren (Tom Cruise), an ex-American soldier in charge of the training of the Japanese Imperial army. Eventually Nathan Algren, captured in battle by the rebellious samurai, joins their cause in a romantic and deadly confrontation over two ways of life and ethics of war. As correctly emphasised by Tierney (2007: 607), this movie, together with ‘*Kill Bill*’ and ‘*Bulletproof Monk*’, reproduces a “strategic rhetoric of whiteness”, expressed through “the supraethnic viability of whiteness”, “the necessary defeat of Asians”, “the disallowance of anti-White sentiment”, and “the presence of at least one helpful and/or generous Asian cohort”. More specifically, ‘*The Last Samurai*’ as much as the broader Odaka Yoga system could be fruitfully explored following Lucia’s (2020) theorising on “white possessivism” (Moreton-Robinson 2015), that is, a cultural trait, or an ideology, through which white people feel entitled to appropriate minorities’ cultural and religious resources as their own, such as Indic spirituality, martial arts and other indigenous forms of knowledge.

Everything started because one day we were living in Australia, in a beautiful place where we practiced with joy, and “The Last Samurai” came out in the cinema, and we went to watch it...we were in Melbourne and we had just rented a beautiful place for a new yoga studio. We left [the cinema] and Roby did not talk for a couple of days. I said to him “What’s happening? How are you feeling?”. He replied, “Look, I touched the soul, deeply, and I feel I need to go to Japan”. And in that moment, I thought “Give him a couple of days and he will be over it”. But it did not happen. Instead we terminated the contract [of the yoga studio] and we sold everything we had in Australia [where] we were only a step away from the permanent visa. There was our best friend that was saying “I mean, you don’t speak a word in Japanese, you know nobody, but where do you want to go?”. But instead his soul had launched this message, such an intense message that we moved there. The first year, the first few months in Japan were rather difficult, but then the local community begun to open up.<sup>35</sup>

Watching ‘*The Last Samurai*’ prompted Roberto to silently question his current life and ongoing projects, further challenging his long-standing and ever evolving “martial habitus” (Brown and Jennings 2013) which, in all fairness, was already shaken by and re-adapting to the recent disruption of his academy. Because of these crises Roberto and Francesca re-located to Japan, where they creatively managed to further innovate their martial style and finally obtained international recognition. These processes of change, adaptation and re-invention could be fruitfully theorised through the lenses of George Jennings’ (2019) “theory of martial creation” as it emerges at the intersection of C. Wright Mills’ (1959) “sociological imagination” and Chris Shilling’s (2008) call for a more pragmatist orientation to the study of the body. The former, a reaction to the structural-functionalism of Talcott Parsons’ sociology, is primarily concerned with directing scholars’ attention to the manners in which macro-sociocultural processes and historical events intertwine with – and could be studied through – individual biographies; the latter, distancing itself from what it perceives to be the limits of “the dominant traditions in sociology” (Shilling 2008: 3), rehabilitates the pragmatist notion of “habit” (Dewey 1922) and focuses on moments of crises that stimulate social actors’ creativity and actions

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<sup>35</sup> Roberto Milletti and Francesca Cassia, interview by author, audio recording, online interview, May 22, 2019.

oriented to social change. As Jennings (2019: 62) comments, “[t]aken together, these provide a powerful framework for understanding how and why a person might create a new martial arts system”. More specifically, recalling Jennings’ (2019: 69) six stages of his theory in the light of the biographical remarks here discussed it is possible to provide the following analysis of the birth and development of Odaka Yoga: first, Roberto and Francesca have a background as *practitioners* in one or more martial art(s). More precisely Roberto practiced Karate Shotokan and Ju Jitsu (in both of which he hold a Fourth Dan Black Belt) next to Zen, Hatha and Raja yoga; while Francesca practiced Karate (earning a First Dan Black Belt under Roberto’s tutelage) next to a lifelong practice with different styles of yoga and fitness; second, both Roberto and Francesca reached a level of *competence, confidence* and *charisma* that did not only allow them to gather a following, but also to transform a local martial arts academy into a transnational organisation praised for its innovative character by some of the most influential voices of the contemporary yoga industry (e.g., Yoga Alliance); third, Roberto and Francesca were *not* the official gatekeepers or lineage holders of their original system (e.g., Karate Shotokan, Ju Jitsu, Hatha or Raja Yoga). However, Roberto was the founder of two different martial arts (e.g., Shin Jitsu Ryu and Wi Yoga Wakan) that in due time, and with the contribution of Francesca, morphed into Odaka Yoga; fourth, Roberto and Francesca started to practice martial arts and yoga as an answer to a personal *crisis* that aggravated them. More specifically, when still a child Roberto was bullied and attempted to exorcise his fears through the martial arts, as suggested by his grandfather; while Francesca, already familiar with the fitness world as she was teaching aerobics as a side job to her study in business administration, found in yoga an effective tool to cope with and resolve her anorexia. A Further moment of crisis was represented by the disruption of their Oriental Disciplines Academy in Rome, which brought the two teachers to Australia where they continued their martial explorations. Finally, Roberto’s conversion following the vision of ‘*The Last Samurai*’ functioned as an epiphany that proved instrumental in the further internationalisation and popularisation of Odaka Yoga; fifth, Roberto and Francesca, each of them through their own expertise, devised a *solution* for their personal problems through a revised martial and human development system, in this case Odaka Yoga. More specifically, through the formulation of their “new concept”, “Live Centered, Liquefy Your Limits, Embrace The Power” and its “principles of transformation, adaptability and interior strength”, Roberto and Francesca provided an

existential answer to the fears and health challenges encountered in their youth while also offering a seductive path cable to equip its practitioners to face the flexibility demands, performative requests, and uncertainties of contemporary neoliberal societies; sixth, although Roberto and Francesca are still alive and well, there are preliminary elements to postulate that their death will eventually create added *chaos*, thus fuelling the cycle of *creativity* among future generations of practitioners and possible lineage holders, a fascinating topic in itself that here cannot be competently explored.

As Jennings (2019: 66, emphasis in original) comments, these six stages can be summarised in the following declaration: “A *martial art is founded by a disciplined, habitual martial artist who creatively transcends personal and social crises*”. Here, Roberto and Francesca learned different disciplines from a variety of teachers, practiced extensively and creatively, achieved a status within their respective fields and finally were able “to create something new and create a new method of achieving it” (Jennings 2019: 66). As testified by the biographical sketches here provided “[t]he overall process of creativity is a potentially lifelong process, but it also comes with fleeting and intensive moments of (sometimes epiphanous) creation” (ibidem).

Enriching Jennings’ theory of martial creation with a closer look at Roberto’s and Francesca’s habitus and positions within the martial arts, yoga, and fitness fields, may further help focusing on important elements in the birth and development of Odaka Yoga. First, Roberto and Francesca managed to adapt and transform their respective “martial” (Brown and Jennings 2013) and “fitness” habitus (Sassatelli 2002) into a specific declination of “yogic habitus” (Di Placido 2018) hybridised with martial arts and fitness elements. This signifies that their old habitus and its schemes of dispositions, developed at the intersection of the martial arts, fitness, and yoga fields, progressively changed as they moved away from the center of the martial arts and fitness fields, and towards the center of the yoga field. In other words, we may say that Roberto and Francesca successfully managed to exploit and convert certain types of capitals that granted them their previous positioning in the martial arts and fitness fields, into useful resources to acquire an ever more central positioning within the yoga field. For instance, next to their previous teaching expertise and pedagogical know-how – including in the martial arts founded by Roberto, yoga, and aerobics – they exploited the “bodily” (Wacquant 1995) or “physical capital” (Shilling 2004, 2012) developed, acquired, and secured through their lifelong involvement with different martial activities and fitness practices – not to

mention their previously acquired titles and credentials – to build an image of successful, competent, and innovative teachers. In so doing, as they skillfully converted their proficiency in the martial arts and fitness worlds to create an innovative hybrid style of yoga, they also contributed to the reproduction of the relationship of homology between the broader field of power, and the martial arts and fitness field. Simplifying, via their capitals (e.g., educational, economic, cultural, physical, and so on), Francesca and Roberto secured a dominant position within the martial arts and fitness fields, while also managing to remain in a dominant position in their successive and progressive involvement within the yoga field. More specifically, Odaka Yoga is a prominent style of postural yoga both in Italy, the motherland of its founders and internationally, being particularly practiced, perhaps also due to its martial arts influences, in China and Japan.<sup>36</sup>

After this introduction of the founders of the school, I introduce Beatrice Morello, prominent Odaka Yoga teacher under whose tutelage I conducted the greatest part of my field work with Odaka Yoga.

#### **4.1. *Beatrice***

Beatrice Morello is the owner and main teacher of the Milanese yoga and pilates studio ‘*Just B*’ which functions also as the North Italian headquarter and training center of Odaka Yoga. Beatrice, affectionately called Bea by her students and fellow instructors, is not only a reference point for the Milanese branch of the community, but is, together with Enzo Ventimiglia (based in Catania, Italy) Yui Kitagawa and Megumi Yamashita (both based in Tokyo, Japan) and others, one of the most experienced Odaka Yoga teachers at the internationally level. Beatrice is also one of the few Odaka Yoga teachers that, together with the founders, is actively and extensively involved in providing teacher trainings in this specific style. It is attending to her weekly classes and progressively becoming more immersed in the Milanese Odaka Yoga community gravitating around her studio that I gathered the largest part of the ethnographic observations of this thesis. Moreover, most of the Odaka Yoga teachers I interviewed, with a few notable exceptions, are either Beatrice’s students or close collaborators. Following these remarks, Beatrice’s central status within the school has to be emphasised if not only because her vision of and approach towards yoga and her pedagogical style are particularly influential in

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<sup>36</sup> Roberto Milletti and Francesca Cassia, interview by author, audio recording, online interview, May 22, 2019.

determining the processes of apprenticeship of the modern yogi that I had the chance to observe, embody and then critically explore in these pages. Nevertheless, it is also equally important to underline that her understanding of yoga and of its foundational pedagogies do not spring out of a social, practical, and discursive vacuum. Conversely, Beatrice's distinctive character and central status within the Odaka Yoga community have to be understood as the expression of her specific interpretation of the ethos promoted by the school, or in other words, as her embodiment, interiorisation and in turn transmission of the specific habitus that lies at the center of this school's social reproduction. As a consequence, as we will see in the following pages, there is a certain continuity between the broader ethos of Odaka Yoga, the founders' teachings, the habitus that they promote and Beatrice's own vision and understanding of yoga and pedagogical repertoires.

In the official webpage of her studio Beatrice describes her teaching profile stating that:

For almost twenty years I have been following a research path that brought me, through different disciplines, to the deepening and understanding of the relationship between body, mind and emotions. [I have been] Searching for harmony and balance, starting from the work on the body (my translation).<sup>37</sup>



**Figure 4:** Beatrice Morello (Bea).<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> <https://justb.it/beatricemorello/> (accessed: 15/02/2020).

<sup>38</sup> <https://justb.it/beatricemorello/> accessed February 14, 2020.

Perhaps the most fruitful manner to account for Beatrice's self-descriptive remarks is to mobilise hallmark concepts such as "seeking spirituality" (Wuthnow 1998), "spiritualities of life" (Heelas 2008), "private symbolism" (Hanegraaff 1999) and "spiritual but not religious" (Fuller 2001; Mercadante 2014). These concepts, in fact, refer to a paradigm shift from traditional religions towards more self-centered processes of meaning attribution that clearly emerge from Beatrice's short biographical note. For instance, Hanegraaff's (1999) "private symbolism", defined as the individual's ability to re-signify anew a plethora of elements belonging to different religious traditions within the framework of a personal cosmology, pinpoints to the "meta-narrative" of the search as a central component of contemporary and New Age spiritualities, thus being in substantial alignment with Roberto's interpretation of martial arts understood as Dao (The Way). As a consequence, Beatrice's seeking process is not merely the expression of her personal quest for meanings but finds legitimacy and support in the broader hybrid and bricoleur ethos of Odaka Yoga which in turn developed within a cultural climate that encouraged Odaka Yoga founders' experimentation, cultural appropriation and skillful bricolage of different "exotic" cultural and religious resources into a unified hybrid system tailored to foster practitioners' sense of individuality and self-actualisation (Altglass 2014a, 2014b).

After this short contextualisation of Beatrice's own positioning within the context of the broader cultural matrix in which Odaka Yoga is entangled, I explore in more details, relying on a series of rich biographical interview extracts, how Beatrice approached the yoga world in the first place:

*Beatrice:* how did I come to yoga? With a DVD. It was eleven years ago, twelve years ago, more or less, and I had just finished the training to become pilates instructor. I had some friends that talked about yoga, yoga, yoga, and I was sure I wasn't able to do this yoga that they talked about all the time. However, every time we hung out together, I tried some things with them and [I thought] "Yeah I can make it". But they [would put their] legs behind the head while I was a piece of wood. Also, because my sporting history is all, I come from athletics, skating, I mean all power sports and muscle shortening. And so, I said: "All right, I take this DVD and I watch it". So, I take this DVD of Bryan Kest, and Bryan Kest in those years was a bit like the guru of yoga in Los Angeles. He had this long hair, a bit like Jesus Christ and this persuasive voice and taught Power Yoga. I do this Power Yoga class,

demanding but not too demanding, with an intense rhythm, and so I finish the class, and beside the fact that I was in an unexpected puddle of sweat right where I was, I told myself: “What did happen?”. The feeling of wellbeing that I had at the end of that first class was like rediscovering the feeling I had as a kid when I rode my bicycle, I don’t know how to put it. Absolute happiness! And so, it is like if I had started this new path that then I took, to change life. It is like if [this class] guided me to understand what I knew already, that I, for my own happiness I had to go through the body. I need movement. For me the conscious movement, let’s call it like this, of yoga, a movement [performed] with attention, it is something I’ve always done, I mean, I’ve always looked for it. I started twenty years ago with dynamic meditation. So [this movement] gave me my peace back.<sup>39</sup>

Beatrice recalls how her first approach with yoga, as for many other practitioners worldwide, was mediated by a DVD (today increasingly substitute by online classes). She also underlines how her friends – naturally next to her involvement in the fitness field as a fitness instructor – played a pivotal role in creating an interest for this discipline, an important point on which I will expand in Chapter Five discussing the role of practitioners’ social capital in the discovery and maintenance of their yoga practice. As for Francesca, the first class was such a highly transformative experience that Beatrice was literally set on a quest to change her life. To use Foucault’s understanding of conversion, it is possible to theorise Beatrice’s first class with Bryan Kest, one of the pioneers of Ashtanga Yoga in the United States, as an experience of conversion “...from the outside, from others and the world etc., towards “one self”” (Foucault 2005: 11), whereby she was encouraged to cultivate a specific introspective relationship to her somatic-sphere. Interestingly, and in line with the experiential epistemology characterising contemporary spiritualities, Beatrice’s quest is first and foremost a matter of experimentation, direct experience, and sensuous re-discovery of one’s own body, something that she also explored in the past through her involvement with Osho’s dynamic meditation. In the following extract, Beatrice clarifies how such an experience of conversion brought her to the initial but sustained practice of different styles of yoga:

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<sup>39</sup> Beatrice Morello, interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 16, 2020.



*Beatrice:* And then from there I began to practice in classes, different styles of yoga, Anusara, Vinyasa. I began a training with Vinyasa but I did not feel comfortable, I mean, I felt that that was my path but I could not follow the way it was practiced in that specific style, maybe perfect for other people. Because I was always projected not to hurt myself, because practices were regularly too intense, or too much into the pose, [oriented] to perform the right pose, and not enough [oriented] to the listening to the body and of what my body could do in that moment. In short, I had to adapt to the pose and not the pose to me and this thing made me slightly uneasy. But I still felt that that was the right path and so I was doing different workshops, I was trying different things and finally I came, for a seminar, to Odaka Yoga.<sup>40</sup>

Beatrice specifies how after a period of experimentation with different styles and schools of yoga she started a Vinyasa teacher training, however, only to discover that the performative and highly technical features of the style did not match her needs, or as we will in Chapter Five, her dispositions. Beatrice was particularly annoyed by the fact that, as she says, “I had to adapt to the pose and not the pose to me”. Nonetheless, she was also conscious that yoga was something meaningful for her and therefore she kept searching until eventually she stumbled upon Odaka Yoga, as she describes in the following fragment:

*Beatrice:* I retired from this Vinyasa training and I started to see what else was going on around, and with a friend of mine, my best friend, we went to an Odaka Yoga workshop. One full day. After two hours I wanted to leave. My god, no way! Sensei talked all the time...he talked with such an obnoxious voice. So I go there and this dude [Roberto] talks in romanaccio [derogatory term to address somebody speaking with a strong Roman accent], slightly colored blond hair and a detestable tone. I got angry and after three seconds I looked at my friend Maria and told her: “Mari, if we are in another place with crazy, exalted people I leave, give me two hours and I leave at the end of the morning”. And she went: “Yeah, you are right!”. But the more we progressed in the practice the better I felt. So, I said: “You see!” [with

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<sup>40</sup> Beatrice Morello, interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 16, 2020.

surprise] and at the end of the day I subscribed to the teacher training, immediately!<sup>41</sup>

Beatrice's first impressions of Odaka Yoga, or more specifically of Roberto, are critical to say the least. First, she depicted this community as "another place with crazy, exalted people" and she actively planned to leave the workshop way before it ends. Second, she found Roberto annoying, both aesthetically (his colored blond hair) and in his mannerism (the way he speaks). Nonetheless, despite these initial worries, Beatrice was seduced by the practice, to the point that by the end of the workshop she subscribed to enroll in one of the earliest Odaka Yoga Teacher Training (TT) courses. In the following fragment, Beatrice expands on her personal take on Roberto and Francesca, emphasising the discrepancy between her first impression and judgmental approach and her current appreciation of her teachers:

...and [now] I understood that this man [Roberto] challenged my absolute prejudice towards this world. I mean, I have a prejudice! And I still have it in many ways. Because we all want beatification but I am not inclined to holiness and so I have lots of things I don't understand of this seeking to be what one is not. Yoga leads to particular drifts. And instead, what I understood at the end of that day is that in his being also a bit theatrical, Sensei is absolutely authentic. He is like this. It is with time that I understood that this practice leads you a lot into listening and so it is not theater but simply that you really do an atypical journey and people are not used to it. And if you say, as he does: "Wow, what a wonderful sensation!" [in English in original], well, sometimes I burst into a laughter, but really! I burst into a laughter! I look at him and say: "Did you say it for real?". But then if I stay there and listen, he is right, what I am feeling is a terrific sensation, and he has the courage to say it. I would never have it. And so, he has an authenticity and if you like also a simplicity, I mean, he does not have all these slightly intellectual sovra-structures that I have...And from there on this amazing journey started that for me is still a revolution in everything. For the body, because it managed to allow me to do things that my body in other styles would have never done. For the heart, because it unhinged me a great deal, I

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<sup>41</sup> Beatrice Morello, interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 16, 2020.

mean, the strength of these two people that transmitted this practice to me. Francesca has an incredible technical quality and so going through experience and listening I was forced to profoundly understand not only my body but also that of my students. But both have also the quality to greatly tune in with the class. Roberto for his history, for who he is, he makes you meditate in movement, that in the end is what I am after. I mean, it's that aspect, it's the journey that I am after. That's it, he guides you into a journey.<sup>42</sup>

In this extract Beatrice describes how her skepticism and critical positioning are radically challenged by the authenticity and simplicity of Roberto and by the technical qualities and direct guidance of Francesca. More specifically, both teachers are presented as having the “quasi-magical” ability to “greatly tune in with the class”, that is, to build an experience of “sensuous” or “sensual solidarity (e.g., Mellor and Shilling 1997; Routledge 2012), defined by Mellor and Shilling (1997: 174) as:

consumption-oriented forms of sociality; bound up with corporeal absorption and immersion. They are based on the feelings, emotions and the effervescence which can derive from being with others (as opposed to simply discursively communicating with them).

According to this perspective, Roberto and Francesca, are, in the transmission of their message, capable to jointly address their students at the somatic, cognitive and emotional level. In so doing, these experiences of sensual solidarities, on which I will expand in some details in the next section, also function as key events to the social and discursive construction of Roberto's and Francesca's charismatic leadership. In fact, while on the one hand they certainly allow to minimise the contestation towards the authority, charisma and qualities of the teachers through a positive collective experience of their abilities, on the other hand, this type of momentary solidarities are also instrumental in generating collective positive mood contagion among the member of the group (e.g., Bono and Ilies 2006; Wallis 1982; Werbner and Basu 1998). As poignantly recounted by Beatrice, when Roberto states “What a wonderful sensation!”, “if I stay there and listen, he is right, what I am feeling is a terrific sensation”, testifies to the importance that shared positive experiences and emotional contagion play in the context of reinforcing one's charismatic role and legitimate authority within a given group.

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<sup>42</sup> Beatrice Morello, interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 16, 2020.

In the following, I introduce a field note from the very beginning of my fieldwork where Beatrice, at the outset of a morning class, talks about the student-teacher relationship and her teachers. In so doing, I attempt to substantiate the analysis of Roberto and Francesca as charismatic leaders contextualising Beatrice's narrative within the broader "institutional" perspective, or legitimate discourse, about the Odaka Yoga's founders circulating among Odaka Yoga practitioners:

We are sitting on our mats. 7.45 in the morning. The weekend just passed, and Beatrice begins to speak about the role of the teacher as a student. She says: "As a student you only look up to the teacher while as a teacher you look up and learn how one thing is done differently by twenty people". This sentence sticks to my head! Beatrice also speaks about one of the founders of Odaka Yoga, Roberto, as coming from the martial arts world and having really brought that in and merged it with yoga. She describes this man as a free spirit, she repeats this a few times in a minute or so, and seems to refer to him as a superior, gifted person, or as a disciple does with the guru. In the community is known as Sensei, the way a master is called in the martial arts world. Beatrice says that when she attends a class with him, she is completely taken back to herself, she is just in the present moment, for the duration of the all class, being it one, two or three hours. She says that although Odaka Yoga is meant to be highly flowing and experiential, this quality of bringing the students to the present moment is a specific gift, a quality of Sensei. She then adds that Sensei would change the style and the practices he proposes each time, and fortunately there is Francesca who pulls the situation, being it a master class or a teacher training, in the other direction, thus managing to have both the free spirit, changeful and innovative touch of Sensei and the due structure of a style that is taught in several schools across countries and continents.<sup>43</sup>

A useful way to preliminary understand how Beatrice relates to Roberto and Francesca is Max Weber's construct of "charismatic authority" (1968: 215) defined as a particular type of authority "resting on devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person, and of the normative patterns or order revealed or

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<sup>43</sup> Field note, Milan, Italy, May 8, 2020.

ordained by him”. According to Weber’s (1968) typology, also comprised of “traditional” and “legal or rational authority”, the charismatic type is the only one that does not rely on external formal structures or norms. In other words, the charismatic teacher’s message usually relies on very low levels of institutionalisation for its transmission<sup>44</sup>. In this sense, it readily matches the experiential epistemology at the heart of contemporary spiritualities and central to Beatrice’s narrative as much as Roberto’s creativity and “specific gift” of “bringing the students in the present moment”. In fact, the teacher’s “exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character” and his supposed “supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities...regarded as divine in origin or as exemplary” (Weber 1968: 241), are the primary grounds that determine the teacher’s legitimacy to guide others and transfer his or her knowledge to them. I will expand on a theorisation of charisma as a crucial theoretical aid to understand – in practice – the processes of knowledge transmission that characterises the pedagogies of the community investigated and the teacher-student relationship in the following chapters.

In the next section, I provide a short account of Odaka Yoga’s social organisation, institutional structure and transnational reach.

## **5. The Community**

The Odaka Yoga’s website describes its international structure and transnational character as follows:

Europe, USA, Australia, India, Japan, Canada, China, Korea....17 countries, 70 school, hundreds of teachers, one passion. The Odaka Yoga method, throughout the world, has been captivating teachers and students. It is due to this increasing interest that Odaka Yoga has become a real community; outstretched to spread a universal approach and creating an international network of events and possibilities.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> This lack of reliance on external, institutionalised forms of authority is what determines the fleeting nature of those groups entirely based on the charismatic authority of their leader. For example, Newcombe (2019, 75-108) draws a distinction between Iyengar Yoga’s successful dissemination in Britain, largely obtained thanks to the progressive institutionalisation of his charisma into a formal structure of teacher trainings; and Yogini Sunita’s (born Bernadette Bocarro 1932-1970) Pranayama yoga which was virtually lost due to her early death alongside the substantial charismatic character of her teachings. In the case of Odaka Yoga there is a simultaneous reliance on both forms of authority.

<sup>45</sup> <https://odakayoga.com/en/> accessed February 16, 2020.

From this, it emerges that Odaka Yoga is not merely a school or a style of postural yoga but is also a transnational organisation with centers across four different continents and a hectic calendar of events such as festivals, workshops and teacher trainings that take place continuously all over the world. Odaka Yoga's website lists a total of seventeen "Centers blessed by Odaka Yoga", one in Japan, one in the United States, six in China and the remaining nine in Italy.<sup>46</sup> Among the events listed for 2020, some of which have been rescheduled due to the current Covid-19 pandemic, figure yoga festivals in Gran Canarie, Spain (12-14 June); Athens, Greece (18-20 July); and Russia (1-2 August); and teacher trainings in Mexico (5-15 April); Arizona (17-22 April); and Greece (26 July - 9 August). Naturally, from this list are excluded a plethora of previous events such as teacher trainings and retreats in Japan, China, Korea and Thailand, just to mention a number of Asian countries where the style is particularly practiced and in constant expansion<sup>47</sup>.

Moreover, Odaka Yoga is also represented as a "passion", as something as "captivating" and involving as to generate the constitution of a "real community". Borrowing Benedict Anderson's (1983) concept of "imagined communities", originally formulated to theorise about the social construction of nationalism, and merging it with Roland Robertson's (1992, 2014) analyses of globalisation and glocalisation, we can claim that Odaka Yoga is instead constructed as a specific transnational, de-territorialised "imagined community" constantly re-enacted glocally by its members. According to this reading, while Anderson (1983) underlines the importance of "print capitalism" and media's representations in the processes of social construction of nationalism, we can say, with Robertson (2014), that next to the transnational ramification of the school also its branding strategies such as a high online visibility and the construction of a specific exotic hybrid ethos particularly appealing for middle-classes worldwide, largely contributed to the creation of Odaka Yoga's communitarian dimension. I will expand on the appeal of Odaka Yoga's message of self-actualisation for the middle-classes worldwide in the conclusions of Chapter Four and in Chapter Five. For the moment, I will only provide a series of circumstantial remarks, starting from an extract taken from the Odaka Yoga's website:

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<sup>46</sup> <https://odakayoga.com/en/community/centers/> accessed February 16, 2020.

<sup>47</sup> Roberto Milletti and Francesca Cassia, interview by author, audio recording, online interview, May 22, 2019; Sakura [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, online interview, February 5, 2020; Eri [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, online interview, February 27, 2020.

Odaka is a full-spectrum approach to embodying the flow of life with awareness, joy and empowerment. Odaka's core belief is living and sharing the yoga practice on and off the mat. It is a lifestyle that constantly creates synergy and synchronicity, promotes self-awareness and green consciousness and develops a deep respect for all living creatures. Odaka's vision is to create a universal approach and unity of purpose not only with the Odaka Yoga teachers, but also with various schools of differing yoga styles throughout the world via an international network of exchanges and events done together.<sup>48</sup>

This extract emphasises the coming together of the Odaka Yoga community as a “lifestyle” constructed around values such as “self-awareness”, “green consciousness” and “deep respect for all living creatures”, not to mention the “universal approach and unity of purpose” that the school intends to foster not only within the Odaka Yoga community but transversally, within the yoga field in its entirety. Interestingly enough, these values belong to the same practical-discursive universe and can be equally embraced, promoted and socially reproduced by an Italian practitioner as much as by a Japanese or a North American one in their respective national contexts without substantial variation. Therefore, Odaka Yoga emerges as a hybrid system, transmitted globally, and accommodated globally, whose normative patterns of conduct, moral universe and performative repertoire are particularly seducing for the middle-classes, irrespectively of their geography of reference of national heritage. I will expand on a reading of Odaka Yoga as a lifestyle in the conclusive section of the next chapter, exploring in more details how this lifestyle is embodied through the interiorisation of Odaka Yoga' scheme of dispositions and thus how it can be usefully conceptualised through the lenses of Bourdieu's (e.g., 1977a, 1984, 1996) theory of habitus. In the next section I will delve deeper into an analysis of the communitarian dimension of Odaka Yoga.

### **5.1. *Odaka Yoga: Tribe or Utopia?***

The communitarian dimension of modern postural yoga schools and organisations emerge simultaneously as a driving force for practitioners' continuous involvement in the schools and/or as one of the stated aims of these organisations, that is, to create, maintain and spread their community so as to bridge differences among its members and beyond (e.g.,

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<sup>48</sup> <https://odakayoga.com/en/about/concept/> accessed February 16, 2020.

Lewis 2008; Smith and Atencio 2017; Strauss 2005). Naturally, the teachers – and the teacher-student relationship – occupy a pivotal role within these processes of communitarian construction, especially when the teachers are also the founders or the initiators of a specific school or lineage. Founders, in fact, are more likely to function as catalisers of practitioners’ processes of involvement within the school and as the main advocates of the discursive and philosophical foundations and the pedagogical repertoires of their own organisations. I will dedicate the remaining of this chapter to a discussion of the communitarian dimension of Odaka Yoga and its construction around its founders and the larger transnational community.

In the following extract, Francesca replies to my question regarding the centrality of the founders in the social organisation and processes of construction of the communitarian dimension of Odaka Yoga, of which the teacher-student relationship, I argue, is the organising principle:

*Matteo:* I wish to ask you something. More than once, especially during classes with Bea, or even after, having breakfast [with the other students], it happened I noticed the warmth with which you are considered by the other teachers and practitioners, at least of the Milanese school where I had a chance to practice a bit. So, I was asking myself, you are the founders and the main Odaka Yoga teachers, how does this thing impact on the manners in which the other teachers or students relate to you?

*Francesca:* look, one of the things that have always been brought to our attention, not always very kindly by some, is the fact that Roby and I, but basically I speak for myself, is that I don’t want to be the teacher of anybody. It is true you are the founder, but it did happen [by chance]. We did not want to found a style or anything like that. It has always been something that happened and that channeled itself. And your collaborators, they are part of this magic too. I mean, there is never an absolute truth, “I say this and this is done”, but we talk, we listen...a good leader is somebody that in some way listens to everybody and then decides which direction to take but after listening to everybody and without saying “This is it, that’s it!”. Perhaps it is for this reason that a nice relationship is created. And then for us is important, when the guys open a new studio, the first few years we went to Bea when she just opened the studio, for the first two, three years, we have always done



free masterclasses in her studio so to help her start, and she has done other things for us, in the same way. It has been a relationship of trust and support. That is fundamental, really of support.<sup>49</sup>

Francesca underlines that despite their role as founders Roberto and herself never really wanted to establish a new style or become teachers<sup>50</sup>. She further argues that they have been criticised exactly for not taking on the role of the teacher, or, I would add, perhaps for attempting to dismiss or apparently subvert their overt role of leadership within the system of yoga they created. Nevertheless, the non-authoritarian and “virtuous leadership model” that Francesca mentions, based on the cultivation of “nice relationship[s]” with their collaborators and structured around reciprocal “trust” and “support” could be fruitfully theorised through the analyses of charisma provided by Roy Wallis (1982), William Gardner and Bruce Avolio (1998) and Avolio and Gardner (2005). According to the former, Roberto’s and Francesca’s legitimate authority within the relationships that constitute the social fabric of their hybrid system of yoga is a consequence of the social construction of their charisma during their interactions with their followers or fellow practitioners. Here, a “nice relationship” and the cultivation of mutual “trust” and “support” with their collaborators are the primary means to the constitution of the founders’ charismatic leadership rather than evidences of a horizontal social organisation. Similarly, according to Gardner’s and Avolino’s (1998: 32) dramaturgical model of the “charismatic relationship” and their later theorisation of “authentic leadership development” (Avolino and Gardner 2005: 315), Roberto’s and Francesca’s “charismatic authority” (Weber 1968) emerges from the interactional and ritualised encounter between the teachers and their students and from the affective/emotional experiences that this ritualised interactions generate in the community of practitioners, as my previous analysis of sensuous solidarity hinted at. Again, borrowing an expression from Avolio and Gardner (2005: 315), in the following extract I inquire into “the roots of positive forms of leadership” as understood by Roberto and Francesca respectively:

*Matteo:* so, the dimension of the teacher-student relationship is there but a bit on the background. And what is more present is a relationship, how to say...

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<sup>49</sup> Roberto Milletti and Francesca Cassia, interview by author, audio recording, online interview, May 22, 2019.

<sup>50</sup> For more details on this point see Note 1 Appendix One.

*Roberto*: of sharing the magic of what you experience when you live on that mat.

*Francesca*: respect is something that is born and not something that you can force on others. If affection and respect are born, that's ok, but it is not something that you can impose.<sup>51</sup>

Roberto underlines how the communitarian feelings of trust and support are primarily springing out of a shared commitment to the magic of the experience that a life lived on the mat creates. This is what the founders and other teachers and practitioners share: their lifestyle. Moreover, Francesca adds that affection and respect, emotions typically directed to the teachers by their followers, cannot be imposed but should develop naturally, if anything. Again, as underlined by Bono's and Ilies' (2006: 317) study on charisma, positive emotion and mood contagion, "follower mood", "leader effectiveness" and "attraction to the leader", three constituting elements of a successful charismatic leadership (at least from the perspective of her followers), are positively linked to leaders' emotion and most notably to their positive emotional expressions, that is, in the case of Odaka Yoga, expressions such as "What a wonderful sensation!" or teachers' smiles, kind attitude, and youthful looks. Moreover, it is important to underline that to underscore one's positioning as a leader and instead reframe it as an outcome of a shared interest, an expression of love or of a higher power, is a common strategy among a plethora of sectarian spiritual communities, thus leading to a less obvious and more problematic recognition of the power dynamics and authority inherent in any relationship of teaching and supervision (e.g., Kramer and Altstad 1993; Lucia 2018a; Remski 2019). In the following fragment, again extracted from my interview with Roberto and Francesca, I challenge the founders on the actual role of the teacher, thus offering a chance to inquire more closely into their charismatic roles:

*Matteo*: true. But there are roles, for instance I think also about the martial arts, the role of the master in the martial arts, that have almost a charge of respect already inserted in the role itself.

*Francesca*: there is also for the yoga teacher, because in the end all those that come have a great respect for us. But then there is also the human component

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<sup>51</sup> Roberto Milletti and Francesca Cassia, interview by author, audio recording, online interview, May 22, 2019.

that comes through violently. And so, there is also a respect that is not made out of detachment.

*Matteo:* right. In fact, I was surprised to see how other people relate to you when we first met, in this very natural way, fundamentally.

*Roberto:* exactly. Spontaneous, natural, beautiful, I would like to define it beautiful. A very beautiful interaction...I don't know, maybe exactly because I come from the martial arts, from Zen, the tea ceremony, acts that have a very iron like discipline, rigid, I don't know, in the end to be circular smooths those rigid edges without undoing that respect. On the contrary, respect is born in a profound and natural way, more spontaneously. It is not looked for, imposed.

*Matteo:* right. It's not any longer the respect that you must have towards the teacher but is the respect that springs from a non-imposed authoritativeness.

*Roberto:* right.

*Francesca:* exactly. It is not institutional. We have never looked for this institutionalisation of respect, because in the end you don't get to know each other for real cause there is a filter.<sup>52</sup>

What emerges from this interaction, beside a reformulation of the importance of the teacher-student relationship in the social and discursive construction of a charismatic leadership model that attempts to appear as horizontal and non-authoritarian as possible, is the dismissal of the “institutionalisation of respect” as it prevents real human encounters between teachers and students to happen. However, as rightly argued by Michael Mullan's (1995) analysis of sport as institutionalised charisma, based on Guttman's study of the transformation from medieval leisure to modern sport and Weber's concept of Western rationalisation, sport can be “conceived as a multidimensional institution existing in tension with bureaucratic and charismatic forms of control” (Mullan 1995: 285). I contend that Odaka Yoga is a poignant case study that similar processes and social dynamics are also at work in the social organisation and internal articulation of modern yoga schools and organisations. More specifically, according to Weber's (1968) theorisation of authority, a low level of institutionalisation corresponds – ideal-typically – to higher levels of charismatic authority, that although partially shunned by Roberto

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<sup>52</sup> Roberto Milletti and Francesca Cassia, interview by author, audio recording, online interview, May 22, 2019.

and Francesca remains an important component of the social articulation and matrix of relationships of Odaka Yoga. Moreover, Odaka Yoga also displays a degree of institutionalisation of the founders' charisma next to a more structured – if you like rationalised – institutionalisation of the transmission of “technical knowledge” (e.g., Mullan 1995). For instance, during my fieldwork I collected anecdotal evidences that at the end of a teacher training the founders hand over to the new teachers a *mala* (ritual prayer chain), and in so doing they symbolically perpetuate the lineage through the ritualised transmission of their charisma, or a portion of it, and recognise that the teacher is now qualified to transmit to others in turn. However, the structure and overall contents of these trainings are rather standardised and follow the international standards proposed by Yoga Alliance International, thus pointing towards a more institutionally inclined dimension of the school. In this second example the charisma of the teachers is diluted within a standardised model implemented globally across styles and schools of postural yoga. Yet the transmission of Roberto's and Francesca's charisma – although surely less charged with emotional tones than the ritualised handing over of the malas – is guaranteed by certain bureaucratic apparatuses of recognition of yoga teachers qualifications, nonetheless a highly contested space where both national states laws as much as international organisations attempt to have the last word<sup>53</sup>. In other words, it is possible to conclude this preliminary analysis stating that Roberto's and Francesca's legitimate authority is simultaneously strengthened by charismatic as much as bureaucratic relational forms and organisational constraints, next of course to their special competences and the variety of capitals accumulated.

In the following part of this exchange between the founders and myself the focus of the conversation shifts from the role of the teachers to the community itself. More specifically, Roberto remarks the anti-authoritarian character of the school; I offer my opinion on Odaka Yoga as an overtly very friendly, united and open group of people; while finally Francesca re-asserts the solidity of the communitarian dimension of Odaka Yoga, a point on which I elaborate analytically in the following:

*Roberto:* in the end a dogma becomes also a fixed point and the fixed point is somehow also something rigid. It does not flow, it does not interact and in the end it stays like this. It does not have margins for transformation, or at least

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<sup>53</sup> Ginevra [pseud.], member of YANI (Italian National Association of Yoga Teachers), interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy Australia, October 24, 2019.

it slows that transformation down. Beside dogmas, beside everything, there is this beauty to live and share the practice for what it is, do you understand.

*Matteo:* yes, and I must say that I very much felt this aspect participating to Bea's courses, also coming to the masterclasses and that weekend of training, the sense of community is something very tangible.

*Francesca:* and this is important. I think that in a world like ours to know that, the guys know, as I know, that whatever happens to you, you have a network of people to support you, that supports you with the heart, not for any other reason. And so, it is a beautiful thing...the best is that the guys, those who have started to go around, who have been to Japan, have been taken under the Odaka Japanese community's wings, they showed them around there, it is really an exchange at a deeper level, with all the races, so it is something that goes beyond our habits and this is very, very important. It makes you think a bit because you say: "Bring peace to the world", it would be enough to be all on the mat and the peace really is born. Differences erased, judgments erased, everything erased.<sup>54</sup>

According to the founders' narrative, Odaka Yoga is a community that is first and foremost constituted through *doing* yoga together and whose specific discourses and practices constitute a shared repertoire, the heart of the community. Dogmatic views and rigidity, then, cannot find scope within the Odaka Yoga system. Similar considerations, for instance, have been proposed by Tamara Kohn's (2003: 139) work on Aikido. Kohn theorises the "Aikido body" as the location where martial arts training regimes foster the "expressions of group identities", facilitate practitioners' "self-discovery" and is the main means through which the Aikido community is constituted through doing Aikido. Moreover, Francesca stresses how the Odaka Yoga community extends beyond national and ethnic borders, that is, it is truly cosmopolitan, another key trait of contemporary middle-classes worldwide (e.g., Ball and Nikita 2014; Maxwell et al., 2019; López-Pedrerros and Weinstein 2012; Rovisco 2016). More specifically, the normative understanding of cosmopolitanism in contemporary political theory (e.g., Appiah 1997, 2006; Nassbaum 1997) as much as in Francesca's narrative, emphasises the idea that all human beings are, or ought to be, members of a single encompassing community, in this

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<sup>54</sup> Roberto Milletti and Francesca Cassia, interview by author, audio recording, online interview, May 22, 2019.

case structured around a shared repertoire of discourses and practices surrounding yoga. In fact, I contend that the cosmopolitan lenses through which Francesca approaches the world brings her to state, clearly a bit naively, that “it would be enough to be all on the mat” in order to “bring peace to the world”, and in this way also “differences”, “judgments” and so on would be “erased” in the name of one global community. Again, here yoga emerges as a reliable solution to the evils of the world, a narrative that has long-standing echoes in the history and development of modern forms of yoga and martial arts alike.<sup>55</sup>

Two other – although interconnected – fruitful manners to theorise about Odaka Yoga’s conception of community could be derived from Maffesoli’s *The Time of the Tribes* (1996) and Amanda Lucia’s (2020) *White Utopias*. Maffesoli’s argument, in a nutshell, is that traditional social ties are harshly challenged by the contemporary socioeconomic structures of neoliberal societies, or postmodernity, to use a term closer to his analytical lenses. These societies are characterised, among other things, by high mobility and flexibility demands where individuals are constantly on the move if not displaced. Here, individuals look for new ways, or better new groups through which satisfy their drive for belonging. “Neo-tribes” are then groupings of subjectivities characterised by fluid, occasional and dispersed gatherings (Maffesoli 1996: 76) where individuals cultivate a sense of mutual engagement and shared practices with other members. It is building on Maffesoli’s account, coupled with Durkheim’s (2001 [1912]) seminal notion of “collective effervescence” that Mellor and Shilling (1997:174) introduce their previously discussed concept of “sensual solidarities”. Lucia (2020) in turn, proposes the concept of “white utopias” to theorise about the manners in which yoga, among other exotic cultural and religious resources, is romanticised, re-appropriate and mobilised as a central tool to the temporary construction of the social and ideological fabric of transnational transformative festivals, where it is used as a tool for spiritual growth and to cultivate human connections by their largely white participants. Similarly, I contend that the communitarian dimension of Odaka Yoga, skillfully built on the hybrid foundations of the school, a façade of horizontality and inherently characterised by a transnational and cosmopolitan reach, presents itself as a particularly appealing product for those members of the middle-classes eager to belong, work on themselves and

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<sup>55</sup> See for instance the ecumenical message of teachers such as Vivekananda and Yogananda or the manners in which Judo and Aikido were discursively articulated by their founders.

embrace the cosmopolitan and transnational values that the school proposes. Accounting for this analysis it is then difficult to discern if Odaka Yoga resembles more closely the model of the neo-tribe proposed by Maffesoli or the one of the white utopias proposed by Lucia. What is certain is that whether we approach Odaka Yoga as a neo-tribe or a white utopia, its defining trait remains its ability to offer a sense of communality, although partial, transient and commodified, to its practitioners, where specific moral universes are inscribed into practitioners' bodies through their shared involvement in the practice, as the next fragment partially delineates. More specifically, in the following field note I recall a specific moment from my field work where I had a sort of epiphany that, in a more embodied and sensually informed manner, points to the analytical directions provided by theorists such as Mellor and Shilling, Maffesoli and Lucia:

After the bridge pose we are invited to lay down to the floor and do our usual closing exercises, with the hands open in cross position and then bending the knees to both sides in turn. I am longing to get my lower back stretched. The mats are so close one to the other, a matter of inches really. My mat and the one of the girl next to me are so close that we cannot even fully extend our arms without overflowing in each other space. Somehow, we manage to set us in position, although having to adjust the angle of the arms a little. There is a feeling of intimacy in practicing so close to each other and also in practicing the same things at the same time. A sort of unspoken communication. We are almost touching each other bodies although we try not to. While trying to carefully inhabit the pose at best we almost touch each other, we skim each other's hands. This makes me suddenly realise how I really enjoyed something that happened earlier in the practice when in hearing the rhythm of her breath and in perceiving her body moving next to me, I felt guided when I could not directly look at Beatrice. Somehow, I also felt we were again doing some kind of group work, working together and not merely one for himself or herself.<sup>56</sup>

Most notably, as much as the charismatic role of the teacher is socially and discursively constructed through the routinised and partly ritualised encounters between teachers and practitioners, so the communitarian dimension of Odaka Yoga has as its roots a shared

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<sup>56</sup> Field note, Milan, Italy, May 31, 2018.

practice. In other words, the collective body of the Odaka Yoga community, with its local schools, network of events and transnational reach, emerges from a shared practice that allows practitioners to feel as one, as posited by Marcel Mauss's (1968 [1935]) theorisation of embodied forms of intersubjectivity. Paraphrasing, Odaka Yoga is a community, a tribe, or a utopia whose ethos and sensual solidarity are constantly reinforced and reproduced in each class, teacher training or retreat performed across the globe.

Bringing this chapter to a close I would like to emphasise that there is a certain continuity between the philosophical and discursive foundations of the school, its founders, other central teachers, and of course the larger community of teachers and practitioners. More specifically, Odaka Yoga is, overall, an inherently middle-class community of practitioners, and as such it promotes the values that an emergent cosmopolitan, self-aware, eco-friendly middle-class is most likely to promote: a self-actualising work on yourself in the name of health-management, self-mastery, and of course global peace. However, what keeps together, in practice, the philosophical and discursive references of the school, its founders, other teachers and practitioners and the larger Odaka Yoga community, is a specific pedagogical repertoire. As a consequence, it is only including a close scrutiny of the specific pedagogies of Odaka Yoga to the analysis at hand that we may be able to competently inquire into how the ethos of Odaka Yoga translates into a habitus, through the unavoidable mediations of the teachers' guidance. This will be my main concern in the next chapter. More specifically, I will explore the "symbiotic relationship" (Wacquant 2004) that occurs between the middle-class ethos/habitus and the Odaka Yoga ethos/habitus, similarly to what discussed by Wacquant (2004) in relation to the "elective affinities" (Weber 2011) between the practical-moral universe of the boxing gym and that of the ghetto. In fact, in order to thrive as a transnational, hybrid system, Odaka Yoga needs to appeal to the middle-classes, its main members; while the cosmopolitan middle-classes, in turn, need Odaka Yoga as it gives them something through which assert their middle-classness, or to say it with Bourdieu (1984), to distinguish themselves from other social groups. Therefore, as I will argue in more details in Chapter Four and Chapter Five, the encounter between the ethos/habitus promoted by Odaka Yoga and the one of the middle-classes gives rise to a process of refinement and evolution of practitioners' habitus from which the specific "yogic habitus" (Di Placido 2018) promoted by Odaka Yoga springs from.



**Chapter Four**

**Dissecting the Yogic Habitus: Odaka Yoga's  
Pedagogies, the Class Format, and the Shaping of the  
Self**

## 1. Introduction

This chapter is primarily concerned with the study of the *pedagogies of modern postural yoga*, the *means of knowledge transmission* within the Odaka Yoga community (with a focus on the *classroom format* and the *performative language* mobilised by the teachers) and their *outcomes* (especially in reference to the *shaping of practitioners' embodied self* through the *incorporation* of the teachings, that is, the processes of *somatisation* through which practitioners interiorise and embody a particular way of being-in-the-world). The material discussed is first and foremost derived from my ethnographic participations within and observations of the *processes of apprenticeship* that myself – alongside other practitioners – underwent during the time of my involvement within the Odaka Yoga Milanese community. In other words, I aim to reconstruct a specific ethnographic tale framed at the intersection of: (a) the auto-ethnographic, multi-sensorially and carnally inclined data gathered; (b) and theoretically grounded reflections, while more space will be given to practitioners' narratives in Chapter Five, '*Practitioners' Voices and Experiences*'.

In line with the broader theoretical framework of this thesis, the guiding analytical tool of this chapter is the concept of "habitus". More specifically, I rely on the concept of habitus as both a "topic and tool" (e.g., Wacquant 2004, 2013a) following Wacquant's ethnography of the apprenticeship process of the prizefighter as undertaken in the Chicago boxing gym. Habitus, defined as "[a] structuring structure, which organizes practices and the perception of practices" (Bourdieu 1984: 170) is a topic of investigation in itself as it allows to inquire into how modern yoga practitioners acquire a specific yogic habitus that characterises the ethos of their school (in turn related to the broader ethos of the yoga field), also exploring the permeability and circular relationship between discourses and pedagogical practices.

Moreover, when mobilised as a research tool, the habitus becomes a privileged instrument "to decipher action and meaning from the body and with the body" (Sánchez García and Spencer 2013: 5). Here, following Wacquant (2013a: 19):

The apprenticeship of the sociologist is a methodological mirror of the apprenticeship undergone by the empirical subjects of the study; the former is mined to dig deeper into the latter and unearth its inner logic and subterranean properties; and both in turn test the robustness and fruitfulness of habitus as guide for probing the springs of social conduct.

It is in the light of these reflections that the first-person, often self-referential nature of the field notes gathered in my ethnographic diary should be understood as the expression of the documenting process of the ethos of the school studied and not merely as naïve, confessional remarks. In other words, as I speak about my process of apprenticeship within Odaka Yoga, the guidance received from the teachers, the struggles that my body and mind encountered on the mat, my frustration, joy and sweat, I am always doing so with the sociological intention to bring into light the embodied, multisensorial and largely unexplored dimensions of what it means to become a modern yoga practitioner.

Chapter Four is structured as follows: first, I briefly introduce the class format as a relatively standardised pedagogical setting. In turn, following its tripartite division in the *tuning in phase*, *practice phase* and *relaxation phase*, I explore how each part of the class is related to the cultivation of a very specific disposition (*focusing/listening*, *flowing/fluid* and *practical/ascetic* dispositions); second, I discuss how the transmission of esoteric or spiritual knowledge is often covertly conveyed through the use of metaphors and evocative language. More specifically, I examine the role of three principles – that when translated into practice function very much as metaphors – that guide teachers’ pedagogical repertoire helping to bridge the philosophical dimensions of the school’s teaching with practitioners’ direct experiential access of these deeper layers of meanings attached to the practice. They are respectively: “*moving from the center*”, “*bending the straight lines*” and “*rhythm*”.<sup>57</sup> Third, I introduce the concept of yogic habitus as composed by the very dispositions previously discussed in their construction. In so doing, I underline how the yogic habitus is an expression of an “emerging” middle-class ethos which simultaneously constitutes the habitus in question as much as it is socially reproduced by it.

## **2. The Class Format**

Modern forms of postural yoga are primarily taught and practiced following a fairly standardised class format that tends to remain unchanged despite yoga’s deployment in different locations (e.g., yoga studios, gyms and fitness centers, hotel halls, hospitals, prisons etc.) or its reliance on the specific ethos and pedagogical style of different schools (e.g., Iyengar Yoga, Ashtanga Yoga, Kundalini Yoga, Odaka Yoga etc.). Most styles of

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<sup>57</sup> Roberto Milletti and Francesca Cassia, interview by author, audio recording, online interview, May 22, 2019.

postural yoga, in fact, privilege the health and safety of the practitioners (medical/therapeutic field), a search for the perfect alignment of the performing body (fitness/leisure field),<sup>58</sup> and in some cases foster an experiential access to the sacred typical of New Age and contemporary spiritualities (spiritual/religious field). In other words, the yoga class format mirrors the complexity and internal articulation of the yoga field understood as a hybrid field. Therefore, fitness/leisure, therapeutic/medical and spiritual/religious registers are simultaneously mobilised and intrinsically interconnected to the point that – as we will shortly see – within a single yoga class we can find traces of all of them (although with a different emphasis on each one in different phases of the practice).

A standard modern yoga class format extends from one hour to one and a half hour and can be divided into three different parts: first, the *tuning in phase*, or what De Michelis (2004: 251) addresses as “introductory quietening time”, a time composed of practitioners’ arrival and settling in. The tuning in phase delimits the boundaries of the practice from the “outside world” through clear ritual elements, such as the unfolding of the yoga mat or the switching on of background music. In turn, this phase introduces the practitioners to the first forms of movements within the class, usually as a means to corroborate their tuning in and prepare the body for the practice. It is a liminal phase between the profane time of everyday life and the central part of the practice where actual physicality is exercised more diffusely. The tuning in phase, similarly to what Roberta Sassatelli (2014) pinpoints in relation to the changing rooms of the gyms and fitness centers, encourages practitioners to “let go” of their professional commitments and familiar ties to merge into the collective body that is intersubjectively constructed through shared practice (Mauss 1968); second, the *practice phase*, or “practice proper” in De Michelis’ (2004: 251)

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<sup>58</sup> In other words, the complex processes of transnational diffusion, transcultural development and cultural appropriation that generated modern forms of postural yoga at the intersection of different geographies and practical-discursive universes have been equally important in formalising its class format and its associated pedagogies. In this context, as much as yoga’s exponential diffusion can be interpreted as a specific instance of “Easternisation of the West” (Campbell 2007), the specific ways in which yoga is morphed and it is currently practiced worldwide can be equally understood as expression of the “Westernisation of the East”.

model, is the central and usually longer part of the class where the teacher guides the class “through example, correction and explanation” (De Michelis 2004: 251). It is here that the practitioners engage in the more strenuous part of their practice and confront the limitations of their bodily constitution (e.g., strength, balance, flexibility) and mental attitude (e.g., focus, irritation, determination). Moreover, in the practice phase practitioners’ bodies become the surface where the efficacy of the modern yoga class ritual begins to inscribe its effects as much as where practitioners begin to constitute a collectivity more structurally through their shared commitment to the practice; and third, the *relaxation phase*, or following De Michelis (2004: 251) “final relaxation”, is where *savasana* (corpse pose) is performed. Here the practitioners are guided in a relaxed, meditative, and highly experiential exploration of their own body and of the sensations generated by the practice. Also, the class is brought to a close and the practitioners slowly transit back from the sacred space of the yoga class to their mundane everyday life and their biographical commitments. The point though is that the class injects a degree of fluidity, focus and ascesis that influences practitioners’ conduct and colours their “scheme of perception” (Bourdieu 1984), that is, the experiences of the world that a certain habitus favors and facilitates, not to say determine.

There are very good reasons to grant specific attention to this apparently trivial and highly standardised teaching format, besides the obvious fact that there is a substantial lack of research in this direction notwithstanding De Michelis’ (2004) preliminary analysis published almost two decades ago. First, exactly on the ground of its fairly standardised structure, to discuss the yoga class format of a specific school may not only signify to gain valuable insights in

relation to a specific case study but conversely may offer a useful entry point into the study of the world of modern postural yoga more broadly conceived; second, to start from the yoga class format helps to point out possible lines of continuity between structure and content, that is, between specific phases of the practice, the practices therein performed and a particular emphasis on the fitness/leisure, the therapeutic/medical and/or the spiritual/religious registers that characterise each phase in turn; third, and directly following from the previous point, this may grant a more nuanced understanding of how specific phases of the practice are structurally more prone to favour the cultivation of specific “dispositions” (Bourdieu 1977a, 1984, 1996), whose totality constitute the yogic habitus pre-consciously embodied by the practitioners of a given school.

Taking these considerations seriously, in the following pages, I will read my ethnographic data through the schemata of the class format. Moreover, following De Michelis’ (2004: 252) analysis of yoga as a “healing ritual of secular religion” and Koch’ s (2015) analysis of “alternative healing as magical self-care” , I reiterate a reading of modern postural yoga classes as intrinsically ritual-like and therapeutic, emphasising the teachers’ skilled reliance on metaphors to bring about the therapeutic and self-transformative changes promised by the practice. In fact, bridging the phenomenology of yoga practice with social theory, I will claim that it is through bringing the embodied experience of yoga to conscious awareness - a crucial part of the making of that experience of practice meaningful in the first place - that is also possible to modify practitioners’ previously acquired habitus and perhaps instill elements of a new one. In so doing, we will appreciate how each phase of the yoga class offers well defined ritual elements that allow the practitioners to experience the conscious suspension of

their everyday subjectivity, the bracketing of the inevitability of the rational laws that dictate our “disenchanted” world (Weber 1965) and perhaps more importantly, the possibility of re-drawing the boundaries of practitioners’ own identity projects according to the specific logics of self-fashioning and self-transformation that constitute the ethos of Odaka Yoga.

### *2.1. Beginning the Class: Tuning in*

The teacher comes in and unfolds her mat. The small chit-chat in the room slowly comes to an end as the music starts. Beatrice says: “Put your hands on the knees and close your eyes. Take some full breaths. Then move your hands at the center of your chest and breath in through your heart. Accompany the movement of the breath with your hands”. A few seconds of silence and then she speaks again: “Now, leave your hands on the chest but just listen to what happens while you breath”. A few more moments pass by, while we slowly enter into the silence of our breath, and the music, a piano instrumental, accompanies us in the beginning of the practice.<sup>59</sup>

The beginning of a class delimits the momentary suspension of the logics and duties of practitioners’ everyday life. It is a threshold between the “sacred time” of the next hour or so and the “profane time” (e.g., Durkheim 2001; Eliade 1961) of the hectic life most practitioners’ entertain outside of the walls of the studio, through demanding career paths, family life and so on. This momentary suspension is achieved thanks to the ritual functions of elements such as the unfolding of one’s mat to the floor, the playing of background music and of course the “centering role” of closing one’s eyes and taking a few deep breaths.<sup>60</sup> A fruitful manner to theorise about the role of music and of the other

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<sup>59</sup> Field note, Milan, Italy, May 29, 2018.

<sup>60</sup> While the reliance on yoga mats and the centering role of closing one’s eyes represent a common denominator in virtually all styles of modern postural yoga, playing music during classes is somehow less of a universal component. Other alternatives to this ritual element are, for instance: the performance of three *Óm*, a sacred sound within yoga soteriology that represents the origins of the universe (Lochtefeld 2002a); the recitation of *mantras*, usually performed to calm practitioners’ mind and as catalisers’ of practitioners’ attention; or other invocations such as the dedication of the day’s practice to a specific intention, whether collectively through the teacher formulating the intention for the all classroom (e.g., world peace, the end of the Covid-19 pandemic and so on), or individually, that is, with every practitioner privately formulating his or her intention. Nevertheless, music is increasingly found as an integral part of many classes across the globe.

ritual-like elements that characterise the tuning in phase of the class is offered by Ervin Goffman's (1983: 2) notion of "interaction order", defined as the "face-to-face domain...whose preferred method of study is microanalysis". More specifically, reading this concept within Goffman's (e.g., 1959, 1961, 1967) broader theoretical project on everyday life interactions, it is possible to notice how music functions as a temporal, spatial and aural marker that signals the shift from a given interaction order (such as the profane time preceding the beginning of the class) to another one (the beginning of the class proper), regulated, in turn, by its specific norms and interactional rules that differ from those of practitioners' everyday life. The ritual power of these markers, in fact, derives exactly from the fact that they radically divide and set clear practical, material, symbolic and emotional boundaries between the sacred time dedicated to the practice and the profane time of the outside world (e.g., Durkheim 2001; Eliade 1961).

In the following note, I reiterate the importance of music within the Odaka Yoga class format, elaborating also on the centrality of the teacher's verbal guidance:

The teacher approaches the speakers and puts on some music. A little bit too loud for my taste. People are still changing clothes, putting on their yoga gears, and the entryphone keeps ringing every minute or so, but the teacher sits and says: "Let us close our eyes and focus on the breath". It is hard to hear clearly because of the loud music. I am a bit irritated. But after a few minutes of contemplation, where the teacher is mostly silent and time to time repeats a concise but effective "Come back to your breath", I begin to feel lighter, and the irritation fades away. Her voice is really modulated differently now that she is guiding the class in meditation.<sup>61</sup>

From the very beginning of the practice, the teacher assumes the central role of guiding the practitioners into the correct performance of the practice, that in this phase is chiefly represented by the practitioners' ability to *tune in* within their own bodies. The teacher's guidance is, in this phase, either minimalistic and repetitive, as the second field notes underlines, with the teacher repetitively suggesting to direct attention to the breath, or it can also be more elaborated. In this latter case, attention to the breath is coordinated with some form of gentle movement, visualisation and/or with a more closely guided self-exploration of one's own perceptive field, as testified by the first field note introduced at

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<sup>61</sup> Field note, Milan, Italy, May 25, 2018.



the outset of this section. Nonetheless, whether minimalistic or more elaborated, teachers' guidance is first and foremost verbal.

As Beatrix Hauser (2013b: 128) correctly underlines:

Language as a medium of instruction gained its present significance only in the course of the twentieth century. What used to be transmitted largely by mimesis in a life-long relationship between guru and adept was gradually communicated in new forms, shaped by the spread of print, photography, and changing institutional structures. Hence the development of postural yoga is inherently linked to modern modes of learning and teaching, not least to groups of people in classes that have a defined beginning and end. In this context, it became important to verbalize why and how to perform an exercise correctly, and also its further implications...Language constitutes the major cognitive device to anticipate, frame, and rationalize somatic experience in a variety of yoga cultures, whether exclusivist or mainstream at a particular time and place.

Verbal instructions, in yoga as much as in Asian martial arts, is a Western addendum. Moreover, like music, teachers' voices are an important component of the hybridity of contemporary forms of postural yoga and their verbal guidance is closer to the use of voice in therapy than, for instance, in sport and coaching environments. As we will see in more details in the following of the chapter, a certain modulation of the voice (e.g., relaxed, decisive, evocative and so on) is closely connected to the promotion of the cultivation of specific dispositions, which in turn contribute to structure the habitus fostered in a specific pedagogical environment. Here, the repetition of and familiarity with a routinised practice as much as the repetitive exposition to the teacher's therapeutic voice, are integral elements to the yoga class "event" and of how it shapes practitioners' habitus. As Hauser (2013b: 111) further underlines:

Although there are several factors that may influence the somatic experience of yoga practitioners – ranging from social context to individual preferences regarding the class situation – the major instrument for (re)shaping notions of a healthy body is, I suggest, verbal instruction.

Verbal instruction, in fact, is the primary means through which practitioners are guided to direct their attention and self-awareness towards their breath and focused movement as the following field note illustrates:

Beatrice says: "Feel your hamstrings at the floor, both well connected. Then place your hands with the palms on the chest and breath through them. Feel the breath moving within the chest and accompany this movement with your hands. Then stop moving your hands with the breath and simply feel it. Feel the chest going up and deflating down. Then move your hands with the palms

on the sides of the rib cage and feel it enlarging but this time on the sides. Feel the breath reaching all the areas of your rib cage. Then move your hands on the beginning of your thighs and do a small pressure towards the inside of the thighs and feel what happens. Bend your back forward, just a bit, straightened. Then place your hands in the opposite direction, with the thumbs towards the back and exercise a small pressure towards the extern of the thighs”. I feel how these small movements, almost invisible, not even movements in fact, but simply a small pressure at the intersection of by groin and my thighs, determine the activation of a specific part of a muscle. I am enjoying this small, big discovery.<sup>62</sup>

As this extract suggests, the tuning in phase sets already the tone for the cultivation of a specific “disposition” (Bourdieu 1977a, 1984, 1990) that I label *focusing/listening disposition* here captured as springing out from the teacher’s careful guidance of her students. More specifically, the construct of the focusing/listening disposition helps to underline two elements that constitute, simultaneously, the foundations of the pedagogies of modern postural yoga: first, the attention that the practitioners are required to give to the teachers’ instructions and verbal guidance; and second, the attention that they have to orient towards their own embodied experience. In this way, as we will have the chance to discuss more extensively once I will introduce the concept of “yogic habitus” (Di Placido 2018) in the following of the chapter, the focusing/listening disposition is simultaneously encouraging the cultivation of a disciplining attitude and of an experiential epistemology typical of the landscape of contemporary spiritualities.<sup>63</sup>

Moreover, to couple Bourdieu’s notion of habitus with the concept of “body pedagogics” (e.g., Shilling and Mellor 2007; Shilling 2007, 2010, 2016, 2018) is instrumental to emphasise the generative and productive elements that specific

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<sup>62</sup> Field note, Milan, Italy, May 31, 2018.

<sup>63</sup> These are two important facets of the pedagogies of modern forms of yoga, as much as of a variety of other practices such as martial arts, certain forms of fitness classes and so on. However, although the contemporary sociology of religion/spirituality seems to have interiorised, almost as a mantra, the latter, that is, that contemporary spiritualities are primarily moved by an experiential epistemology (e.g., Heelas 2008; Heelas et al., 2005; Berzano 2019), it constantly fails to discuss its disciplining side-effects, that are in fact largely considered only in relation to traditional religions or cultic like NRM. Yet, these two facets would be better studied in their simultaneous unfolding, thus problematising the mainstream and naïve position that reads people’s practices and narratives as actually self-actualising and liberatory (for a critique of this position see for instance Altglas 2014a). Until the integration of these two partially antithetical and partially overlapping domains – the disciplining and the experiential – will not be carefully approached by sociologists, we are bound to produce a partial reading of the social world we ought to explore and remain largely blind to the broader practical-discursive logics that govern it.

dispositions have. Therefore, the scheme of dispositions that constitute a specific habitus can be explored not merely as the primary mechanisms of social reproduction of a given pedagogical environment or social order but possibly of social change too. In fact, as Bourdieu poignantly underlines (2005: 46) “habitus is never a mere principle of repetition... It is a principle of invention, a principle of improvisation. The habitus generates inventions and improvisations but within limits”. “Body pedagogics” (Shilling and Mellor 2007; Shilling 2007, 2010, 2016, 2018), in turn, is a conceptual device formulated with the intention to facilitate the study “...of those institutionalized social, technological and material *means* through which cultural practices are transmitted, the varied *experiences* of those involved in this learning, and the embodied *outcomes* of these processes” (Shilling 2018: 76). As further argued by Shilling and Mellor (2007: 533 emphasis in original):

Specifically, body pedagogics refers to the central *means* through which a culture seeks to transmit its main corporeal techniques, skills, dispositions and beliefs, the *experiences* typically associated with acquiring these attributes, and the actual *embodied changes* resulting from this process.

As a consequence, following the embodied and pedagogical reading of Bourdieu’s notion of disposition suggested by the concept of body pedagogics, the focusing/listening disposition here introduced appears as: first, one of the *means* through which the Odaka Yoga ethos is transmitted to its practitioners; second, it qualifies the *experiences* that practitioners have – starting from the very beginning of the practice – of their role in relation to the teachers (disciplining dimension) as much as of their own embodied experience (experiential epistemology); and third, it offers a useful tool to navigate the *embodied changes*, or the *outcomes* that the correct performance of the practice is bound to grant to the disciplined, that is, to the listening and focused practitioner.

The focusing/listening disposition is not only the preliminary ground that guarantees yoga teachers’ guiding role within practitioners’ socialisation into specific styles of postural yoga. Conversely, it is also the inevitable presupposition that grants, through reiterated practice and the cultivation of the right form of attunement, practitioners’ processes of self-transformation. In fact, it is starting from a very specific form of attention that practitioners develop the necessary skills to decipher the energetic, physical, and emotional changes that a well-executed yoga session is supposed to foster.

To conclude, I introduce another field note where it is possible to appreciate the partially blurred boundaries between the different phases of the practice, as much as between the different dispositions cultivated on the mat:

“Now bend a bit forward with your back and then coming back round it and do this a few times”. After a few instants, maybe a minute Beatrice speaks again: “Now bend a bit more forward and place your hands to the mat. Pull the mat towards you and point to the floor the parts of the legs that touch it and slowly come to be on four [meaning touching the mat with both hands and knees]. From here root your hands properly on the mat, all the palm is adhering and there is no pressure in the shoulders. Your feet are also pointed at the mat, and slowly pulling the mat towards you go backwards, almost to the point of sitting to the heels. From here come at the center again, rounding your back”. We do this movement a few times. Then we are guided in the upward-facing dog and finally we move to the down-facing dog. I suffer particularly in this position, which is one of the most common and practiced one in modern postural yoga.<sup>64</sup>

This moment of the practice, performed right after the tuning in phase (in *stricto sensu*), accompanies the practitioners – via the ever-present mediation of the teacher’s verbal guidance – through a series of soft, fluid, and repetitive moments that prepare the body for the central phase of the practice. It is a liminal moment that perfectly captures the blurred boundaries between the different phases of the yoga class. In this moment of transition, the teachers’ guidance becomes progressively more articulated and next to a focus on the awareness of one’s breath and the small focused adjustments that characterise the cultivation of a focusing/listening disposition, we can see the seeds of other two specific dispositions: the *flowing/fluid disposition*<sup>65</sup> and the *practical/ascetic disposition* that I will discuss at some length in the next section. Here, we can again mobilise

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<sup>64</sup> Field note, Milan, Italy, May 31, 2018.

<sup>65</sup> My formulation of the flowing/fluid disposition differs from, although partially echoes with, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s (1975, 1996, 1998) famous notion of “flow”, described as a psychological state in which the person is completely immersed in an activity to the point of detaching from her usual sense of self, time and place. Both concepts derives from the same discursive register (e.g., flow, fluidity) but they are mobilised to describe quite different processes: on the one hand, Csikszentmihalyi’s notion of flow aims to capture individuals’ experiences of immersion in an activity (e.g., work, dance, sport and so on); on the other hand, the notion of flowing/fluid disposition contributes to a micro-sociological analysis of the pedagogies of modern yoga. Nevertheless, it is possible to state that Csikszentmihalyi’s notion of flow is an integral part of the experiences of those practitioners that are encouraged to cultivate a flowing/fluid disposition during their practice on the mat, as my field notes in this chapter testify.

Goffman's (1983) notion of the "interaction order" to underline how the intensification of the teacher's instruction signals the transition from an interaction order (the tuning in phase) to another one (the practice phase).

At this point it is perhaps necessary to make a clarification: these three dispositions, that as we have preliminary seen are also partially interrelated, characterise the ethos of Odaka Yoga as much as the ethos of modern forms of postural yoga more generally. Naturally, each style or school is based on a specific balance between these three dispositions, to which perhaps it is possible to add other differing ones in case of styles or schools that privilege the cultivation of other aspects of yoga's principles and practices and the consequent embodiment of these other elements by their students and practitioners. For instance, schools that give a lot of emphases on mantra chanting are more likely to provide a pedagogical repertoire where the cultivation of a *chanting disposition* is central; or again, schools that emphasise breath work (*prāṇāyāma*), in turn contribute to the cultivation of a very specific declination of the practical/ascetic disposition that could be labelled the *breathing disposition*. But let me momentarily interrupt these reflections on the plausible heuristic power of this Bourdieusian reading of modern yoga pedagogies and instead unpack the practical/ascetic and the flowing/fluid dispositions in some more details with a focus on their unfolding during the second and central phase of a typical yoga class.

## ***2.2. Performing the Class: The Practice Phase***

Also today we start with the classic Odaka style gentle rotations of the trunk with the hands on the thighs. Soon we begin to flow into postures, and it is clear from the beginning that today is going to be a tough class. Already performing a high lunge pose I can see the athletic skills, endurance, and style of the teacher. We stay in the position for a few breaths, before moving to the other side. We then repeat, this time attempting to bend the elbows. I am already in pain, sweating. I try but I cannot. I have the impression to be the only one in the class that struggles to follow the sequence to its conclusion.

We then move to a downward facing dog, and here we play in the position, with the bending of the knees and the adherence of the heels to the mat, stretching one leg and then the other. Then we bend both knees and twist the feet on their left side and extend the right arm toward the ceiling, a nice

chest stretch. We do the same thing on the other side. We are back in downward facing dog. Knees on the floor. Bālāsana [child pose]. Just for one breath. I feel my body wants to stay here longer. I see also the woman on my right indulging in the position a little longer than the instruction of the teacher prescribes. Next, we are entering the upward facing dog pose and then back to the downward facing dog. From here it is the one leg downward facing dog for each side and then again, we come to the center, knees on the mat for, literally one breath of break. I keep feeling I would like my slow pace kind of practice and just stay in this position. But it is again the upward facing dog and then the downward facing dog and from here we move in one-legged king pigeon, then back to downward facing dog and then again, the pigeon on the other side. I am exhausted and this is just the first actual sequence of the practice. I literally think: “It is not even 8 a.m., Who made me do this? Can’t I simply do a regular research like everybody else? I am not even enjoying it!”.

I am facing the limitation of my muscular-skeletal structure, feel the pain, the effort, and the desire to be more flexible and better equipped for this kind of intense practice. I think that the teacher is pushing a bit too far and relies on her strength and body structure, which is a privileged one for this kind of practice. More sequences of the same intensity follow, but this time standing. Here we move again from one side to the other, performing positions such as trikoṇāsana [triangle pose], vīrabhadrāsana I [warrior I], prasārita pādottānāsana [wide legged forward bend]. Again, especially in the latter, which implies a forward banding of the trunk having the legs spread, I face the resistance and the tensions of my body.<sup>66</sup>

This rather lengthy account of the beginning of the *practice phase* of a typical postural yoga class well exemplifies the *fluid/flowing* and the *practical/ascetic dispositions* that Odaka Yoga practitioners are directed to cultivate in this part of the class. More specifically, the fluid/flowing disposition is composed of two different dimensions: first, a dimension that is only – or at least prominently – the expression of Odaka Yoga’s ethos and its grounding in martial arts and biomechanics; and second, a dimension that unites

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<sup>66</sup> Field note, Milan, Italy, May 25, 2018.

most mainstream styles of modern postural yoga, with perhaps only a handful of exceptions. In reference to the specific ethos of Odaka Yoga, the practice promotes the cultivation of a fluid/flowing disposition insofar as it relies on the fluid gestures typical of martial arts coupled with an attention to the principles of “moving from the center”, “bending straight lines” and “rhythm”, a syncretic reading of martial arts and biomechanical principles (I will expand on these three principles and their metaphorical power in the transmission, cultivation and embodiment of specific dispositions in the following of the chapter). Accounting for this first facet, practitioners’ bodies are then guided into a series of rotating movements that closely resemble the concentric structure of a spiral, thus offering the possibility to loosen contracted muscles and joints and involve the whole body into the smooth and effective performance of the movement. Moreover, the construct of the fluid/flowing disposition addresses with a certain accuracy the cultivation of a postural yoga practice where the transitions from a posture to another are substantially integrated into the practice to the point of becoming a central part of it in their own right. This fast-paced, fluid, and performative approach to *āsana* is generally known as Vinyasa Yoga, and it was introduced and diffused to a wider public by the founder of the Ashtanga Yoga, K. Pattabhi Jois. Usually, especially in its Ashtanga applications, vinyasa refers to the performance of a sequence of postures where movement and breath are synchronised, an element that is not particularly emphasised in Odaka Yoga although not completely absent either.

In turn, the *practical/ascetic disposition* refers to the cultivation of the defining feature of this central phase of the yoga class format, where practitioners are guided to the demanding repetition of several postures structured into fluid/flowing sequences. Moreover, this disposition clearly illustrates the practical/ascetic ethos of modern postural yoga more in general, which emphasises the importance of constant and continued practice in order to achieve a certain level of proficiency in the performance of *āsana* and/or the physical, psychological, emotional or even spiritual transformations that the practical-discursive universe of modern yoga seems to promise to its practitioners, as I have argued in the previous chapter. In this way, it is important to underline how this practical/ascetic disposition is not only cultivated during the yoga class, but it requires practitioners’ commitment to constantly explore, better themselves and overcome their limits through practice. At this regard, it is significant to mention a short extract from an informal interview I had with Beatrice as we were leaving the Milan YogaFestival 2019

venue. Here, Beatrice and I we were driving back to her studio to drop some of the promotional material used to prepare the Odaka Yoga stand:

As we start to move within the Milanese traffic, Beatrice and I begin to chat about the master class. I mention the impossible pose [an arms balance pose with side straightened legs, see figure 1] that Francesca and Roberto proposed at their masterclass. I say: “I mean, I’ve got some strength in my arms so I could lift myself up, but with the rigid legs I’ve got to straighten them up is sci-fiction for me”. The traffic light turns red. We stop and a few people cross the street in front of us as I giggle in between the euphoria that accompanies the end of this long day of field work and practice and the embarrassment of my physical limitations. “Well”, says Beatrice. “When I started practicing Odaka I was like you, you know, I come from all power sports, skating, athletics...When I started my muscles were all strong but short. But with constant practice, practicing everyday, now I do things that I could have never done a few years ago”. I express my skepticism, saying that she probably wasn’t as rigid as I am and that I think I will never be able to become as flexible as to perform the hard pose of today’s masterclass. Beatrice sticks to her opinion, saying: “If you practice long enough, I am sure you will. It is all a matter of practice”.<sup>67</sup>



**Figure 1:** Arms balance pose with side straightened legs.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Field note, Milan, Italy, October 20, 2019

<sup>68</sup> <https://odakayoga.com/en/media/photos/> accessed October 15, 2020.



What emerges from this field note, as much as from the previous one,<sup>69</sup> is the interconnection between modern postural yoga practices – and more specifically the practical/ascetic disposition that characterises it – and practitioners’ “bodily” (Wacquant 1995) or “physical capital” (Shilling 2004, 2012). Following Shilling’s reading of Bourdieu’s corporeal sociology, we can appreciate a theorisation of the body, its “size, shape and appearances” (Shilling 2004: 474) as much as its cultivation, as a specific form of “capital” (Bourdieu 1986). Capital, as we have defined it in Chapter Three when introducing the notion of the yoga field, is a form of accumulated labor composed of both material and symbolic resources. Its acquisition - and conversion - largely determines social actors’ positioning within a specific field. Again, as underlined by Shilling (2004: 474) :

[p]hysical capital is most usually converted into economic capital (money, goods and services), cultural capital (e.g. educational qualifications), and social capital (interpersonal networks that allow individuals to draw on the help/resources of others), and is key to the reproduction of social inequalities (Bourdieu, 1978, 1984, 1986).

In the specific case of the yoga field, we can claim that teachers’ physical capital, embodied by their flexibility, strength, balance, body appearances, and so on, is a particularly valuable asset that could be easily converted into other forms of capital, for instance granting them the possibility to “easily” attend yoga teacher trainings and thus obtain the required teaching certificates (educational capital); find employment as yoga teachers (economic capital); and of course, become a legitimate teacher if not a key reference for their students and the broader yoga community (social and symbolic capitals).

The possession, acquisition and eventually conversion of physical capital is not only the result of teachers’ practice and hard work on the mat. This specific form of capital, alongside others, is not inherently self-contained within the social dynamics of the yoga field, as I have argued in Chapter Three while discussing Roberto’s and Francesca’s biographical trajectories and the birth and development of their hybrid system of yoga. More importantly, physical capital should be considered in the light of teachers’ previously acquired capitals. Limiting our discussion to yoga teachers’ pre-existing

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<sup>69</sup> As I recall in the beginning of this extract: “[a]lready performing high lunge pose I can see the athletic skills, endurance and style of the teacher”.

physical capital we can use Roberto and Francesca as examples: Roberto was a professional martial artist (e.g., European champion of karate), founded two different systems of martial arts and practiced extensively across different Asian systems of knowledge such as a variety of martial arts and styles of yoga. Francesca, in turn, comes from the world of fitness, practiced extensively gymnastic and fitness and worked as a fitness instructor well before her meeting with Roberto and the world of Asian disciplines. Therefore, we can appreciate how their biographical trajectories are characterised by a transversal effort to master their own bodies which translated in a substantial accumulation and conversion of physical and symbolic capitals well before the birth and development of Odaka Yoga.

Broadening this focus of analysis beyond the Odaka Yoga system, the notion of physical capital becomes a very useful analytical tool to understand why the yoga field as a hybrid field has become particularly appealing for and easily exploitable by a number of individuals already active within other fields. More specifically, well-versed individuals either in the sole practice or the teaching of other forms of movements such as a variety of fitness disciplines, dance and/or martial arts could readily convert their previously acquired capitals and adapt them to the internal articulation and the requests of the yoga field, thus attempting to secure a dominant positioning within it. In fact, as I will expand in Chapter Five, during my fieldwork as much as during my previous involvement in the yoga field as both a practitioner and as an instructor, I noticed that the greatest part of practitioners are already quite fit and tend to conform to the normative ideal of yoga body (e.g., a flexible, lean and white body) more than they depart from it.

As a consequence, the notion of physical capital can be also used to explore the normative features of the yoga body, that as we have seen has to be first and foremost flexible, strong, balanced and so on. However, as I recounted in the field note opening this section with sentences such as “I am already in pain, sweating. I try but I cannot. I have the impression I am the only one in the class that cannot follow the sequence to its conclusion” and “...I face the resistance and the tensions of my body”, the normative yoga body is not the body that all practitioners have the privilege to inhabit, certainly not myself. This is a point worth a moment of reflection, as the tension between the normative yoga body and practitioners’ physical limitations can potentially become a real source of self-judgment and anxiety if not a good enough reason to not practice any longer or not practice at all. This exclusionary trait is exacerbated by a cultural climate that posits

individuals' moral worth as an expression of their bodily appearances (e.g., Logan 2017; Mishra 2017; Powers and Greenwell 2017) and consequently abilities.

In the following note, I highlight, once again, the relations of proximity between the flowing/fluid disposition and the practical/ascetic disposition and their shared cultivation during yoga classes as one of the foundational elements in the constitution of a community of practitioners:

“Put your ends on the tights and begin to oscillate forward and inspiring round your back”. We repeat this gentle movement a few times. All the class moves within the same gentle rhythm. As if we are the ripples of the same wave that hits the shore in different parts of its extension. It is a beautiful feeling. After a few movements we stretch all the way towards the floor, and remain a few seconds in this posture, with the hand at the floor, and the trunk bended in this direction. It is a very relaxing posture, as all the forward bends. Beatrice then speaks: “Slowly withdraw your ends from the floor and unwind your back, vertebra after vertebra. The neck is the last to unwind. Now place your hands on the back and bend backwards” and we repeat this movement a few times. “Place your hands on the floor and twisting a bit your legs come to have them on the floor, being on four. Find the right opening for your body and stay. The hands are strong on the mat and the shoulders are free of any tension, the feet are pointed to the mat. Go back almost to touch you heels with the back and use the wrists as leverage, the hands are open and the fingers spread. Rounding the back you come forward again”. We repeat this movement a few times and afterwards we are guided in the down-facing dog. “Put your right foot just behind the right hand and twist both feet on the right. Then rise your right harm, opening”. We repeat this movement also on the other side. I enjoy the practice very much today. I begin to sweat.<sup>70</sup>

One of the defining traits of a well-executed yoga class is exactly its ability to foster the cultivation of a collective body starting from a shared practical repertoire. The feeling of communion that the practice instills into the practitioners echoes Durkheim's (2001) analysis of “collective effervescence” defined as “the perceived energy field around a crowd of people” (Brown and Jennings 2011: 69) that “generates a kind of electricity that

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<sup>70</sup> Field note, Milan, Italy, May 29, 2018.

quickly transports them to an extraordinary degree of exaltation” (Durkheim 2001: 162). According to this analysis, I contend, modern postural yoga classes emerge as very specific type of *secularised, healing ritual of magical self-care*.

As anthropologists and sociologists have repeatedly underlined, one of the foundational elements of rituals is their ability to re-actualise group belonging and collective identities through the shared performance of the ritual itself (e.g., Bell 1997, 2009; Douglas 1973; Durkheim 2001; Levi-Strauss 1966; Rappaport 1999; Turner 1969). Similarly, in this section of the practice, practitioners’ bodies become the privileged surface where the efficacy of the modern yoga class ritual begins to inscribe its effects, although it is only at the very end of the class that practitioners are guided to pay attention to its self-transformative potentials. In the following note, I provide a brief account where the bounding and self-transformative elements of the modern yoga class are prominently described. The context is the very end of the class, just before the final greetings:

A few minutes pass by, and I am rejoicing in my own self, feeling the body nicely worked, the mind relaxed. Beatrice says: “And now stretch your body how you feel like and then move on a side before coming to sit”. So, I stretch, right as I am, still lying but about to get up from my mat and turn on the left side, with my eyes half open. Here, moving on the side I have the sensation, for the first time since I started to practice yoga here, and actually since I started to practice yoga, that I belong to the group. It is hard to capture it, but the feeling is that we are part of the same broader field of energy, or in other words the feeling is very real, as if we are performing a choreography and thus somehow moving at the same rhythm as we all slowly move from the fetus position to the cross-leg pose that closes the practice. It is an exquisite, ungraspable, and even more so, hard to convey feeling. I wonder if others also feel the same about today’s class.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Field note, Milan, Italy, May 29, 2018

### 2.3. Closing the Class: The Relaxation Phase

Modern postural yoga classes generally end with a *relaxation phase*. This phase is substantially characterised by the performance of *savasana* (the corpse pose) and the final greetings between teacher and students. These greetings, usually involving the ritual gesture of *añjali mudrā*, a hand gesture where the two hands meet in prayer position close to one's own chest (Chatterjee 2001), and the pronouncement of *namasté*, a customary, non-contact form of Hindu greeting (Singh 2015), formally signal the end the class.

As De Michelis (2004: 257) underlines, *savasana* is already mentioned in one of the classics of the postural yoga canon, the '*Hathayogapradipikā*' (I. 32). In this text it is framed as a rest and recovering posture particularly suitable after the strenuous practice of Hatha Yoga. Nevertheless, as others have convincingly argued, the structural inclusion of the relaxation phase within a standardised yoga practice is a rather recent addition which progressively took place in the last hundred years of modern yoga transnational development and diffusion.<sup>72</sup>

In this section, I introduce a number of field notes emphasising the three principal functions of the relaxation phase, which are in turn: to reiterate the cultivation of a listening/focusing disposition, its self-transformative potentials and of course, its ritual dimension.

We slowly move to *savasana*, while the teacher turns the lights off and the music down. The room is suddenly darker and quieter. Beatrice says: "Stretch your arms over your head and the legs in the other direction and keep the body

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<sup>72</sup> Naturally, this is another example of modern postural yoga's hybrid character and of its practical-discursive construction as what Eric Hobsbawm (1983: 1) has poignantly labeled as "invented tradition", defined as "a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past". More specifically, as Hobsbawm (1983) continues, invented traditions are often springing from times of crisis and rapid social change as attempts to challenge new and unexpected sociocultural scenarios through a narrative of romanticisation of the past. In this way, the idea of invented tradition is closely connected to the "rediscovery", by the Western middle-classes, of what Véronique Altglas (2014a) frames as the "exotic capital of Asian religions", which, as in the case of modern forms of yoga, functions as an indispensable element for its social and discursive construction as an antidote for the malaise of contemporaneity.

tense, active for a few seconds. Now let it go, bring your arms next to the body and then let the feet point towards the sides, completely relaxed. Focus on the boundaries of the body and breath in to fill all that is within these boundaries. Fill it in in all the directions and then breath out to explore what is outside of these boundaries”. I am totally happy to be able to confirm how I am not bounded to the body. I feel as I am extending beyond the boundaries of the body and at the same time I experience the body as completely empty, as if all I know the body contains, organs, liquids, muscles and everything else is, in this moment, simply substituted by a sweet empty presence. Then I hear Beatrice speaking again: “Enjoy this infinite horizon”. As she says this the speakers start to utter the first few notes of Imagine. The room is filled by its powerful lyrics. A few moments pass by and then we are guided to slowly come to sit. As usual, we greet with a namasté, guided by Beatrice.<sup>73</sup>

As this field note testifies, the focusing/listening disposition that I introduced in relation to the tuning in phase of the practice becomes again particularly important in the context of the relaxation phase. Here, practitioners are guided by the teacher into a very specific kind of introspection where the breath and its flow as much as the body and its boundaries and contents are the primary objects of attention. The transformative experience and experiential outcome of this type of introspection varies according to the sensitivity and the maturity of the focusing/listening disposition cultivated by the practitioner. In the case of this field note, I recall how following Beatrice’s words and focusing on my own breath and body – the two facets of the focusing/listening disposition previously introduced – produced an actual experience of self-transcendence, where the locus of my subjectivity was not merely perceived as belonging to my body-mind unity but felt as if it expanded for “an infinite horizon”, as suggested by Beatrice’s verbal guidance. In the following extract, I delve deeper into a presentation of the emotional, energetic, and somatic changes that the practice of *savasana* induces immediately after the end of the class:

The emotions and the energetic sensations that the practice and the final relaxation induced in me are exhilarating. I feel like walking to Beatrice to tell her that every single lesson I do with her I feel like crying. But I stay put, sitting on my mat, while everybody else is slowly getting up, and going to the

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<sup>73</sup> Field note, Milan, Italy, May 31, 2018.

changing room. When the traffic is somehow slowing down, I also stand up and go to take the spray and the tissues to clean up my mat. As I walk towards the corner where the cleaning supplies are, literally a few meters away from my mat, I feel my body is light, relaxed, open. I feel happy. I really feel a great amount of vibrations in my belly area, especially in the upper belly part, and flows of relaxed energy all over my limbs.<sup>74</sup>

These feelings of expansion coupled with a sense of deep relaxation and energetic vibration are quite common among advanced practitioners as much as newcomers. For example, Maria, an Odaka Yoga teacher active within the Milanese Odaka Yoga milieu, underlines how she fell in love with yoga from her very first lesson exactly because of how she felt at the end of the class:

*Maria:* I mean, from the first lesson I fell completely in love.

*Matteo:* what did happen that made you fall in love?

*Maria:* honestly it was really a physical sensation the one I had. I mean, at the end of the class I really had a sensation, within my body, as if I had a sort of vibration at the energetic level that I had never experienced before. But it was also physical. What I mean is that it wasn't only my own mind, it was a physical sensation that I could perceive. I don't know how to define it. Vibration is the word that comes closer to what I felt. Almost as a tingling, also in the body. And I said: "Wow, what a strange sensation" and first thing I liked it. And so, from there I've decided to buy a ten entrances package, I enrolled in Beatrice's course, and so I started going there in the mornings before going to work.<sup>75</sup>

Or again, as Sakura, one of the central Odaka Yoga teachers active in Japan, underlines in an exchange with the author:

*Sakura:* After taking an Odaka Yoga class, every time I am practicing on the mat I feel like the Jñāni<sup>76</sup> of life...

*Matteo:* Wow!

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<sup>74</sup> Field note, Milan, Italy, May 31, 2018.

<sup>75</sup> Maria [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 22, 2018.

<sup>76</sup> A Jñāni is a sage according to Vedic philosophy.

*Sakura:* Yeah! And after taking [the] Odaka Yoga teacher training, every time I do my Odaka Yoga class I feel like [I am] the world or the universe in the class, because everybody [is] different but everybody [is] beautiful. And... there is union there. So that kind of experience I have never had before taking Odaka Yoga teacher training. Yeah, that's completely different, I think.

*Matteo:* Wow. It sounds like an experience like this can really change somebody's life.

*Sakura:* Yeah, Yeah, exactly! [Excited tone]. [It is] not only physical, but [it] change[s] one's life. Yeah.<sup>77</sup>

I will expand on these and other types of self-transformative experiences as lived by practitioners in Chapter Five. For the moment, I would simply like to emphasise the role of the yoga studio lighting and background music in creating a very specific “affective atmosphere” (Brennan 2004) that influencing the emotional tone of the relaxation phase makes of it a particularly conducive moment to introspection. As we have seen, “...the teacher puts the lights off and the music down. The room is suddenly darker and quieter”, thus transforming the yoga studio – that until a few instants before was inhabited by the efforts, sweat and ascetic discipline of the practitioners – into an environment that is materially, symbolically and affectively prone to foster certain introspective qualities (e.g., listening/focusing disposition) that in turn are possibly conducive of specific types of self-transformative experiences. Here, the concept of affective atmosphere, defined as the affective/emotional features of a given space and its generative potentials to arouse affects and emotions in the bodies of those who move in them (Benner 2004) – or as in this case, those who simply rest and contemplate in them – is useful in theorising how the yoga studio, in this particular phase of the practice, offers a protected space for practitioners' self-explorations. However, not every relaxation phase is so successful in conveying the right emotional atmosphere, as the following extract clarifies:

We are about to approach the mat with our backs, time for savasana, while “DRRRRIILLTTT, DRRRIILLTTT, DRIILLTTT” we are literally shaken by the noise of a jackhammer right outside the studio. “DRRRRIILLTTT, DRRRIILLTTT”. It feels like they are gutting the walls of the studio. There is a general moment of discouragement, as if we all

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<sup>77</sup> Sakura [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, online interview, February 5, 2020.



think “Not now!”. Beatrice catches our silent but expressive reaction as she says, with a sarcastic tone: “Well, today they started earlier than usual. It will be the most relaxing savasana ever”. We are then guided to the floor as nothing happened and twist our bended knees on both sides in order to give some relief to our lower backs, as we are used to do at this point. Then Beatrice speaks again: “As you relax into the position learn to welcome everything in life, including the drill noise”. I cannot but notice her ability to use this unexpected – and also potentially disturbing – event in a funny way, integrating it into the practice itself. The relaxation is short, but very refreshing, and luckily with no drill noise. “Say thanks to the workers that let us do our relaxation”, says Beatrice, again in a sarcastic tone.<sup>78</sup>

As it clearly emerges from this field note, an important dimension of Beatrice’s pedagogical style is her reliance on irony and humour. In this instance she uses them to maintain control over the class in the face of an unexpected and disturbing event, while as the following extract underlines, she also mobilise them to rearrange the spatial distribution of practitioners within the studio while simultaneously reinforcing her role and authority as a teacher:

I am sitting in the front right side of the room, next to one of the columns that dot the studio, my usual place. There is quite some space on the front, the first row is empty. Beatrice, in a funny and smiley manner invites a girl sitting in the back to come and fill in the space left in the front. The girl replies, quickly and with a big smile on her face: “I left it for somebody that may come later”. I am quite amused by this exchange as then Bea calls her by surname and says, quite assertively: “Giulianotti [pseudonym]! First desk, so you follow the lesson!” clearly mocking the interaction between a school-teacher and her pupil.<sup>79</sup>

As the last two field notes clarify, Beatrice’s irony and sense of humour are expressions of a rather malleable “pedagogical device” (Bernstein 1990, 1995, 2000, 2001) whose specific scope and objective change according to the manners and the context in which it is applied. According to Bernstein’s theory, a pedagogical device is the ensemble of rules,

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<sup>78</sup> Field note, Milan, Italy, July 3, 2018.

<sup>79</sup> Field note, Milan, Italy, July 17, 2020.

procedures and tools via which knowledge is conveyed within a given pedagogical context. As correctly argued by Singh (2002: 571), this concept equips “researchers with explicit criteria/rules to describe the macro and micro structuring of knowledge, and in particular the generative relations of power and control constituting knowledge”. For instance, framing Beatrice’s irony and humour in the light of Bernstein’s conceptual device pinpoints to the strategic usage of these by the teacher and their generative potentials in maintaining, strengthening and re-actulising the roles, norms, and expectations inherent in the teacher-student relationship. Nevertheless, although teachers’ irony and humour have a privileged role in the transmission of specific values, skills, and systems of knowledge across a plethora of pedagogical environments (e.g., Edwards and Jones 2018; Ronglan and Aggerholm 2014; Pedrini, Brown and Aimini 2020), their use is often rather improvised and not always successful, as the following extract points out:

After these torsions we are again sitting and Beatrice says: “Now stretch one leg and place the other with the ankle over the leg. Place your hands on the back and then being strong on the arms bend the other leg and bring hips and heel close to each other. From here grab the left foot with the right hand”. I lose a bit of balance but then gain my position back. After this sequence we stretch both legs at the floor and Beatrice says: “Feel the difference between the sides of the body, one is lighter. Also in the face”. She is right, the stretched side is significantly lighter and my left cheek too. We repeat the same on the other side, stretch of the back and of the hips. Beatrice says, a bit sarcastically to somebody in the back of the room: “We have to work a bit on the hips right!?!”. The woman, which sits in the back of the class, replies, a bit embarrassed and with an exhausted voice: “I won’t come any more”. She is probably joking but I think Beatrice is a bit embarrassed herself.<sup>80</sup>

Next to the teacher’s verbal guidance also imitation (mimesis) and correction via physical touch are two common strategies of knowledge transmission. Most notably, verbal guidance, mimesis and touch are oftentimes simultaneously captured within a single pedagogical interaction, although they have their distinctive qualities and can be used to facilitate the transmission of different facets of the practice. For instance, imitation is paramount for the cultivation of the fluid/flowing disposition, that is learned through

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<sup>80</sup> Field note, Milan, Italy, 5 July, 2018.

reiterated attempts and constant engagement in the practice but also through students' mimesis of their teachers' fluid/flowing movements. The listening/focusing disposition and the practical/ascetical disposition, in turn, are more easily transmitted through verbal guidance alone, although imitation remains an important element also for their cultivation. In the next extract, I provide an example of Beatrice's reliance on touch to guide her students in the correct performance of a posture:

After this posture we are guided to the floor. We are guided to perform a bridge and we stay in this position for a few minutes, contrary to what we are used to do. I wonder if the prolonged time is related to the types of postures and thus to the effects that the postures have on the nervous system, as if this is a sort of re-balancing of the energetic work that we have done during the practice. While I am in the bridge pose Beatrice arrives and place a finger on the top of my breastbone and says: "Try to push up from this point". I try to follow her suggestion, feeling that I am succeeding at doing what she is pointing at. Then touching my shoulders, she says again: "Try to turn them a bit", but my shoulders do not move, they are literally glued to the floor. Leaving her place next to me she says in a sweet, soft voice "Very good. Good boy" and she moves on correcting somebody else.<sup>81</sup>

As the previous field note emphasises, touch and direct physical manipulations are crucial tools for postural improvement and the correction of mistaken body alignments. Moreover, appropriate physical proximity and contact between teachers and students positively influence the teacher-student relationships, as it strengthens the bond among the two and it allows to transmit nuances otherwise hardly replicable only through mimesis or verbal guidance<sup>82</sup>. Similarly, other studies have explored "touch communication" (Miller, Franken and Kiefer 2007: 1) in the coach-athlete relationship, arguing that touch involves "showing appreciation, instructing, comforting and giving attention", thus affecting teachers' and students' perceptions of their reciprocal relationship. However, similarly to other pedagogical environments, postural yoga studios are increasingly becoming "no-touch-zones", especially as a consequence of the

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<sup>81</sup> Field note, Milan, Italy, 31 May, 2018.

<sup>82</sup> For more details on this point see Note 2 Appendix One.

growing awareness that #MeToo's campaigns are raising also in reference to teacher-student interactions.<sup>83</sup>

Overall, the listening/focusing, flowing/fluid and practical/ascetic dispositions discussed in this chapter exceed the cultivation of a simple reproduction of technical knowledge regarding how certain practices should be performed. Conversely, echoing Shilling's and Mellor's (2007: 533) reading of "body pedagogics", these dispositions can be framed as: the *means* through which the culture of modern postural yoga is transmitted; the inevitable presuppositions that shape practitioners' *experiences* of this culture and its core practices; and the ground on which the actual *outcomes* of the practice are micro-sociologically brought into light, chiefly in terms of their pre-conscious embodiment by the practitioners. More specifically, the pre-conscious embodiment of specific dispositions grants simultaneously the social reproduction of the yoga culture transmitted in the first place and the perpetual confirmation of practitioners' experiences, that then function as living examples of the normative experiences that yoga practitioners ought to have when practicing correctly. In other words, when successfully undertaken, practitioners' embodiment of these three dispositions contributes to the social reproduction of the school's ethos and are a testimony of its effectiveness.

In the following section, I turn my attention to the importance of metaphors and evocative language in the processes of transmission of those "deeper layers of meanings" that constitute the philosophical and discursive references of the school.

### **3. The Transmission of Esoteric Knowledge: The Role of Metaphors and Evocative Language**

Teachers' verbal guidance is not limited to the instruction of practitioners' technical proficiency in the performance of postures, which, following a biomechanical perspective, translates into maximising the beneficial effects of the posture while preventing possible injuries.<sup>84</sup> Verbal guidance, that is, language, is in fact also used to transmit esoteric knowledge. However, the transmission of this specific type of knowledge encounters the double obstacle of its inclusion into an overtly secularised

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<sup>83</sup> <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/yoga-reconsiders-the-role-of-the-guru-in-the-age-of-metoo>; <https://www.yogajournal.com/lifestyle/prominent-yoga-teachers-share-their-metoo-stories>; <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-7685879/How-yoga-latest-MeToo-battleground-Women-fight-against-unwanted-touching.html> accessed October 8, 2020.

<sup>84</sup> For more details on this point see Note 3 Appendix One.

context where there is little place for yoga philosophy and soteriology (e.g., Newcombe 2019); and its progressive simplification, inherent to its translation and accommodation to a largely middle-class, Western audience (e.g., Squarcini 2006). It is here that metaphors – and the evocative language that links practitioners’ bodies to certain universal principles and natural elements – become essential tools within the pedagogical repertoire of Odaka Yoga.

As correctly pointed out by Thibodeau, Matlock and Flusberg (2019: 1), metaphors are pervasive in everyday communication and “help people understand complex topics, communicate efficiently, and influence others”. More specifically, metaphors are crucial in a variety of fields, ranging from the natural sciences and the arts, to religion and spirituality. In the case of Odaka Yoga, metaphors foster the transmission of the practical-discursive universe of esoteric knowledge of the school, or part of it, without the need of extensive and explicit reliance on the philosophical, religious/spiritual, and soteriological facets of the yoga tradition, Zen, and bushido. Within Odaka Yoga’s pedagogical repertoire, metaphors are mobilised following a number of strategic considerations: first, they grant the transmission of esoteric, or spiritual knowledge, in a covert fashion, that is, without openly challenging practitioners’ secularised mindset; second, metaphors guide the practitioners to experience also the less obvious and more energetic changes that the practice induces; and third, metaphors function as another “pedagogical device” (Bernstein, 1990, 1995, 2000, 2001) that contributes to the cultivation of specific dispositions, functioning as bridges between the discursive – or philosophical – dimension of the practice and its practical, experiential unfolding. In other words, metaphors allow the discursive, and more precisely the esoteric facets of Odaka Yoga’s philosophical foundations, to be experientially explored and embodied by the practitioners.

In the previous pages, in introducing the flowing/fluid disposition, I addressed the principles of “moving from the center”, “bending straight lines” and “rhythm”, as having the metaphorical power to transmit and foster the cultivation of specific dispositions. Now it is time to unpack this claim in some more details, noticing how these three principles function as actual metaphors that draws a line of continuity between the *micro-cosmos of practitioners’ bodies* and the *macro-cosmos of nature*. More specifically, following Odaka Yoga’s philosophical and discursive foundations, this continuity is chiefly represented by the element *water*, whether explicitly mentioned or simply alluded at

through a reference to its qualities (e.g., flowing, fluid, rhythmic). As Francesca and Roberto underline in a blog post:

If our bodies can reflect the *effortless dynamics of water*, then perhaps we can learn to navigate the multi-pronged challenges of life more gracefully. Just as water will always find its way around obstacles, we too can learn to ‘*go with the flow*’ (emphasis in original).<sup>85</sup>

### **3. 1. *Moving from the Center***

*Roberto*: the center is one of the three principles, the three pitfalls of Odaka Yoga. Be centered and discover that center that anyway is innate in each one of us. When a kid takes something from the ground, he enters into the squat pose and so the whole body, in an integral manner, goes to the ground to take up that thing. The grown up, not being aware of that center, of that centered, organic movement, starts to fragment, and so uses the shoulder, and there in some way, develops distortions at a motor level. So, the center, the center is one of those pillars to reeducate our body to move through that innate intelligence, that motor archetype that belongs to us.

*Francesca*: It’s like this, framing it at a metaphorical level, the more we grow old and the more we lose our entirety. And so, as movement becomes fragmented so our ability to fully live the spaces [of life] is fragmented too. To the point that we are so many fragmented distinct bits that we do not recognise ourselves any longer. And there you lose balance, at the physical, emotional, mental level, and even more profoundly, really at the level of the soul. So, one of the pillars, Roberto is right, it is to return to a movement that starts from a stable point and moves around a stable point.<sup>86</sup>

“Moving from the center” is simultaneously depicted by Roberto and Francesca through the practical-discursive registers of spirituality and esotericism and biomechanics and anatomy. The opposite of a movement that starts from the center, that is, a “fragmented movement”, is in fact the cause of a variety of ailments, ranging from the physical to the spiritual level. Here, “moving from the center” functions as a “meta-narrative”

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<sup>85</sup> <https://odakayoga.com/en/move-through-life-effortlessly-with-the-fluidity-of-odaka-yoga/> accessed February 28, 2020.

<sup>86</sup> Roberto Milletti and Francesca Cassia, interview by author, audio recording, online interview, May 22, 2019.

(Lyotard 1979), namely a totalising social theory or philosophical outlook on life that provides a comprehensive account of knowledge and experience based on a given principle interpreted as universally valid. This principle connects practitioners' bodies to the law and functioning of *prana/ki*, the primary substance pervading all creation according to Asian systems of knowledge such as yoga and a variety of martial arts. As a consequence, embracing this principle, that metaphorically links practitioners' bodies – and therefore their health – to their fluidity of movement, is the solution to get in contact with one's own “true self” and thus live in accordance with the universal laws that govern our physical as much as our energetic constitution. This analysis is further substantiated by the text accompanying an Odaka Yoga's promotional video, where Roberto and Francesca perform a series of fluid sequences in the suggestive location of the crater of Etna, an active Vulcan in Sicily, southern Italy:

Being centered is a state of complete fulfillment, a way of life. Flow arises from being centered. Flow is possible when we are fully in the present moment. Thinking fades, presence emerges. The mind is in a state of continuous flow not fixated on anyone point. Intensively focused attention. Being centered gives to you the power to change, to adapt and to rise to life's challenges. Come flow with us.<sup>87</sup>

Flow, that is, energy (*prana, ki*) arises from being centered. Practitioners' complete fulfillment resides in their ability to be centered and tap into their own reservoir of energy, thus acquiring “the power to change, to adapt and to rise to life's challenges”. The Odaka Warrior discussed in the previous chapter, is not, in fact, put off by life's complexity exactly on the ground of his/her ability to flow, starting from the center. In the following extract, I show how this principle is integrated into the Odaka Yoga's ethos and how it is used to provide a hierarchical reading between one's own focused and flowing involvement with the practice and technical knowledge regarding the perfect performance of specific poses, a priority in styles such as Iyengar and Ashtanga yoga:

Today, after the performance of a few transitions, Beatrice stops and says: “It is more important to focus on the sensations of the practice. Yoga is about contacting an inner balance, about listening to oneself. Perfect alignments, technicalities like twisting a bit the right foot and like this are useful, and to

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<sup>87</sup> <https://odakayoga.com/it/media/video/> accessed February 28, 2020.

perform perfect poses is a great experience in itself. But yoga is not about perfect alignments, or technicalities, but about being present”.<sup>88</sup>

Beatrice makes clear, in this as in other instances,<sup>89</sup> that although Odaka Yoga is concerned with the transmission of a certain technical proficiency in the performance of its postural repertoire, the cultivation of a focusing/listening disposition is a priority. In the following extract, the principle, or metaphor of the center is again evoked to instruct practitioners to pay attention to their experience in the midst of a demanding practice:

After this intense, central part of the practice we move in a standing position. The transition is done from the dog bringing one leg in between the arms and then the other following it. Beatrice says: “Slowly unwind your back, vertebra after vertebra, the arms opening, as large as you can. The palms meet over the head and come down slowly with the elbow open and the finger well spread. Open again. The hands meet and come down, this time the wrists rotate and the arms are again open, with the elbow at ninety degrees and the palms open”. We repeat this and similar movements a few times [this movement is known as ki flow by Odaka Yoga practitioners] and then we move on to the performance of a sequence of warriors. At the end of this sequence while we are again standing at the beginning of the mat, Beatrice says: “Now place your hands a few fingers below your belly button. Here is the tanden, the center. All of our own energy comes from this energy center, all movement comes from here. It is known in all Oriental traditions as the most important energy center. We then perform a series of movements that involve bending the legs with the top of the feet at the floor and the heels raised from it and we come up and down in this manner several time [another variation of the ki flow]. The last time, opening up, Beatrice says, quite inspired: “And now feel yourself growing from your roots to the sky”. At one point, during one transition to the other, I look at Beatrice’s elegant movements while she is extending her arms in the warrior position and I notice her eyes closed and

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<sup>88</sup> Field note, Milan, Italy, May 15, 2018.

<sup>89</sup> For more details on this point see Note 4 Appendix One.



her smile. I feel she is really right there, enjoying her practice, yet somehow also performing a role, the role of the happy yoga teacher.<sup>90</sup>

The tanden, that as we have seen in the Chapter Three is the subtle energy center placed a few inches below the belly bottom, functions as the bridge between the different sheaths that connect the physical, energetic, mind, and spiritual bodies of the practitioners. Paying attention to this area is deliberately encouraged by Beatrice as a means to cultivate practitioners' self-centeredness. In fact, the tanden is simultaneously the source of all physical as much as all energetic movements and as such it is essential to practitioners' self-awareness whether in strictly anatomical or esoteric terms. As the extract continues, practitioners are also encouraged to experience their specific positioning in between the ground and the sky. Here, during the performance of a series of fluid movements that involve the bending of one's legs and the flowing/fluid movements of one's arms in a manner substantially akin to certain forms of *Qigong* (ki flow), Beatrice guides the practitioners to notice the "vertical tension" that characterises this specific sequence. These two elements, grounding and extension, translated into the evocative image of the "the ground" and "the sky", together contribute to the constitution of the rhythmic movement that characterise Odaka Yoga's flowing practice and that springs, inevitably, from the center.

Finally, before introducing the next metaphor, I would like to take a small detour and shortly underline how certain facets of the teacher-student relationship, and more specifically of the yoga teacher profession, can be fruitfully theorised through the lenses of the concept of "emotional labor" (Hochschild 1983). This concept was originally introduced to describe the processes of emotional control, regulation and display that airplane hostesses – and by proxy all the workers of the service sector and caring professions more in general – have to constantly engage in as part of their occupation, especially when they are directly interacting with the public (e.g., costumers, passengers, clients/patients and pupils). As Hochschild (1983) points out, these processes of emotional regulation are an expression of the increasing commercialisation and commodification of feelings and emotions and match rather well with some of the ramifications of what Foucault has named "biopolitics" (2008) and subsequently "governmentality" (1980). In a nutshell, the "good worker" has to engage with constant

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<sup>90</sup> Field note, Milan, Italy, May 31, 2018. For more details on this point see Note 5 Appendix One.

self-scrutiny in order to display only those behaviors and emotional tones that are appropriate to the context, often without questioning the “naturalness” of these behaviors and emotional tones. The type of emotional labor that is required to yoga teachers, I argue, is even more invasive and totalising than in the case of other professions, as yoga teachers, by definition, have to embody a certain landscape of emotions such as peacefulness, centeredness, happiness, acceptance and so on.<sup>91</sup> Of course, the constant display of such emotional proficiency is challenging for most human being, if not actually out of their reach. Nonetheless, yoga teachers, in order to be fully in the position to navigate the complex and constantly changing field of contemporary postural yoga and to inspire their students, next to their “physical capital” (Shilling 2004, 2012), have to rely on and cultivate also their “emotional capital” (e.g., Cottingham 2016; Reay 2004; Zembylas 2007). As the previous field note suggests, this emotional capital is essential to teachers’ ability to move from the center, and as such, remain in contact with their own “true self”, drawing a substantial line of continuity between the physical, the energetic, the emotional and even the biological level. In fact, as the journalist and Odaka Yoga teacher Valentina Ferrero underlines:

In Odaka Yoga everything is centric and circular. Rotary. Yourself too are rotating around a foundational axis for our evolution: the vertebra column, a bone structure whose importance we often forget. Odaka Yoga is based on our origins, when that microscopic prokaryotic cell – immersed in the primordial broth – suddenly decided to transform itself in genetics and start what today we call life (a concept – that of life – that, trust me, for many is still rather trivial).<sup>92</sup>

Odaka Yoga then, through its reliance on the metaphor of the center and the translation of this philosophical facet into the practice through the use of specific verbal strategies, really aims to reach, affect and transform practitioners’ life right at their center, as we will have the chance to see more extensively in Chapter Five.

### ***3.2. Bending Straight Lines***

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<sup>91</sup> For more details on this point see Note 6 Appendix One.

<sup>92</sup> <https://italiayoga.com/2018/11/08/odaka-yoga-posizioni/> accessed February 27, 2018.

*Roberto*: the second [principle] is to bend the straight line. This means bend the lines of the body, bend the situations in life, our gestures, because there is nothing in nature that has the dimension of a straight line. Everything has a spiral-like shape, our DNA, our irises, the intestine, the fingerprints, everything in nature moves in a spiral-like manner and in bending we rediscover here too that innate intelligence inherent in our body, because it is exactly a spiral-like body.

*Francesca*: Let's say that our muscles, our skeleton, our way of moving is not in a straight line. When I used to go to the gym there were the famous Technogym machines for weightlifting, and they were all linear. Now they are all in curves...they allow all the movements in curve. Because it is how the body moves to keep healthy. So, bending the straight line is really coming back to naturalness, both in thinking and in moving, and this makes you more aware of how you are and how to move in space.

*Roberto*: then the curve, the curve has a fascinating side because it makes you live your journey between a position and the other in yoga, and so there is no place of arrival but you are in the journey and then you let the body finds the perfect pose for you. This is a fundamental aspect. With straight lines there is always an aim to reach. And so sometimes you force the nature of your body or desist to reach that pose.

*Francesca*: let's say that is like when you are driving. When you are in a rectilinear you can get distracted. If there is a curve you can't really. You slow down and in slowing down you acquire a little more vision and awareness.

*Roberto*: and to bend the lines of the body signifies also to recreate spaces, those infinite possibilities, because the bones function as spacers, there you can discover infinite possibilities. The range of movement increases and raises.<sup>93</sup>

As Roberto underlines, everything in nature, from our genetic structure to the entirety of creation “moves in a spiral-like manner”. Our body, then, is a “spiral-like body” and as such is inherently connected with that “innate intelligence” that pervades all of creation, *prana* or *ki*. Moreover, next to this spiritual/esoteric register, Francesca clarifies that

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<sup>93</sup> Roberto Milletti and Francesca Cassia, interview by author, audio recording, online interview, May 22, 2019.

bending the straight lines guarantees a healthy, functional movement that mirrors a “...coming back to naturalness”. These two registers, the energetic/esoteric and the anatomical/biomechanical conflates into the idea that Odaka Yoga, through its attention to “bending the straight lines”, is a “journey” for its practitioners. A journey, that borrowing from one of Zen’s central tropes, has no destination if not a fundamental transposition of those qualities cultivated on the mat (e.g., focus, flow and ascesis) also outside of it and a trust in the innate intelligence of the body. I will discuss the different facets of practitioners’ journeys of self-transformation via Odaka Yoga in Chapter Five. For the moment let me simply point out how this principle – as much as the other two here discussed – is a useful pedagogical aid in the process of transforming the discursive-philosophical foundations of the school into transmittable dispositions that can then be embodied by the practitioners, becoming akin to something like a “second nature” (Bourdieu 1990a: 56). For instance, the principle of “bending the straight line” is constantly mobilised during classes to guide practitioners to embody the focusing/listening and the flowing/fluid dispositions that we have previously discussed. In the following extract, I provide an example, where the fluid, rhythmic movements of the practice are performed to guarantee the opening and closing of practitioners’ arms (and consequently chest, shoulder, and back muscles) following curved trajectories:

We are guided to go on four. Here we begin to go slowly towards the heels, rounding the back, and then come up on four. We repeat this a few times before finally sitting on the heels. While we sit in this posture with the hands on the thighs Beatrice says: “Now place your hands next to the chest, like this, with the thumbs bended like in the martial arts and we begin to open, from the center and then up, and slowly down again. We open again, up and down”. The feeling of moving slowly but consciously is very nice, and I can really see the martial arts roots of this movement which highly resembles the practice of qigong...Then we repeat the same transition but having the hands placed at a different angle to the air, what Beatrice address as “hands that cleave the air”. I have the feeling I begin to understand something more about Odaka....<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Field note, Milan, Italy, June 5, 2018.

The movements described are an example of *high tide*, a specific movement structured following a mixture of martial arts and biomechanics principles where practitioners' arms extend and open up paying particular attention to the creation of a curved trajectory and the "round" movement of the shoulder's and scapula's joints. As we have seen through the presentation of a variety of field notes, these movements – round, from the center to the periphery, fluid and rhythmic – really characterise the ethos of Odaka Yoga. This ethos, far from being merely framed as philosophical, is translated into practice, and transmitted to the practitioners through the teachers' skilled verbal guidance. In so doing, even without explicitly referring to the philosophies or the principles underlining the school and its rationale, teachers are successful in facilitating the embodiment of these very philosophical elements. Once this occurs – thanks to the reiterated engagement in the practice that we have addressed with the concept of practical/ascetic disposition – then practitioners are also more prone to recognise their experiences as reflected in those philosophical facets that characterise the school, thus confirming the meaningfulness and the efficacy of the practice they have chosen.

### **3. 3. *Rhythm***

*Roberto*: the third [pillar] is rhythm...rhythm because we are rhythm, life is rhythm. With rhythm we mean that balance between tension and relaxation because tension somehow blocks the flow of the energy, of thoughts, etcetera. Relaxation, when one body parts collapses to the ground or it is completely relaxed consumes energy anyway, so rhythm allows to find that middle way between tension and relaxation where you can flow in a constant manner, a continuum. It is how to channel prana, this energy, this vital force within the body and be prana in motion. Prana in the flowing of things.

*Francesca*: rhythm is important. Because too fast a rhythm, also at a physical level, works more on the superficial muscles. A slower movement is deeper and works on postural muscles. So, let's say that the slower the movement the more stability you will create. And then it's up to you to slide in between these two rhythms and find a balance.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Roberto Milletti and Francesca Cassia, interview by author, audio recording, online interview, May 22, 2019.

Once again, also rhythm is conceptualised by Roberto and Francesca through the energetic/esoteric and the biomechanical/anatomical registers. In both cases, rhythm addresses the balance that practitioners must find between “tension and relaxation” and between fast and slower movement. Each one of these “extremes” has its own specificities and serves its purpose (e.g., a fast rhythm works the superficial muscles while a slower one works the deeper tissues). According to Roberto, through rhythm practitioners should learn how to flow, and more than that, how to become that flow of energy that inhabits them, *prana*, or *ki*. In this way, the practitioners’ body becomes a *micro-cosmic* representation of the *macro-cosmic* order of things. The syllogism goes like this: we are rhythm and prana in motion; everything is rhythm and prana in motion; we are everything, if and when we manage to fully “channel prana”, as Odaka Yoga instructs us to do. At a physical level this translates with practitioners’ having to find their own rhythm and with it balance. How is then this principle, or metaphor conveyed by teachers and received by practitioners? Is rhythm explicitly invoked, thus allowing practitioners to recognise it as a foundational element of their practice or is it somehow experienced without an overt explanation? Through the following field notes I attempt to preliminary answer to these and other questions:

We repeat the previous sequence a few more times, but while we are in the down-facing dog we insert the high stretch of the back leg and subsequently the half scorpion. These postures kill me every time and really challenge my strength and flexibility. Beatrice says: “Then bring your right leg towards the opposite arm, and then stretch it back and then bend it in the half scorpion. Coming down bring your foot next to the right hand, on the external side. I first put the leg on the inside, the second time I do the right movement. “Now bend the arms and go towards the ground to thank Mother Earth” says Beatrice. Also, this part is a bit challenging for me, and I can only bend a bit with my leg stretched on the back. I notice how the girl next to me has her knee on the floor, this is probably a good idea to not force to much if there is not enough strength and flexibility in the body.<sup>96</sup>

First, rhythm is acquired through repetition, that is the constant performance of specific fluid/flowing sequences. Therefore, one’s own rhythm cannot prescind from the

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<sup>96</sup> Field note, Milan, Italy, June 5, 2018.

cultivation of a practical/ascetic disposition and the constant reliance on practice and performance that practitioners are encouraged to maintain. However, rhythm is not invoked by the teachers in an overt manner, but following an experiential epistemology, is the result of practitioners' deliberate interpretation of and choice with their own practice. For example, as recounted in the previous field note, I recognised that the practice was too demanding for my own possibility and therefore I decided to adjust it in order to accommodate my own needs. Here, a certain balance between tension and relaxation is aimed at and achieved, at least at a physical level. Naturally, according to the subtle body model, a manipulation of the physical body has repercussions also on all the other sheaths of the practitioners' body, thus positing that even a minimum search for physical balance is bound to bring some level of energetic balance too whether the practitioners are aware of it or not.

However, it is also important to notice that to recognise one's own need to seek a balance between the intensity of the practice and a more relaxed engagement with one's own body is primarily the result of the cultivated listening/focusing disposition. This signifies that the practitioners have interiorised: first, the teachers' guidance about not forcing and respecting their body limits; and second, their ability to attend, moment by moment to the sensations and the feelings of one's own body and then act accordingly. In the following extracts, I underline two different instances where the teacher guides, more overtly, the students to embody the rhythm of the practice, and in this way access their own energetic resources:

“Put your ends on the tights and begin to oscillate forward and inhaling round your back”. We repeat this gentle movement a few times. All the class moves within the same gentle rhythm.<sup>97</sup>

We are performing a specific sequence and the teacher says: “Play with the opposites” ... We keep moving, flowing, from one position to the other. First, we perform a sequence for the benefit of one side of the body and then we repeat it on the other side. Beatrice says: “Move like the ocean...let yourself be moved like the ocean” and showing a specific twist of the shoulder and the

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<sup>97</sup> Field note, Milan, Italy, May 29, 2018.

arm she says: “High tide and low tide” addressing the rising and falling of the movement and the positioning of the shoulder and of the arm.<sup>98</sup>

In the first extract, we are brought into the midst of the quasi-hypnotic rhythm that the reiterated performance of a fluid sequence is meant to produce, in a manner substantially akin to the breaking and falling back of the ocean waves. In the second fragment, this dimension is made more explicit, with the teacher inviting the practitioners to “play with the opposite”, “move like the ocean” and “let be moved like the ocean”. Of course, as I have already underlined, the reference to the movement of the ocean waves is one of the strongest definitory traits of the Odaka Yoga’s ethos. As shown in one promotional video of the school (now removed from their website) the founders are performing a series of fluid/flowing transitions on a deserted shore while a text appears stating: “Odaka is the wave motion inspired by the natural rhythms of the ocean where the body moves like water without interruptions, in a continuous flow”.<sup>99</sup>

Before bringing this section to a close, I would like to underline the symmetry between the rhythm of the ocean waves evoked in Odaka Yoga and the rhythm of the breath. The symmetry is inherent in the idea of rhythm epitomised by expansion and contraction, or as Roberto says, “tension and relaxation”. According to the overall narrative of Odaka Yoga, that following a long standing esoteric and Asian inspired heritage, traces a correspondence between the micro-cosmos of the human body and the macro-cosmos of nature and its functioning, the rhythmic movements of the ocean reproduced in the practice, as much as the rhythmic movement of the breath, belong to the same logic. This logic aims to guarantee the constant and balanced flow on one’s own inner energy. In fact, breath and movement are both powerful representation of the flow of natural or cosmic energy.

It is important to notice that the principles or metaphors of moving from the center, bending the straight lines and rhythm, all unequivocally connected to the movement of the ocean waves that Odaka Yoga seeks to emulate and to the fluid/flowing movements of its martial arts heritage, are inherently connected. As it emerges from the discussion above, it is from the center that our inner energy flows, as much as it is from the center that the rhythmic movement between tension and relaxation happens; bending the straight

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<sup>98</sup> Field note, Milan, Italy, May 15, 2018

<sup>99</sup> <http://www.odakayoga.com/it/media/video/> accessed Spring, 2017.



lines, again, is inherently a fluid/flowing movement which itself determines and affects the quality of our rhythm and the flow of our energy. As such, although at the discursive level the teachers present these principles as autonomous and self-standing, we have to be aware then when translated into practice through specific pedagogical devices (e.g., chiefly metaphors and evocative language), they conflate into the fluid/flowing movement patterns that characterise the school's ethos.

Finally, the importance of language, and more specifically of teachers' verbal guidance – whether in the guise of “technical” instructions or more philosophically grounded references – characterise this school as much as the landscape of postural yoga more in general. Nonetheless, spoken language here becomes particularly important as the study of texts is not a prominent feature of the school's ethos (perhaps with the notable exception of some cursory overview during teacher trainings). Therefore, the philosophical foundations of Odaka Yoga are largely transmitted through practice, that is, they are translated into experiential principles that guide practitioners' conduct on the mat and possibly also outside of it. Here, language, whether through the adherence to strict metaphors or its evocative tones, establishes the condition of possibility for practitioners to experience and understand the philosophical foundations of the school.

#### **4. Conclusive Remarks: The Yogic Habitus and the Emergence of a New Middle-Class Ethos**

According to Bourdieu (1984: 170) habitus is “[a] structuring structure, which organises practices and the perception of practices”. Most importantly one's own habitus, understood as a specific scheme of dispositions, once internalised, influences the individual's very perceptions of the social world (Bourdieu 1984: 170). Or again, as Wacquant comments, habitus is “the way society becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel and act in determinant ways, which then guide them” (2006: 316). Moreover, as we have seen in the previous chapter, there is a certain correspondence between a field, its ethos, and the habitus it fosters. Accordingly, we can conceptualise a field's ethos as the matrix from which a certain habitus springs from (e.g., Bourdieu 1984: 94; McNay 1999: 109; Peillon 1998: 215).

Consequently, considering how the yoga field as a hybrid field is: (a) an autonomous and self-standing field which produces its own habitus; (b) while simultaneously being

influenced in its constitution and internal articulation by a variety of practical-discursive registers particularly central to other fields (e.g., chiefly the fitness/leisure, spiritual/religious and therapeutic/medical fields), the yogic habitus is then likely to incorporate and reproduce some of their core features. This is of particular interest to the analysis at hand as the yoga field – as much as the fitness/leisure, the spiritual/religious and the therapeutic/medical fields – tend to reproduce different facets of a *new middle-class*<sup>100</sup> *ethos*, that is, an ethos that valorises the importance of the cultivation of a very precise type of “self” (e.g., flexible, performative, self-caring and so on). In turn, this middle-class ethos and the type of self it gives shape to, favour distinctive everyday conducts towards oneself as much as others and the world, as I will discuss exploring the “elective affinities” (Weber 2011) and “symbiotic relationships” (Wacquant 2004) between it and the “yogic habitus” (Di Placido 2018).

In this chapter, I have attempted to reconstruct the apprenticeship process through which the modern yogi acquires a specific set of dispositions that in turn form a particular declination of “yogic habitus”. Through my direct involvement within the Milanese branch of Odaka Yoga coupled with a reliance on habitus as “topic and a tool” (e.g., Wacquant 2004, 2013a) I have discussed – from the vantage point of the apprentice – the processes of transmission and interiorisation of specific dispositions. In so doing, I have suggested the idea that the dispositions fostered within contemporary postural yoga styles such as Odaka Yoga, closely follow the class format and its structure. In other words, I unveiled the existing correspondences between the structure and the contents of a standardised yoga class. Accordingly, although each disposition is transversal to the whole class, it is emphasised differently in different phases. Within this general framework, I have then identified three “core dispositions” (Brown and Jennings 2013) whose transmission and embodiment are central to the social reproduction of the school’s ethos, and as consequently also of the broader yoga field’s ethos.<sup>101</sup> The dispositions I

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<sup>100</sup> With the expression *new middle-class* I mean the middle and upper sections of this specific social group. More specifically, the new middle-class can be defined, in Marxist terms, as a “transitional class” (Ollman 1968: 576) between, on the one hand, the lower middle-classes and the proletariat and on the other hand, social elites; or again, in Bourdieu’s (1984: 39) terms, we can understand its members as “cultural intermediaries” among these different groups. In other words, the “new” middleclass is a composite group whose tastes and internal articulation are hardly reducible to a monolithic class identity. However, its members seem to converge towards the values of entrepreneurship, individualism, self-care and selfactualisation. For a similar usage of the expression “new petite bourgeoisie” see Bourdieu (1984) and most notably Altgals (2014a: 282-323).

<sup>101</sup> For an exploration of Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and disposition see also Brown and Aldous (2015).

identified are not merely a useful heuristic device in relation to the specific school explored. On contrary, and in line with the construct of core disposition developed by Brown and Jennings (2013: 34) in their study of Wing Chun and Taijiquan, I argue that they “tend to have some significant congruence” across yoga schools and styles. In this way, those scholars interested in the processes of apprenticeship of modern forms of yoga – or more generally, in theorising about the links between social fields, yoga schools and specific social groups – may find the analysis proposed in these pages as a useful schemata worth of application.

These dispositions are in turn the *focusing/listening* disposition (particularly central in the *tuning in* and *relaxing phases* of the class), the *flowing/fluid* disposition and the *practical/ascetic* disposition (mainly cultivated in the *practice phase* of the class). These dispositions, I believe, can be fruitfully explored in relation to a plethora of modern postural yoga schools (if not virtually all) and to some degree also in relation to other forms of movements such as certain martial arts (e.g., capoeira, qi gong, thai chi, aikido and so on), dance and fitness.<sup>102</sup>

In this chapter, I have also discussed how language, and more specifically teachers’ verbal guidance, is the primary means of knowledge transmission in modern postural yoga (Hauser 2013b), and as such is the unavoidable premise from which the transmission of these dispositions is possible in the first place.<sup>103</sup> Although mimesis and touch are also important, language is here theorised as the central pedagogical device that helps teachers to bridge the discourse-practice divide and translate into practice the philosophical and discursive backbones of the school. This is achieved without explicitly referring to the philosophical and discursive universe of the school but exclusively relying on the performative power of language, naturally coupled by students’ mimesis of their teachers’ conduct on the mat. It is here that metaphors and evocative language come into place, fostering the embodiment and thus the experiential recognition of some of the esoteric and spiritual elements that characterise the school’s ethos.

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<sup>102</sup> For some contributions that follow a similar theoretical orientation in the study of a variety of martial arts the reader is referred to: Brown and Jennings (2013); Kohn (2003); and Tan (2014).

<sup>103</sup> A caveat here is due. Language without mimesis as much as mimesis without language are hardly imaginable within the context of the pedagogies of modern yoga discussed in this chapter. This signifies that they are both foundational to the successful and effective transmission of the pedagogical repertoire of the school and in turn of its philosophical and discursive references. In fact, apprenticeship itself is, at its roots, a process of imitation of the teachers’ gestures, movements, acts and so on, to which the student is continuously exposed to. These facets of students’ mimesis of their teachers’ behaviors on the mat, I believe, were, at least partially, captured in my field notes through my reliance on habitus as a topic and as a tool.

Moreover, these dispositions, far from merely fostering only a type of pre-conscious, embodied orientation to self, others and the world typical of the yogic habitus, offer a useful analytical tool to explore the permeability between the yoga field, its ethos and a plethora of other sociocultural processes that characterise contemporary neoliberal societies. First, via a focusing/listening disposition and its emphasis on the importance of directing one's own attention to the expert (e.g., the teacher) in order to be guided in the process of discovering one's own true nature and to independently attend to one's own body, its potentials and limitations, the yogic habitus is constituted as a very fertile surface for disciplining and self-monitoring instances typical of other neighboring fields such as the fitness/leisure, spiritual/religious and therapeutic/medical fields. Second, via the cultivation of a flowing/fluid disposition that instructs practitioners to move their bodies and inner energies in accordance with the core principles of Asian disciplines (e.g., chiefly yoga and martial arts), nature (e.g., the natural rhythms of the ocean waves) and western science (e.g., biomechanics and anatomy), the yogic habitus becomes a privileged location where practitioners' fluidity and flexibility in the face of adversity is effectively interiorised, thus substantially echoing the flexibility demands of post-fordist, neoliberal societies and their ethos of self-responsibility (Schnäbele 2013). Third, and highly interrelated with the previous points, the practical/ascetic disposition cultivated on the mat encourages self-improvement and an unshakable dedication to one's own practice – in the guise of constant work on oneself – as the single and most important determining factor for one's own success on the mat as much as in life, thus showing a certain “elective affinity” (Weber 2011) with the Protestant ethic identified by Max Weber as one of the foundational cultural forces behind the rise of capitalism. Considered together then, these dispositions contribute to the constitution of a yogic habitus that equips practitioners with balance, fluidity, focus and determination, essential values if one is to attempt to navigate the logics of contemporary neoliberal societies and “live centered in the middle of chaos”.<sup>104</sup>

In the remaining of this chapter, I briefly mention five sites of continuity between some of the core features of the yogic habitus and its schema of disposition and a broader new middle-class ethos from which it simultaneously emerges and that it contributes to reproduce. They are in turn: first, the importance of health and freedom; second, the

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<sup>104</sup> <https://odakayoga.com/en/> accessed February 07, 2020.

centrality of flexibility; third, the production of cosmopolitan and transnational identities; fourth, New Age religions and contemporary spiritualities and their focus on the “self”; and fifth, ecology. Of course, these reflections do not intend to be exhaustive in themselves but function as a point of intersection between the preliminary results presented in Chapters Three, Four, and Five and possible future lines of investigation, for myself as much as for other scholars that may find them promising.

The cultivation of *health* and *freedom* is one of the central normative injunctions of neoliberal conceptions of subjectivity within and outside of the yoga field (e.g., Altglas 2014a; Godrej 2017; Lucia 2020; Rose 1996). As McGuigan (2014: 224) correctly underlines, “[a]lthough neoliberalism is first and foremost a doctrine of political economy, it is also, rather more diffusely, a principle of civilisation that shapes the socio-cultural makeup of people through socialisation in the broadest sense”. Here, the “neoliberal self” (McGuigan 2014) he portrays is bound to embody this “principle of civilisation” that posits individuals’ self-responsibility in the management of their own health (e.g., self-care, self-control, self-monitoring) and their supposed free choices, especially in relation to their consumers’ and lifestyles’ choices. Yoga practitioners, among other social groups/categories are a poignant example of the pervasive logic of neoliberalism as a principle of civilisation and as such, are highly committed to this self-responsible and self-caring model. This signifies that today’s practitioners embody the normative ideal of the “entrepreneur/citizen/consumer” advanced in neoliberal societies (e.g., Brown W. 2006; McGuigan 2014), simultaneously contributing to the social reproduction of this structure while being pre-consciously structured by its core values and orientation. Similarly, a specific “taste”<sup>105</sup> (Bourdieu 1984: 56), that is, the manifested preference for the cultivation of one’s own health and its translation into situated practices such as modern forms of postural yoga, tends to reproduce very clear patterns of class distinction: it is not a coincidence that a growing body of literature

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<sup>105</sup> As further argued by Bourdieu, “[t]aste, a class culture turned into nature, that is, *embodied*, helps to shape the class body. It is an incorporated principle of classification which governs all forms of incorporation, choosing and modifying everything that the body ingests and digests and assimilates, physiologically and psychologically. It follows that the body is the most indisputable materialization of class taste, which it manifests in several ways. It does this first in the seemingly most natural features of the body, the dimensions ( volume, height, weight) and shapes ( round or square, stiff or supple, straight or curved ) of its visible forms, which express in countless ways a whole relation to the body, i.e., a way of treating it, caring for it, feeding it, maintaining it, which reveals the deepest dispositions of the habitus. It is in fact through preferences with regard to food which may be perpetuated beyond their social conditions of production ( as, in other areas, an accent, a walk etc. ),and also, of course, through the uses of the body in work and leisure which are bound up with them, that the class distribution of bodily properties is determined. (Bourdieu 1984: 190, emphasis in original).

underlines the largely – if not exclusively – middle-class background of yoga practitioners alongside their middle-class concerns for individuality, self-actualisation, health and freedom (e.g., Altglas 2008, 2014a; Hauser 2013a; Kern 2012; Koch 2013; Lewis 2008; Jain 2014a, 2020; Schnäbele 2013; Strauss 2005; Strauss and Mandelbaum 2013).

This should not be a surprise. In fact, although the practice of postural forms of yoga is ubiquitous across geographies and cultural contexts, most practitioners are so far positioned in the urban middle-classes, whether in North America, Europe, or South Asia. These social groups are generally characterised by “an above average level of education, and work in the increasingly delimited, immaterial knowledge work sector, as well as in the affective work sector” (Schnäbele 2013: 141), such as the entertainment and fashion industries, banking, communication, traditional and alternative forms of care (e.g., massage, psychotherapy, yoga) and so on. These professions – perhaps more than others – as a consequence of the post-fordist transition of the last few decades have become increasingly organised around the central imperative of and for *flexibility*. As correctly argued by Schnäbele (2013: 141), “[u]nder these demands, an increasing amount of employees regard yoga as an adequate form of recreation. There are clear parallels: The flexibility required on the employment market is practiced in yoga”. In other words, the flexibility, and the fluidity that practitioners cultivate on the mat also become a valuable capital in reference to their career’s demands and professional success. I will expand on this particular line of analysis in Chapter Five while discussing practitioner’s voices and experiences of postural yoga as an expression of their middle-class taste.

Moreover, the emerging new middle-classes, inherently self-centered and flexible, constitute a homogeneous *cosmopolitan* and *transnational* social group. Their identities are increasingly more defined by the lifestyle and values they share with those people on the other side of the globe that occupy a similar social positioning to theirs (e.g., Strauss 2005; Hauser 2013a) rather than with people physically and spatially closer to them, as my analysis of Odaka Yoga’s community as an “imagined community” (Anderson 1983) or as a “white utopia” (Lucia 2020) testifies. Naturally, this middle-class, cosmopolitan attitude, partly discussed in Chapter Three in relation to the Odaka Yoga’s transnational reach, is one of the driving cultural forces behind yoga’s hybridisation, that is, yoga’s increasing reliance on different practical-discursive universes (e.g., a bricolage of Asian and Western notions and systems of knowledge). In fact, for it to be truly cosmopolitan,

yoga has to be constantly reinvented as a hybrid between the exoticism of Asian traditions (e.g., Altglas 2014a) and the legitimising discourses granted by Western science and medicine (e.g., Alter 2004; Di Placido 2020).

Connected to this middle-class, transnational, and cosmopolitan social positioning there is also a specific “taste” for the self-centered, self-referential and privatising features of “New Age” religions (e.g., Heelas 1996, 2008; Hanegraaff 1996, 1998, 1999) and “contemporary spiritualities” (Palmisano and Pannofino 2021). As Heelas and Hanegraaff, alongside others, have convincingly argued, *New Age religions* are characterised by the core idea of a self that, privately, can access the mysteries of the sacred. Here, it is “the inner realm of life serving as *the* source of significance and authority” (Heelas 2008: 28, emphasis in original) and not the external authority of holy books, traditions and “spiritual director[s]” (Foucault 2010: 30, 31, 378, 281), teachers and mentors that guide and mediate social actors’ experiences and knowledge of the sacred. Similarly, *contemporary spiritualities* are in turn conceptualised as “partly new and/or alternative” spiritualities opposed to “tradition”, “past” and “mainstream religious or lay culture” (Palmisano and Pannofino 2021: 158), as inherently self-centered and substantially devoid of the influence of “external authorities” (e.g., Bellah et al., 1985; Berzano 2019; Heelas 1996, 2008; Heelas et al., 2005; Roof 2003). Again, this focus on the self and the postulated lack of influences from external authorities in the processes of discovery of, access to and mediation with the sacred, substantially matches with the broader neoliberal focus on the self (e.g., individuality, self-actualisation, self-responsibility) that has transversally occupied the social field in the last few decades, and also with the work of self-cultivation that yoga practices require.

Finally, we should mention *ecology*, as a particular practical-discursive universe that intersects with contemporary spiritualities and their rediscovery of nature as the privileged dimension where the self can access the sacred in its immanent manifestations (e.g., Camorrino 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2020a, 2020b; Palmisano and Pannofino 2021). Here, nature functions as a further “meta-narrative”, or as Antonio Camorrino (2018a) puts it, as “a contemporary myth” that inspires practitioners’ healthy and balanced lifestyle and their rejoicing in transnational communities of conscious consumers (e.g., Strauss 2005; Strauss and Mandelbaum 2013).

These are only some among the possible lines of continuity between the yogic habitus delineated in some details in these pages and broader sociocultural processes that are

simultaneously central, tangent and in some cases peripheral to the yoga field and the yoga habitus in *stricto sensu*. Nonetheless, what I attempted to underline in these final remarks is the “symbiotic relationship” (Wacquant 2004) that occurs between the yoga field, its ethos and habitus and the broader ethos of an emergent middle-class that values health and freedom; cultivates flexibility; is increasingly cosmopolitan and transnational; closely resembles some of the core conceptions of New Age religion and contemporary spiritualities; and is ecologically oriented. To say it otherwise, it is logical to posit that those individuals that find themselves positioned alongside some of these sociocultural axes would be more likely than others to develop a “taste” for yoga and as a consequence may actively try to find strategies to interiorise those core disposition promoted by the practice and in turn may be more prone to the acquisition of the yogic habitus.

Given these premises, it seems complicated to imagine how contemporary forms of postural yoga, whose ethos is largely middle-class, could offer a reliable alternative to the dominant model of subjectivity and self-conduct typical of neo-liberal societies, as provocatively suggested by Godrej (2017). In fact, Odaka Yoga’s orientation towards constant transformation, as testified by statements such as “Liquify your limits. Create forms, transforms. Be adaptable...dive into the change”<sup>106</sup>, seems to perfectly match neoliberalism’s core values. However, there is more to this, as practitioners’ habitus and their processes of self-cultivation - although framed within and limited by the practical-discursive logics of these broader sociocultural processes - have also to be understood as manifestations of practitioners’ relative agency and intentionality. In other words, it is important to underline the generative potentials of a concept such as habitus, which can be inhabited and transformed by different individuals differently, thus leaving open some possibility for unexpected individual and social change. This signifies that the substantial alignment between the dispositions

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<sup>106</sup> <https://odakayoga.com/it/media/video/> accessed September 14, 2020.



constituting the yogic habitus and a variety of core neo-liberal values, a topic I will explore in more details in the following chapter, does not mean that these, in principle, cannot be transcended. For instance, despite the progressive commodification and marketisation of the spiritual and the ecological registers, neo-liberalism as a “doctrine of political economy” and as a “principle of civilisation” (McGuigan 2014) is not spiritual neither it is particularly ecological. Similarly, the listening/focusing, flowing/fluid and practical/ascetic dispositions are not inherently neo-liberal, although they can be strategically mobilised within and bended to a neo-liberal framework and its imperatives. As a consequence, the compatibility between these two forms of habitus, that is, between a yogic habitus and a new middle-class habitus substantially imbued with neo-liberal values and orientations, is perhaps more circumstantial rather than organic. If this is true, the cultivation of a specific yogic habitus might, in certain cases, prevail over neo-liberal values in changing the dispositions of practitioners in new directions, although this, for now, remains to be largely ascertained.

# Chapter Five

## Practitioners' Voices and Experiences: Expressing “Taste”

### 1. Introduction

This chapter presents and analyses *practitioners' voices* and *experiences* of their yoga practice as a particular expression of a new middle-class “taste” (Bourdieu 1984) for the “exoticism” of Asian religions and spiritual resources (Altglas 2014a) and their therapeutic, self-actualising, and self-transformative promises. It explores how the appropriation (e.g., transmission, acquisition, and mastery) of these exoticised resources functions as a means to reinforce particular dispositions and orientations to self, others and the world that already largely characterise a broader middle-class ethos and the habitus it fosters.<sup>1</sup> In this way, this chapter aims to show the important lines of continuity that occur between the *focusing/listening*, *flowing/fluid* and *practical/ascetic dispositions* – that together contribute to the constitution of the *yogic habitus* – as transmitted and cultivated through the practice of yoga and broader middle-class concerns for health, self-actualisation, self-control, self-responsibility, flexibility and so on. In other words, Chapter Five attempts to show how for the greatest majority of Western practitioners, to become a yogi does not mean to renounce to their worldly identity and social privileges but on the contrary is a powerful assertion of one's own belonging to a certain social group: the new middle-classes and their taste for the exotic, therapeutic, self-actualising,

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<sup>1</sup> As Bourdieu (1984: 228) rightly argues in ‘*Distinction*’, “[b]ecause the appropriation of cultural products presupposes dispositions and competences which are not distributed universally (although they have the appearance of innateness), these products are subject to exclusive appropriation, material or symbolic, and, functioning as cultural capital (objectified or internalized), they yield a profit in distinction, proportionate to the rarity of the means required to appropriate them, and a profit in legitimacy, the profit par excellence, which consists in the fact of feeling justified in being (what one is), being what it is right to be”.

and self-transformative character of Asian cultural resources such as yoga. An assertion that, as we will see, substantially aligns with the neoliberal imperatives of individuals' self-governance through a calculated exercise of freedom, self-responsibility, and self-care. Naturally, this is not to claim that the totality of the middle-classes practice yoga but simply that the majority of contemporary yogis are either of middle-class origins or do share middle-class values, lifestyles, and worldviews, of which yoga has become a pivotal expression in the last few decades.

In order to avoid a naïve reading of or a taken-for-granted attitude towards the truth spoken by social actors, I attempt to present and discuss practitioners' narratives and biographical remarks in reference to broader sociocultural processes<sup>2</sup> (e.g., Mills 1959). This choice differentiates a critical approach to the study of religion (e.g., Altgals 2014a; Altglas and Wood 2018; Bourdieu 1977a; Guizzardi 1979; Wood and Altglas 2010; Wood and Bunn 2009) from certain strands of contemporary sociology that seems to unreflexively privilege the individuals and their narratives or claims of self-actualisation as the privileged locus of social significance for individuals' actions, practices, meanings attribution and worldviews.<sup>3</sup> This overemphasis on the “autonomy of individual lifestyles” (Berzano 2019) understood as the primary ground around which the contemporary religious field is organised comes at the expenses of a serious scrutiny into the collective, social origins of the practical and discursive universes mobilised by social actors in the attempt to make sense of their own life. On the contrary, this chapter attempts to contextualise practitioners' narratives within the broader ethos of the yoga field, practitioners' social origins (inherently middle-class) and pervasive sociocultural processes such as neoliberalism. I believe this to be a useful manner to satisfactory account for the taxing sociological issue of the structure-agency relationship giving space simultaneously: to practitioners' narratives, without dismissing their social and

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<sup>2</sup> As Wright Mills suggests (1959: 6), “[t]he sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two in society. That is its task and its promise”. The exploration of the continuities between the biographical and the historical – or macrosociological – is, together with a constant exercise of reflexivity (e.g., Bourdieu 2010; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) and a close engagement with the analytical and clarificatory potentials of theory (Wacquant 2013b), one of the key duties of the sociologist. Therefore, the inability to competently link micro and macro amounts to, according to this perspective, a failure of sociological depths.

<sup>3</sup> As Bourdieu (1977a: 79) rightly underlines: “[i]t is because subjects do not, strictly speaking, know what they are doing that what they do has more meaning than they know. The habitus is the universalizing mediation which causes an individual agent's practices, without either explicit reason or signifying intent, to be nonetheless “sensible” and “reasonable”. That part of practices which remains obscure in the eyes of their own producers is the aspect by which they are objectively adjusted to other practices and to the structures of which the principle of their production is itself the product”.

discursively constructed nature; and to the manners in which sociocultural processes such as the construction of the yoga field's ethos, social class formation and neoliberalism pervade and inscribe into specific social domains influencing discourses, practices, relationships and trajectories of action.

To account for practitioners' voices and experiences, I relied on a semi-structured, open-ended biographical interview method conducting 22 interviews for a total of 25 practitioners interviewed (more on this in the next section). Here, I aim to access social actors' learned identities as yoga practitioners as they are constructed over time through a close exploration, interpretation, and analysis of practitioners' narratives. As it will become increasingly clear in the following, the yogic habitus, that pervasive and all-encompassing orientation to the self, others, and the world hinted at in the previous chapter (see also Di Placido 2018) does not only guide practitioners' practice on the mat but also outside of it, pervading their narratives. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, it also represents a useful bridge between practitioners' narratives and a broader middle-class habitus which already predisposes practitioners to find in yoga a plausible path of self-cultivation that is substantially in line with the dispositions, values, and orientations that most practitioners already embody before their involvement with the practice.

Unfortunately, and for obvious reasons (primarily dictated by space concerns), I cannot discuss each practitioner's perspective in relation to all of the themes that will be discussed. Conversely, I am bound to synthesise, deconstruct, and reconstruct practitioners' narratives. In so doing, however, I have attempted to remain as faithful as possible to the structure and contents of the narratives gathered, trying to maintain the sense of diachronic development that spans from practitioners' backgrounds and first encounters with yoga, via the importance of the teacher-student relationship, to the processes of self-transformation undergone through the practice, and finally the impact of these transformations also outside of their practice on the mat. Therefore, the chapter is structured as follows: first, it introduces practitioners' backgrounds and their first approach to yoga; second, it presents a few lay definitions of what yoga is accounting for practitioners' perspectives and experiences; third, it inquires into the teacher-student relationship. It does so with a particular attention to the importance of the teacher, practitioners' direct involvement in teaching and the overlapping role of the teacher as a student; third, it presents practitioners' journeys of healing and self-discovery, with a focus on the physical, emotional/psychological, and spiritual self-transformative potentials of

the practice; and finally, it briefly summarises the main results of the chapter discussing them in relation to the continuum between yoga “on” and “outside” of the mat, expanding on the concept of yogic habitus.

## **2. Practitioners’ Backgrounds: Encountering Yoga**

This section discusses practitioners’ backgrounds and early encounters with the practice of yoga. It does so relying on 22 interviews for a total of 25 practitioners including voices and experiences gathered also outside of the boundaries of the Odaka Yoga community so as to offer a broader scope to the analyses at hand. Almost half of these practitioners (12) are actively teaching and practicing Odaka Yoga, the main school explored in the previous two chapters. Of these, 8 are part of the Milanese branch of the school where I conducted my ethnographic observations; 2 of the Japanese branch; and the remaining 2 are the school’s founders. The other 13 practitioners interviewed are actively teaching a variety of styles and traditions in Milan (6) and in Riverside, Southern California (7). All the practitioners interviewed are qualified yoga teachers with different degrees of experience: 5 are studio owners (2 in Italy, 2 in USA and 1 in Japan); 1 is the organiser of the Milan YogaFestival, one of the largest in Europe; 1 is a high profile member of the Italian Yoga Teachers Association (YANI); 20 are women and 5 men. The greatest majority are Caucasians (21) with a significant minority of other ethnicities (3 Asians and 1 Arabic). Their average age is 44 years old, with the youngest practitioner being 29 years old and the oldest 56 years old. The average time they devoted to practice is 15 years, with the longest engagement being 30 plus years and the shortest being 2 years.<sup>4</sup> Among the styles practiced and taught by the practitioners at the moment of the interviews figure: Odaka Yoga (12 practitioners); Hatha Yoga (5 practitioners); Iyengar Yoga (4 practitioners); Asthanga Yoga (2 practitioners); Trauma informed Yoga Therapy (1 practitioner); YogaFit (1 practitioner); Yoga Harmony (1 practitioner); Yoga for Kids (1 practitioner).

These practitioners are on average highly educated, with 6 holding a high school diploma (the lowest educational level reported); 17 a university degree (either a bachelor or a master); and 2 a PhD (the highest educational level reported). A further common trait is their current or previous employment in the “immaterial knowledge work sector”

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<sup>4</sup> Needless to say, in most cases there is an evident correlation between practitioners’ age and years of practice. For more information see table 1.

(Schnäbele 2013: 140) with 5 practitioners holding managerial positions in multinational, corporate businesses; 5 working in the administration or management of smaller scale business; 5 being holistic practitioners such as massage therapists; 4 teaching different physical activities, such as martial arts, fitness and pilates; 2 practicing and/or teaching arts (1 of which is also a university professor and 1 an holistic practitioner); 2 university professors; 1 television author for a political talk show; 1 fashion designer; 1 engineer; and finally, only 1 practitioner has a professional background in variety of small, “non-career oriented jobs”<sup>5</sup> although now is a studio owner. At the moment of the interview, 12 practitioners out 25 were employed or self-employed as full-time yoga teachers while the remaining 12 taught yoga as a second job. Furthermore, 20 practitioners out of the 25 interviewed had explicitly mentioned their previous involvement in a variety of physical activities such as dance, gymnastics, athletics, fitness, and other styles of yoga, thus confirming Lewis’s (2008) claim regarding the substantial relationship between practitioners’ cultural and physical capitals and yoga practice.<sup>6</sup> Overall, the practitioners’ sociodemographic constitution just discussed – although with notable exceptions – substantially adheres to the ideal-typical modern yogi profile already mapped by other studies (e.g., Lewis 2008; Markula 2014; Newcombe 2019; Strauss 2005) as being inherently composed by middle-class, middle-age, white women. A schematic account of practitioners’ biographical and sociocultural traits is reproduced in table 1.

Name/pseu donym	Age	Gender	Education	Profession	Nationality	Ethnicity	Years of practice	Style practiced	Previous physical capital
Roberto Ca	55	M	Missing information	Yoga teacher – founder of Odaka Yoga	Italian	Caucasian	30 plus	Odaka Yoga	Martial artist
Francesca ca	55	F	Economics and business studies, degree	Yoga teacher – founder of Odaka Yoga	Italian	Caucasian	30 plus	Odaka Yoga	Fitness instructor, martial artist

<sup>5</sup> For more details on this point see Note 7 Appendix One.

<sup>6</sup> Or again, as Bourdieu (1984: 212) emphasises in ‘*Distinction*’ discussing the relationship between different sports and social actors’ capitals, “[e]verything takes place as if the probability of taking up the different sports depended, within the limits defined by economic ( and cultural ) capital and spare time, on perception and assessment of the intrinsic and extrinsic profits of each sport in terms of the dispositions of the habitus, and more precisely, in terms of the relation to the body, which is one aspect of this”.

Bea	48	F	Accountant programmer diploma	Yoga teacher, Odaka Yoga Teacher Trainer – pilates instructor – studio owner	Italian	Caucasian	10	Odaka Yoga	Pilates instructor, athletics, skating, dynamic meditation
Lisa	40	F	Academy of fine arts, painting	Masseuse – yoga teacher – previously artist	Italian	Caucasian	15 plus	Odaka Yoga	Other styles of Yoga
Viola	28	F	Missing information	Family business, accountant	Italian	Caucasian	4	Odaka Yoga	Not specified
Maria	33	F	Missing information	Assistant manager in a multinational corporation in the hospitality sector – yoga teacher	Italian	Caucasian	5 ca.	Odaka Yoga	Running, boot camps
Desire	45 ca.	F	Missing information	Manager in a multinational corporation of the entertainment sector – yoga teacher	Italian	Caucasian	4 ca.	Odaka Yoga	Not specified
Giada	40	F	Design, master degree	Yoga teacher – previously fashion designer	Italian	Caucasian	2 ca.	Odaka Yoga	Gymnastics, dancing instructor, running, fitness, pre-birth course
Sofia	47	F	Missing information.	Yoga teacher – coordinator community for alcohol and drug rehab	Italian	Caucasian	30 plus	Odaka Yoga	Dancing instructor, other styles of yoga, meditation

Aurora	30	F	Accountant diploma	Accountant	Italian	Caucasian	7	Odaka Yoga	Other styles of yoga
Sakura	35 ca.	F	Missing information.	Yoga teacher, Odaka Yoga Teacher Trainer – Masseuse	Japanese	Asian (Japanese)	10	Odaka Yoga	Hatha Yoga
Eri	29	F	Degree in English Culture and Communication	Yoga Teacher, Odaka Yoga Teacher Trainer – studio owner	Japanese	Asian (Japanese)	11	Odaka Yoga	Classic ballet, athletics
Lea	50	F	Teacher school diploma	Yoga teacher – studio owner	Italian	Caucasian	20	Asthanga Yoga	Artistic skating, artistic skating instructor, jogging, aerobics, ex model
Gautama	35 ca.	M	Engineering, PhD in optical fibers	Yoga teacher – Engineer	Italian	Caucasian	12	Yoga Harmony	Sporty at agonistic level (not better specified), involvement with Ananda Marga
Daria	45 ca.	F	Foreign languages degree	Yoga Teacher – television programme author	Italian	Caucasian	10	Hatha Yoga	Classical dance, jujitsu, swimming
Marco	40ca .	M	Missing information.	Teachers' manager in a yoga studio – yoga teacher	Italian	Caucasian	3	Hatha Yoga	Sporty, not better specified
Gemma	55 ca.	F	Missing information.	MilanYoga Festival Organiser – manager	Italian	Caucasian	20 plus	Does not apply	Other styles of yoga
Ginevra	52.	F	Law, PhD in Rights of Antiquity	Yoga Teacher, Vice president	Italian	Caucasian	20 plus	Hatha Yoga	Swimming, gymnastic, fitness, tennis, athletics, fitness, horse



				YANI – University Professor					riding, apnea, savate, diving
Leonard	50 ca.	M	Physical Education	Yoga teacher, fitness instructor – studio owner	American	Caucasian	20 plus	Iyengar Yoga	Athletics, fitness
Marion	50 ca.	F	Missing information.	Yoga Teacher- studio owner	American	Caucasian	20 plus	Yoga kids	Not specified
Jane	50 ca.	F	Master in Physiology	Yoga Teacher	American	Caucasian	25 plus	Iyengar Yoga	Not specified
Louise	56	F	Missing information.	Yoga Teacher – University administrator	American/Bri tish	Caucasian	30 plus	Hatha Yoga	Active Birth System
Sarah	45 ca.	F	College, subject not specified	Yoga teacher	American	Caucasian	20 plus	YogaFit	Light jogging
Linda	36 ac.	F	Master in Business Administrati on (MBA), marketing	Yoga Teacher – previously manager	American	Asian (Filipino)	10	Yoga Therapy	Swimming, tennis, HIIT (high intensity interval training), indoor rhythm based cycling, performative arts
Isa	46 ca.	M	Master of Fine Arts (MFA)	Yoga Teacher – University Professor	American/Eg yptian	Arabic	15 plus	Hatha Yoga	Fitness, running, tennis, martial arts

**Table 1:** List of practitioners interviewed.

Let us now move to a closer exploration of practitioners’ backgrounds and first experiences with yoga through their own narrative accounts. Beatrice, studio owner and head teacher of the most important Milanese school of Odaka Yoga, recounts how she started to practice yoga. In so doing, she digs into her past underlining her pre-existing inclination – or predisposition – to the *listening/focusing disposition* cultivated by the practice well before her actual encounter with yoga.

Well, I started because I had just left meditation pretty abruptly and I knew that yoga was, we speak of some years ago, yoga was quite practiced but not very much, so I sensed it as a possible research [path] that essentially always interested me. I always say, I started to meditate at the Montessori school. At the Montessori school, primary school, there were broad spaces of silence. And some of the games you played were alone and listening [read pay attention to yourself]. The reading room where you went, you would go around it twice, at least, before picking up your book. I mean, I was educated to meditation. And so, I was looking for that.<sup>7</sup>

Beatrice was drawn to yoga as she “sensed it as a possible research [path] that essentially always interested” her. This interest, or inclination for introspection, was already cultivated in her childhood as she was “educated to meditation” at the primary Montessori school that she attended.<sup>8</sup> Obviously, this early experience where meditation was cultivated in the guise of spacious silences, independent games and by listening to herself, left profound traces in Beatrice, that years later found herself drawn to these qualities first via meditation and subsequently via yoga. In the following, Beatrice moves away from her personal story and elaborates on the reasons why many people are attracted to yoga in the first place:

Some people come to yoga because they seek a path. Many because they are stressed. And even without having clearly understood what yoga is, they know that they need it. Nowadays they know that there is a physical version and so more approachable. Today it works a lot by word of mouth, by fashion. It is reassuring for people that is a physical practice.<sup>9</sup>

Beatrice adds that many people come to yoga because they “seek a path”, as she did, while others do so because “they are stressed”. In this way Beatrice mentions two of the

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<sup>7</sup> Beatrice Morello, interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 16, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> In her discussion of the dissemination of yoga in German schools, Suzanne Augenstein (2013) underlines the important role that Montessori’s schools had in functioning as precursors, or early supporters, of yoga’s for kids. As she elaborates, in the context of discussing the cultivation of “concentration as a developmental goal”, “[i]t is hardly known whether Montessori in the development of her theory was inspired by observations in India. It is, however, certain that she wrote her main work during her stay in India 1939–1946. There are some interesting parallels between her interpretations and, conversely, core concepts of yoga philosophy. The latter includes virtually identical stages of development compared with Montessori’s steps towards the polarization of attention (and normalization), although the terms differ” (Augenstein 2013: 162).

<sup>9</sup> Beatrice Morello, interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 16, 2018.

main pulls towards practice: *spiritual search* and *stress reduction*. In this context, spiritual search can be defined as a stereotypical example of “self-spirituality” (Heelas 1996: 2) or “seeking spirituality” (Wuthnow 1998) where – within the legacy of long-standing processes of social and discursive construction of Asian practices and traditions as “exotic resources” palatable to middle-class, Western audiences – practitioners’ “private symbolism” (Hanegraaff 1996: 524, 1999) is mobilised in the attempt to self-reflexively – that is individually – tailor a personal path towards the discovery of one’s own true self. Similarly, stress reduction is a particular category of health-based interventions and practices – usually closely associated with complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) (e.g., Balboni and Peteet 2017; Brosnan, Vuolanto and Brodin Danell 2018; Timmins and Caldeira 2019) and the holistic milieu – where practitioners are promised balance, relaxation and – perhaps most importantly – the restoration of their body-mind unity through a dedication to psychosomatic techniques such as yoga (e.g., De Michelis 2004: 187; Kabat-Zinn 1990; Singleton 2005, 2013). Nonetheless, even when practitioners do not approach the practice as a spiritual search but as a stress reduction technique they seem to have a degree of awareness of the transformative potentials of yoga as practitioners “know that they need it”. Beatrice further clarifies how prospective practitioners “know that there is a physical version” of yoga “and so more approachable” which is mostly advertised “by word of mouth, by fashion”, thus testifying to the importance of social networks and social capital in the dissemination of and access to yoga, as we will shortly see. Finally, Beatrice concludes remarking that the contemporary physical framing of yoga “is reassuring for people”. This is so for two reasons: first, a substantially sanitised yoga, that is, a practice devoid of religious and esoteric elements – at least on the surface – is more luckily to be appealing to a broader portion of the population<sup>10</sup> (e.g., De Michelis 2004; Jain 2014a; Newcombe 2019); second, as we have seen in discussing practitioners’ backgrounds, most practitioners have extensive experience with a variety of physical practices. Therefore, they have already a propensity to engage in physical exercises of different sort. It is the malleability of yoga, as Jain (2012b) poignantly argues, that grants practitioners the chance to relate to it as a spiritual search, a health-based practice, and a form of fitness – as much as any combination of

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<sup>10</sup> For more details on this point see Note 8 Appendix One.

these – further testifying to my analysis of the yoga field as a hybrid field (see Chapter Three).

Lisa, another key practitioner and teacher of the Milanese branch of Odaka Yoga, talks about her long-standing engagement and experience with yoga since her teen years and her aversion for other physical activities. She expresses how such an early exposure to the “core dispositions” (Brown and Jennings 2013) transmitted and embodied in her yoga classes made it almost impossible for her to develop an interest for any other physical activity that, in fact, she considered too demanding and too competitive and as such out of touch with her cultured sensitivities:

I started as a girl. My mother took me there [to yoga] that I was 11 or 12 years old, I don't remember. She took me there after work. And so, we have done 10 years of yoga together, together with my mum and in fact I consider it a big gift from her in some way. And so yes, I practiced traditional Hatha Yoga for 10 years with my mother and a very good teacher that deepened alignments and listening sooo much. And having started so young I did not manage to do any other sport, I mean any!...let me say that I didn't really like the other sports that my father tried to make me do, like athletic, because having the imprinting of a yoga class where you don't force, align, breath and if it hurts you let it go, all the things related to sport where too demanding for me, I mean I don't know, it felt very tight. And so much competition, who runs first, who comes first...maybe if I had not met yoga, I would have made sense of this type of discourse. But the problem of having had this imprinting about listening and non-competitiveness is that it destroyed all the years to come. Therefore, I never managed to do anything else. And so, I practiced back then, when I was a girl, then I stopped for a while between my 20s and my 30s and then I started in a much more depended manner from my 30s on.<sup>11</sup>

This extract further clarifies the importance of early developed dispositions in bringing practitioners closer to the practice of yoga, that is, their “taste” for it, defined as “manifested preferences” or “the practical affirmation of an inevitable difference” (Bourdieu 1984: 56). Lisa mentions twice how her first ten years of practice provided and “imprinting”, “where you don't force, align, breath and if it hurts you let it go”, an

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<sup>11</sup> Lisa [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, January 8, 2019.

“imprinting” about “listening and non-competitiveness”. Following Bourdieu, we can say that Lisa embodied a specific yogic habitus since a young age and as a consequence her “trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel and act in determinant ways” (Wacquant 2006: 316) prevented her to enjoy and even fully understand the world of sports – and its rules of the game – that her father tried to introduce to her. In other words, she never developed a taste for any physical activity beside yoga. But there is more to this fragment. In fact, it also clearly points out the relevance of practitioners’ “social capital” (e.g., Bourdieu 1986) in approaching the practice. This is a common denominator, across geographies and biographical trajectories. For example, Beatrice and Daria, an experienced Hatha Yoga teacher and talk show author active in Milan, begun to practice yoga because their friends were already practicing;<sup>12</sup> Maria, a newly trained Odaka Yoga teacher, started because her boss gave her a 10 entrances voucher to Beatrice’ studio in Milan;<sup>13</sup> while Isa, the yoga teacher of a free Hatha Yoga course that I attended for six months during my visiting abroad at the University of California Riverside (UCR), started to practice because his wife suggested him to do so.<sup>14</sup> In other words, parenting, friendship, working and marital relationships signified for many practitioners the first “causal” encounter with yoga. Encounter that, however, was destined to morph into a long-lasting engagement with the practice, to the point that all these practitioners decided to pursue one or more teacher training courses and also begun to actively teach yoga.

For others, as already hinted at by Beatrice’s introductory narrative, the first encounter with yoga is more explicitly dictated by health concerns, whether physical or psychological.<sup>15</sup> For instance, Jane, one of the most prominent yoga teachers active in Riverside, states that the chief motivation behind people’s approach to yoga “is usually a physical issue. It’s a back injury, or it’s a knee, or, yeah, some people come to it to relieve stress”;<sup>16</sup> while Isa, comments that “a lot of people start almost any kind of practice like this because they’re emm, you know, recognising some kind of suffering, right. Mental, physical, and so that’s the common thing”.<sup>17</sup> Giada, a newly trained Odaka Yoga teacher of the Milanese branch of the school, elaborates on these points stating that:

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<sup>12</sup> For more details on this point see Note 9 Appendix One.

<sup>13</sup> For more details on this point see Note 10 Appendix One.

<sup>14</sup> For more details on this point see Note 11 Appendix One.

<sup>15</sup> For more details on this point see Note 12 Appendix One.

<sup>16</sup> Jane [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, Riverside, California, July 17, 2019.

<sup>17</sup> Isa [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, Riverside, California, February 21, 2019.

...the greatest majority of those that approach yoga has something to heal...many are convinced that it does very well. Yes, maybe there is something inherently therapeutic in yoga, yes, that in its positive take becomes change but anyway is a sort of self-healing, a self-cure. Maybe you don't feel so bad to go to the doctor, you are well-ish, bad-ish slash well-ish and you want to feel good what a hell, right? You try it and see that it does you good and gives you wellbeing.<sup>18</sup>

As Giada states “the greatest majority of those that approach yoga has something to heal”. This view, as valuable as it could be, is not only her personal take but is confirmed by a variety of previous studies (e.g., Lewis 2008; Newcombe 2005: 37; Newcombe 2019; Park's et al., 2016). However, as we learn from Giada, yoga is not merely considered in therapeutic terms but as offering a very specific form of healing, that is “self-healing” and “self-cure”, thus hinting at the magical or quasi-magical powers of the practice.<sup>19</sup> It is following evidences such as this one that yoga can be considered as a poignant example of what Koch (2015: 453) addresses as “magical self-care”, that is, a particular form of self-care offered by alternative healing disciplines such as yoga, where:

the search for authenticity [of the self] is an empowerment and a burden to be alleviated by appealing to a formation on the borderline between spiritual healing, holistic curing, indigenous traditions, and popularized insights into placebo, psychosomatics, and brain functioning.

In other words, practitioners who turn to yoga – or other alternative healing modalities – expose themselves to a form of self-cultivation that is hardly merely definable in purely therapeutic or spiritual terms. On the contrary, the self-care granted by yoga, is, in the light of the hybrid nature of the yoga field, inherently multifaceted.

Among practitioners' motivations to practice figure also mere curiosity and chance.<sup>20</sup> This is testified by Viola, a newly trained Odaka Yoga teacher of the Milanese school, as she argues:

One day I woke up and I thought it would have been nice to do something new, a bit outside of my comfort zone and I thought to try out yoga. So, I looked up on google for a school nearby my house, I found this one, and I

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<sup>18</sup> Giada [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 22, 2018.

<sup>19</sup> For a more in-dept discussion of the relationships between yoga and magic in a variety of contexts see Alter (2005); Newcombe (2013); Urban (2005, 2012); and Jacobsen (2011).

<sup>20</sup> For more details on this point see Note 13 Appendix One.

went for a trial lessons with Bea. It was only the two of us, a private lesson, and nothing, I fell in love with Bea and I stayed there.<sup>21</sup>

Naturally, curiosity is also socially situated – as much as one’s chances to stumble into yoga are – and as such is the fruit a certain predisposition to yoga whether in the guise of its exoticism, physicality or a pragmatic concern with health and stress management. In fact, as Viola continues: “I didn’t see it only as a physical exercise as many people do, I think, but it has really been a work on myself”,<sup>22</sup> thus underlining the self-actualising – if not therapeutic – value that the practice has for her.

Summarising, we can state that practitioners are primarily drawn to yoga for three main sets of reasons: spiritual, health-enhancing, and physical. Their access to the practice is usually informed by a certain “taste” for yoga – again in either spiritual, therapeutic, and physical terms – and the possession of certain forms of capital (e.g., social, economic, cultural, physical). Let us now move to a closer exploration of practitioners’ professional trajectories and how they relate to the practice of yoga.

## **2.2. *The “Symbiotic Relationship” Between New Middle-Class Occupations and Yoga***

In this sub-section, I attempt to spell out further the “symbiotic relationship” (Wacquant 2004) that occurs between new middle-class occupations – largely unfolding within the immaterial knowledge work sector – and the core dispositions cultivated in yoga practice. Linda is the yoga teacher of the eight weeks yoga therapy programme offered by the Care Office of UCR that I attended during my period of studies abroad, parallel to Isa’s free classes. In the following fragment, Linda offers an overview on how she arrived to practice yoga:

So, then I finished with the business degree, I was focused on marketing...for almost 10 years I had a full corporate career, a corporate climb the ladder, getting promoted, things like that. But then I felt the weight of, you know, just regular work, like everyone is always “Work harder, work harder, make more money”, they are always trying to entitle you with a promotion or more money, but you find that you get really tired and like how much more, you

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<sup>21</sup> Viola [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, January 8, 2019.

<sup>22</sup> Viola [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, January 8, 2019.

know, the more responsibility the more money you make, the more responsibility you have, the more secure your job is...I had several job, my first job was like, really, really wonderful...They, we sold the company so I got laid off so I had to go in interviews again. I had to find a new job and I ended up working as a contractor, still working in marketing, I worked as a contractor for another company...It was the most stressful job I ever had. I remember them having zero boundaries, they would email you at any time at night and expect that you replied. That's the company!...I remember I was on vacation, I told them, I said: "Once a year I go to visit my family, I visit my dad I visit my sisters"...But they were so at me that they were like "You must be on this conference call, you must be on all of it". I ended up being in Central Park [New York] and I had to run back to my hotel and be on a conference call for two hours. They have no boundaries, they have no respect for your time, or you, "I am on vacation! Don't pay me! I don't want to be working right now, I am on family time". And it was during that time, where I was really, really stressed out, working for them, then yoga became more than just exercise for me.<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, Maria, mentions how her work as assistant manager of the CEO of a multinational corporation of the hospitality sector is:

very frenetic, an everyday life where I always have to be focused, anticipate what is needed, go always beyond, everything [is] always a race, a race to try to arrive first right?! Also, before [encountering yoga] I experienced all these things with some anxiety, so to say, because I felt under pressure. With time I started to slow down and to have a sort of detachment between myself and what happened to me, I don't know how to explain it.<sup>24</sup>

Desire, again another Odaka Yoga teacher of the Milanese branch of the school, describes yoga as a tool to mitigate her rather stressful position as manager of the Italian section of a very well-known international corporation in the entertainment industry:

I am a bit overloaded, as you say it...this is a bit the dark side of this job. I am always among people, always a lot of meetings. Also, we are a rather

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<sup>23</sup> Linda [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, Riverside, California, April 9, 2019.

<sup>24</sup> Maria [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 22, 2018.



bureaucratic and political enterprise because we are a lot of people and so it is a rather complicated machine, we are always in meetings, things, London, Paris, I travel quite a lot...yoga helps you, it teaches you to look within to take some time for yourself, so it is quite in opposition to what I do. And so, I had already the need to find something to balance [my working life] and it found an open door inside Odaka.<sup>25</sup>

These types of narratives, where practitioners juxtapose a stressful working career with the balancing benefits of their yoga practice is a fairly common trait of an emerging new middle-class whose members are particularly exposed to the stresses of modern urban living (e.g., De Michelis 2004: 249-250) and the flexibility demands that characterise post-fordist, neoliberal economies (e.g., Schnäbele 2010, 2013). But what lies behind these narratives? I contend that what Linda, Maria, and Desire tell us in these extracts is twofold: on the one hand, their “corporate climb the ladder”, “frenetic” and “overloaded” careers are framed “in opposition” to the relaxing practice of yoga that teaches you “to slow down” and “to look within to take some time for yourself”. On the other hand, after a closer scrutiny it appears clear how their managerial positions do not only require them to seek something that could “balance” their life or help them gain some distance from the working environment. But paradoxically, it is exactly their careers that function also as a sort of preparation and conditioning for them to embrace the core dispositions that characterise the practice of yoga on the mat. Let me unpack this important point in some more details.

Linda is explicit about the flexibility that she had to exercise both in finding another job when she got laid off and in facing the extremely invasive demands of her new career. For instance, she was expected to reply to emails received during the night and to sacrifice her own “vacation” – or “family time” – as she was asked by her company to leave everything behind to participate in a conference call. Put differently, Linda cultivated a *flowing/fluid disposition* already before her discovery of yoga as she was constantly in need to accommodate the unexpected requests of her company as much as the uncertainty of the labor market. This is not to say that the flowing/fluid disposition promoted and required in corporate business – as much as in larger sections of the labor market – for instance, is exactly the same that the one transmitted and cultivated on the mat. It would

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<sup>25</sup> Desire [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 10, 2018.

be nonsensical to argue so. However, this flowing/fluid disposition – as much as the other core dispositions here discussed – should be understood, following Bourdieu, as a “transposable disposition”, that is, “a set of perceptual and evaluative schemes that are available for general application” (Bourdieu 1984: 28, 170). In this way, it is possible to appreciate the continuity that occurs between specific dispositions, as they are simultaneously cultivated on the mat and in the working life of middle-class practitioners.

Furthermore, Maria makes clear how in her “frenetic” everyday life she has to “be [always] focused”. In other words, her work is already predisposing her to a specific type of *focusing/listening disposition* where she has to be focused on what comes next, “anticipate what is needed, go always beyond” and possibly attend to what the CEO asks her to do. Again, the focusing/listening disposition cultivated by an assistant manager of a multinational corporation is not identical to the one cultivated on the mat as the “techniques” or “dispositifs” at play in these two contexts are rather dissimilar. Nonetheless, this disposition – again understood as a transposable disposition – translates into her yoga practice with a simple redefinition of the focus of her attention. At work she has to be focused on the demands of her job and her boss’ requests – and possibly be always future directed – while on the mat she is guided to focus on her own experiences, and stay in the “here and now”. But whether at work or on the mat, it is focused attention that is needed. Moreover, jobs as demanding as those mentioned by Linda, Maria, and Desire, seem to also implicitly predispose practitioners to the cultivation of a certain *practical/ascetic disposition* framed in terms of privileging the importance of a constant work on oneself through a dedicated engagement with the practice. Following this line of reasoning we may begin to understand how the extremely demanding – if not totalising – working environment of these modern yoga practitioners already equip them with a taste for hard work, a hard work that they then are going to reproduce and manifest on the yoga mat.

Slightly reframing the analysis at hand we can say that the economic field – of course as much as the cultural – predisposes middle-class practitioners to develop a taste for yoga through the cultivation of a focusing/listening (e.g., be focused on work and listen to the superiors), flowing/fluid (e.g., navigate the flexibility demands of the working environment and be open to the unexpected) and practical/ascetic (e.g., develop a strong working ethics based on high performativity) dispositions. A taste that is also instrumental to practitioners’ ability to sustain the excessive pressure and totalising

demands of their working life. In fact, as Daria underlines: “I have the sensation that the practice centers me, makes me more focused and in some way also more efficient in the things that I have to do”.<sup>26</sup>

These reflections confirm and align with what stated by others regarding the increasing commodification of Asian religious and spiritual resources as palatable products for Western middle-classes and their self-actualising “craze” (e.g., Altglas 2014a; Carrette and King 2005; Jain 2014a, 2020) as much as their substantial self-disciplining role (e.g., Godrej 2017; Lea, 2009; Lea, Philo and Cadman 2016; Schnäbele 2010, 2013; Smith and Atencio 2017). Building from the insights provided by these studies, the present analysis also provides a rationale to understand how these resources may become palatable – at a dispositional level, that is, at a pre-conscious, embodied and structuring level – in the first place and as a consequence how they may be mobilised as tools for self-management, self-control, and self-disciplining. According to the position presented here, this appears to be the case largely in the light of the “symbiotic relationship” that occurs between the demands for focus, flexibility, and dedication that characterise the knowledge-based economy and the core dispositions cultivated through postural yoga. Of course, this symbiotic relationship – and the ambivalences that it implies – is a potential site of conflict between yoga’s liberatory potentials and its self-disciplining and pacifying features (e.g., Godrej 2017; Lea, 2009; Lea, Philo and Cadman 2016; Smith and Atencio 2017) as we will explore in some more details while discussing practitioners’ processes of self-transformation.

Coming back to practitioners’ voices, this scenario is also aptly captured by Beatrice, as she discusses yoga’s astonishing diffusion as largely related to its pacifying features<sup>27</sup> thus coloring the narratives presented so far with a certain critical – if not political – tone:

But I believe that the pacifying power that yoga has is one of the reasons why it is so widespread. And it is not healthy, it is not healthy even for our society. Because sometimes you need to fight. That it is passive resistance or fighting for something, there is the need of it. It is called evolutionary force and if we extinguish it completely and we accept all that comes, it’s no good...I give you an example of the pacifying power but also [of the] focusing [power of yoga]. When I, the last few years that I worked, I was doing negotiations and

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<sup>26</sup> Daria [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 10, 2017.

<sup>27</sup> For more details on this point see Note 14 Appendix One.

so it was a demanding job, emotionally, because I received pressure from the client, pressure from the internal sellers, and so it was a very stressful job from the point of view of what was asked to me. I clearly remember that at some point they would ask me “But who are you?” because I did not get mad any longer while before I did and took things at heart. I had a mental clarity that surprised me because I was not structured by sentimentalisms any longer. I mean, when you are in the flow sentimentalism vanishes a lot. Also at work. And so, I was very lucid in every scope. And then I developed an attachment to the feeling of well-being...and so now I started to work with more introspection towards emotions otherwise you end up working on pacifying [yourself].<sup>28</sup>

Beatrice’s critical reflection is particularly instructive as it elucidates some of the ambivalences intrinsic in the contemporary dissemination and explosive diffusion of yoga: the “pacifying power of yoga” signifies that practitioners cultivate an attitude of detachment and acceptance of whatever happens to them, thus being subjected to a specific declination of “docile bodies” (Foucault 1977). According to Foucault docile bodies are the outcome of continuous and uninterrupted exposure to “processes which subject our bodies, govern our gestures, dictate our behaviours etc.” (Foucault 1980: 97), or in other words to that facet of power implicit in disciplinary technologies implemented to control, dominate, and normalise individuals (Foucault 1977). Moreover, these docile bodies are regulated by a rationale that connects control, or docility, with utility (Foucault 1977: 137). Therefore, in embodying a specific declination of the docile body, yoga practitioners are not merely subjected to specific disciplinary technologies of control – or more precisely of self-control – but are also substantially framed as economic subjects whose actions ought to be primarily directed by the economic scopes of efficiency, productivity, and high work-related performances. It is exactly for this reason, often obscured by yoga’s health benefits and stress reduction promises, that yoga is particularly popular among those sections of the population engaged in demanding working environments, such as the new middle-classes.

In this section, I have preliminarily ascertained the middle-class background of the practitioners interviewed and some of the manners in which they arrived to the practice

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<sup>28</sup> Beatrice Morello, interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 16, 2019.

in the first place. In the next section, in turn, I will explore what are the meanings that practitioners ascribe to their practice of yoga.

### 3. What is Yoga? Unpacking Lay Theorising

The fragments proposed in this section are largely derived from practitioners' responses to my direct question "What is yoga for you?". They cover a variety of interpretative positions regarding the aims and the essence of yoga and they are largely framed around three macro practical-discursive universes, or categories: first, *health* and *wellbeing*; second, *spirituality* and *ethics* (often with explicit reference to Patañjali's 'Yogasūtras'); and third, and to a lesser degree, *fitness* and *physical exercise*. Of course, these categories are hardly mutually exclusive: usually a single practitioner's understanding of yoga oscillates in between different registers, that is, is *hybrid* in nature. This seems to be the case primarily on the ground of the multifaceted, malleable, and holistic features of yoga and of the yoga field as a "hybrid field" (Pedrini, Brown and Aimini 2020) where fitness/leisure, therapeutic/medical and spiritual/religious registers are simultaneously mobilised in the constitution of its specific *ethos*. As Roberto, one of the founders of Odaka Yoga, explains "[y]oga is considered the holistic discipline for excellence. It offers that overall harmony that once rediscovered, reharmonised, works at all levels. Mental, emotional, physical, subtle, spiritual"<sup>29</sup>. Here, the reference to the subtle body model is what grants yoga its status as "holistic discipline for excellence" with its ability to offer "that overall harmony" that "works at all levels".<sup>30</sup> In other words, being an holistic discipline whose central rationale is the substantial permeability between the physical, the psychological, the emotional, the energetic and the spiritual layers of one's own being, yoga is well versed in accommodating a variety of interpretations that privilege, in turn, one of these layers or a selective combination of them. For instance, according to Lisa, "the essence of yoga is the practice",<sup>31</sup> or as she continues, "the physical plane". However, this is only one of the facets of yoga. As she elaborates:

From the physical plane, maybe, something else comes. But only if you go through a physical sensation of openness, of openness and listening. Because it is not that one starts already willing to open up, but if you are willing to

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<sup>29</sup> Roberto Milletti and Francesca Cassia, interview by author, audio recording, online interview, May 22, 2019.

<sup>30</sup> For more details on this point see Note 15 Appendix One.

<sup>31</sup> For more details on this point see Note 16 Appendix One.

listen to the closures and the limits it is already the beginning of a certain openness, I think. Then, eventually the body gives way, slowly, or fast, that depends on your physicality. But the important thing is to listen to your limits.<sup>32</sup>

Again, Lisa implicitly refers to the subtle body model, underlying that yoga unavoidably starts out “from the physical plane” eventually leading to a deeper process of engagement with the practice which, nonetheless, happens “only if you go through a physical sensation of openness, of openness and listening” of one’s own “closures and limits”.<sup>33</sup> In so doing, she evokes the importance of a *focusing/listening disposition* in functioning as a means to the cultivation of yoga’s introspective qualities.

Desire reiterates the hybrid nature of yoga as she describes how yoga is first and foremost an attempt to carve out time for herself:

Yoga is to me time for myself, quality time for me, focused on me as a person. As such, it is a moment where I think about how I am, how I am relating to others, how I am living. And also, it is a moment of energetic recharge. Even if I am tired, even if I am wrecked, I always try do so [some yoga] because I know that I draw from it a physical and mental benefit. Because you let everything go and you start in another way.<sup>34</sup>

Following this extract, the hybrid, or multifaceted nature of yoga becomes even more evident as Desire lists a series of elements that are foundational in her understanding and lived experience of yoga. First of all, she considers yoga as a much needed space for herself – probably also as a consequence of the her demanding managerial position – which nonetheless functions also as a self-reflexive tool to clarify her orientation and self-conduct towards herself, others and her broader life; as “a moment of energetic recharge” which grants “a physical and mental benefit”; and finally, as the chance to “let everything go” and “start in another way”.

For Linda, in turn, “yoga is a healing modality” thus evoking the therapeutic potentials of the practice as also echoed by other practitioner: for example, Beatrice

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<sup>32</sup> Lisa [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, January 8, 2019.

<sup>33</sup> For more details on this point see Note 17 Appendix One.

<sup>34</sup> Desire [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 10, 2018.

underlines that “yoga is this, wellbeing”;<sup>35</sup> while Sofia<sup>36</sup> mentions that “surely yoga is therapy”.<sup>37</sup> However, Linda stresses how the discovery of yoga’s therapeutic potentials was not what attracted her to the practice in the first place, thus underlying the discrepancy that at times happens between practitioners’ motivations to take on the practice and their subsequent decisions to deepen it, as also testified by previous research (e.g., Park et al., 2016):

I seriously just stumbled upon it, I didn’t seek it out, like “I would like to heal, I am here for my yoga class”, I did not see it that way. I came cause I wanted, I wanted the yoga body. I wanted to look skinny and dandy.<sup>38</sup>

For most practitioners, yoga, besides being framed in therapeutic terms, is presented either as an ethical path of self-conduct or as a spiritual path, despite the different motivations that practitioners’ may have had in approaching the practice in the first place<sup>39</sup>. For example, Sofia mentions that “yoga is a philosophy of life”, “to grow, to have a wiser stance in life as years go by. For me yoga is this”;<sup>40</sup> Aurora echoes this position saying that “yoga is awareness...yoga is a strong personal growth that not everybody does”;<sup>41</sup> Sarah that “yoga is a way of living”;<sup>42</sup> and Viola that is “a work on myself”;<sup>43</sup> while for Beatrice “yoga is an experience for the soul”, or as she elaborates, “yoga is exactly the possibility to seek. And to do this as a job is really a fantastic opportunity”.<sup>44</sup> Lisa, partially overlaps with some of these claims as she elaborates on her stance on what yoga is to her:

Yoga is, in some way, to not betray your essence. I mean, it is not that I know how I am, I know what I don’t like and so to find out what I like is more complicated, let alone the so called meaning of life! But let us begin to get rid of what makes me feel enslaved, not of somebody, but of something...the idea is to be listening, this is yoga.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Beatrice Morello, interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 16, 2019.

<sup>36</sup> Sofia [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 20, 2018.

<sup>37</sup> For more details on this point see Note 18 Appendix One.

<sup>38</sup> Linda [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, Riverside California, April 9, 2019.

<sup>39</sup> For more details on this point see Note 19 Appendix One.

<sup>40</sup> Sofia [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 20, 2018.

<sup>41</sup> Aurora [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 17, 2018.

<sup>42</sup> Sarah [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, Riverside, California, July 8, 2019.

<sup>43</sup> Viola [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, January 8, 2019.

<sup>44</sup> Beatrice Morello, interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 16, 2019.

<sup>45</sup> Lisa [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, January 8, 2019.

Lisa points out that yoga is “to not betray your essence”, that is, “to get rid of what makes me feel enslaved”. Again, the means to do so is to listen to one’s own self, or following the analysis proposed in the previous pages, the cultivation of a *focusing/listening disposition* that grants practitioners a certain ability to inquire into and discern how they feel and what they desire, if not who they are. The centrality of practitioners’ *self* – and its discovery, care, management and cultivation – is here presented in very clear terms.<sup>46</sup> Yoga, through its encouragement to focus and listen to oneself, to be fluid and flexible and to engage in constant practice, becomes a self-actualising tool able to compete with – if not replace – the promises of fields as different as “New Age religions” (e.g., Hanegraaff 1996, 1999; Heelas 1996, 2008) and “contemporary spiritualities” (Palmisano and Pannofino 2021), “therapy culture” (Furedi 2004; Illouz 2008) and “fitness culture” (Sassatelli 1999, 2000, 2002, 2014), from which it borrows, reproduces and elaborates on important parts.

Gautama, a yoga teacher active in Milan, provides a relatively concise but clear exposé of what yoga is if understood through the lenses of Patañjali’s Ashtangayoga, the doctrine of the eight limbs discussed in his ‘*Yogasūtras*’, “the bible” of contemporary modern yoga practitioners, especially in styles such as Iyengar Yoga and Ashtanga Yoga:

Yoga is substantially neither a religion nor a philosophy of life, but not even merely postures. They are precepts for life, and I want to present them to you as I want to show you the different stages of yoga...the stages of yoga are fundamentally eight. We always focus on the most basic ones, *āsana* and meditation...but they are yama, nyama, āsana, prānāyāma, pratyāhāra, dhāraṇā, dhyāna and samādhi. Yama, that is the first commandment, a bit like Moses’ Laws, says: attention, non-violence, non-falsehood, non-stealing. Second precept [nyama]: observances, purifying, containment, dedication, and focus. Third: āsana, postures and control of the physical body. Fourth: breathing, prānāyāma. Fifth: pratyāhāra, isolation from everything. [Sixth] Dhāraṇā: concentration. [Seventh] Dhyāna: meditation. [Eighth] Samādhi: superconsciousness. What does this mean? That we usually see yoga as āsana and meditation and neglect all this part of life [conduct].<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> For more details on this point see Note 20 Appendix One.

<sup>47</sup> Gautama [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, January 21, 2018.



After this “scholastic” reading of Patañjali’s ‘*Yogasūtras*’ Gautama elaborates on each one of the eight limbs of yoga providing a series of examples that is worth mentioning to fully understand the pervasive role of yoga in organising practitioners’ life:

If I do not judge you because you have a pigtail or I do not judge you because you have a certain age and are still going to university, or I do not judge you because you dress in a certain way, I am already practicing yoga. I am applying the precept of yama, the first stage. If I care about my physique, eat well, go to toilet regularly, I shower, I do not act violently externally, I am applying the second principle that is niyama. Yama is a suffix that means first of all control. Then, besides purifying the physical body I [also] need to stretch it, open it, strengthen it, I need to create a sort of more stable basal metabolism, and so I do āsanas. But the purpose of āsanas is not to do physical exercise but to improve the endocrine system, the lymphatic system. Many postures of torsion, many postures of elongation, in reality go to touch all the part of the thyroids and parathyroids but also the adrenal glands. And so, they help you, once more, to better your basal metabolism. But mostly they maintain a calm mind that together with breathing, that is the stage of prānāyāma, brings you to calm the mind and therefore to focus, or better, to isolate yourself, pratyāhāra, fifth stage, and then to center, focus on one point, dhāraṇā. And then to meditate, dhyāna ...I told you Paramapuruṣa, meditation, cosmic consciousness, let us translate them in expansion of consciousness, Paramapuruṣa, cosmic consciousness. And let us exchange meditation with meditation in action and so being present in the action in what I do, that’s it. The last stage is samādhi, superconsciousness. But what is the superconsciousness? It is nothing but the realisation of love. And do you know what is love? Once again, the prefix a, [and] mors [love is a-more in Italian] means death, [love is] the opposite of death. And so, love makes you alive and brings you to enforce positive actions. That’s it. All this, contextualised in a Western context, is a philosophy and not a religion.<sup>48</sup>

Gautama’s narrative remarks are a poignant examples of the flexibility of interpretation that a text such as Patañjali’s ‘*Yogasūtras*’ offers to contemporary practitioners: on the

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<sup>48</sup> Gautama [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, January 21, 2018.

one hand, it legitimises their commitments with the yoga path within the framework of an ancient, Indian tradition, that is, an exotic resource guarantor of authority and authenticity; on the other hand, it does so offering a rationale for self-care, self-conduct and self-actualisation that substantially matches practitioners' middle-class general dispositions as much as the neoliberal ethos of contemporary society. Yoga is then here a means for the construction of a personal moral universe, or again borrowing from Hanegraaff (1996, 1999), it simultaneously functions as a personal reinterpretation of “collective symbolism” – that is the symbolic universe shared by a certain tradition – and also as one of the elements that practitioners may mobilise in the construction of their own “private symbolism”. In other words, the ‘*Yogasūtras*’ is not only the “bible of yoga” but also a handbook for the care and cultivation of the “neoliberal self” (McGuigan 2014), although as we will see in the next section, this linear understanding is far too simplistic and oblivious of practitioners' self-transformative experiences.

To further underline the interpretative freedom and the flexibility offered by yoga is its framing as “a tool”. As Beatrice says, “yoga is a tool”,<sup>49</sup> echoed by Sofia, “yoga is surely a very powerful tool, but it is not the only one”.<sup>50</sup> Linda elaborates on this point discussing the “autonomy” of interpretation that yoga grants to its practitioners:

There is so much autonomy in the practice of yoga because it relies on you to apply the practice, see what it does for you and then decide “Does this fit me or does not fit me? Will I keep it, or will I leave it?”. You are not meant to keep all of the practices, not every practice will resonate, and that's wonderful, because [yoga] gives you a lot of choices, because not everything is gonna resonate. There is not one size fits all because we are all so different, we all have different backgrounds, we all have different upbringings, childhood experiences that have shaped us into who we are today and how could work one way for everyone? How could that be?<sup>51</sup>

Here, yoga is substantially inscribed by Linda within the “pick and choose logic” that dictates the social organisation of the New Age (e.g., Heelas 1996, 2008; Hanegraaff 1996, 1998, 1999) and “contemporary spiritualities” (Pannofino and Palmisano 2021),

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<sup>49</sup> Beatrice Morello, interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 16, 2018.

<sup>50</sup> Sofia [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 20, 2018.

<sup>51</sup> Linda [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, Riverside, California, April 9, 2019. For more details on this point see Note 21 Appendix One.

and their underlying “logics of bricolage” (Altglass 2014a, 2014b). More specifically, and contrary to the subjectivist turn of the contemporary sociology of religion, bricolage does not merely refer to individuals’ ability to freely choose elements from different spiritual/religious paths and reassemble them as they are pleased, in the attempt to independently construct one’s own privatised religion. Conversely, bricolage refers to one of the foundational practical-discursive universes through which spiritual and religious resources, are, structurally, socially, and discursively constructed in contemporary societies (Altglass 2014a, 2014b). Naturally, yoga is not immune to these processes of bricolage, whether in its micro-sociological or macro-sociological interpretations, as this thesis repeatedly underlines.

However, not all the practitioners interviewed agree on a depiction of yoga as a flexible tool that could be freely used to achieve what one desires. On the contrary, Lea states that:

yoga is a tool but is never an end in itself. If you practice it for achieving your own goals, it doesn’t work. Yoga is a tool that becomes something that will give fruits that are not those that you try to achieve practicing yoga, I can’t explain myself. I mean “I do this, so I reach there”. No! You engage with a discourse [yoga] and then life will give its fruits, right? I mean, this is the beautiful thing.<sup>52</sup>

These are important remarks for at least two reasons: first, as already underlined, the framing of yoga as a tool means that yoga is something that can be freely interpreted by practitioners and appropriated to achieve different aims, whether in terms of physical, emotional and/or spiritual transformations, for instance. Of course, an understanding of the yoga field as a hybrid field testifies to this type of reading. Second, following Lea’s narrative, she is implicitly referring to the agentic power of *prana* mentioned in Chapter Five. This agentic power – and the alternative conceptions of agency and subjectivity that it manifests – reconceptualises practitioners’ own intentionality as irrelevant while it posits the importance of nature’s innate intelligence (*prana, ki*) as the organising principle of reality. In this second reading, yoga becomes a tool in the hands of nature’s own evolutionary trajectories – not to say of god’s will – of which man is only a derivative.

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<sup>52</sup> Lea [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, online interview, January 18, 2018.

In the following section, I will provide a discussion of the teacher-student relationship through the voices and experiences of teachers themselves.

#### **4. The Teacher-Student Relationship: Receiving, Sharing, and Keep Learning**

As extensively discussed in the previous chapters, the teacher-student relationship is the organising principle of modern yoga communities and as such it finds privileged recognition also in practitioners' narratives of their experiences of and with yoga. For instance, Gautama provides a lucid overview of the role of the teacher, with reference to a variety of different declinations that the teacher's role may assume in the world of yoga:

the *satguru*, the *guru*, the master, the teacher, the instructor, the word is self-explanatory, he instructs right? They are people that give you the foundations, the guidelines, but after it is necessary, and they do it, a detachment, non-attachment, and non-identification.<sup>53</sup>

The figures evoked by Gautama, although partially overlapping, do not completely coincide. While these different figures share a commitment to teach and transmit specific forms of knowledge and occupy the stronger position within the pedagogical continuum, they are primarily differentiated by their respective embodiment of “charismatic authority” (Weber 1968: 215) and as a consequence, by their powers of transmission. The *satguru*, literally the true (in Sanskrit *sat*) *guru*, is considered – within Hinduism and different yoga traditions – the highest source of spiritual authority. *Satguru* is also a title reserved for those enlightened rishis (*r̥ṣi*, Vedic sages) and saints whose sole purpose is to guide their disciples and devotees towards self-realisation, that is, the acquisition of supreme knowledge of reality. The *satguru* is praised and revered as an embodiment of the divine and questioning him or his authority is simply unconceivable, as we will see in the next two chapters discussing the case of Mooji's teachings and ashram. In turn, the “guru” and the “master” are individuals of great knowledge imbued with “exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character” (Weber 1968: 215) which are not necessarily enlightened. However, in some cases they are also considered embodiment of the divine, and as such infused with “supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities...regarded as divine in origin or as exemplary” (Weber 1968: 241).

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<sup>53</sup> Gautama [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, January 21, 2018. For more details on this point see Note 22 Appendix One.

The guru and the master are substantially synonymous although the former is more closely associated with yoga and Hinduism while the latter with martial arts. Conversely, “the teacher”, which is somehow less than a guru but more than a mere instructor, is a term that can also be mobilised to mean each figure in turn. The teacher is generally considered closer to humanity than to the world of embodied divinity, although teachers can also have a substantial appeal based on their charisma. Finally, the instructor (or the *ācārya*), is usually somebody in charge of the transmission of technical knowledge and as such can be unproblematically substituted by another person with the same competencies. As we will see in the following pages, when practitioners talk of their teachers, they address them relying simultaneously on more than one of these categories. In other words, a teacher is for them somebody that embodies quasi divine qualities but that at the same time also transmits specific technical skills. This is not surprising, as according to some, the figure of the “Eastern guru is transmuted to a purveyor of method whose authority rests more upon an instrumental mastery of procedural technicalities than given metaphysical associations (Flood: 202-3; Smith: 171-80)” (Dawson 2006: 8).

As Gautama points out, the teacher is somebody that “give[s] you the foundations, the guidelines” but from which it is also necessary to “detach” and gain autonomy, thus avoiding relationships of dependence. This claim ought to be contextualised as an expression of Western practitioners’ suspicion and mistrust over giving completely away one’s own self-determination to somebody else’s authority. Nevertheless, the figure of the teacher - or of the guru - remains a crucial reference point in the social organisation of the yoga field and for practitioners’ involvement with the practice.<sup>54</sup> In the following extract, Sofia lists a number of qualities that in her opinion the ideal teacher should not only embody but also transmit to his or her students:

I could tell you that there is a basic package, so to say, humility, acceptance, the suspension of judgment, listening, understood as presence and love. These five things, if [a teacher] manages to transmit this is already a big deal, ahaha Roberto Milletti docet [as Roberto Milletti teaches]. I mention Roberto

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<sup>54</sup> For more details on this point see Note 23 Appendix One.

because for me he is really a person that managed to transmit me these things in such a manner, I mean, but even there, because of a mutual attunement.<sup>55</sup>

Sofia illustrates the “basic package” of the ideal teacher, that she identifies with the Odaka Yoga’s founder Roberto Milletti. The qualities composing this package, however, in order to be then taken on by practitioners, necessitate a teacher that has fully mastered them as much as a “mutual attunement” between teacher and student. These remarks could be fruitfully theorised recalling how teacher’s charisma emerges as socially and discursively constructed during the pedagogical interactions with their students (e.g., Avolio and Gardner 2005; Gardner and Avolio 1998; Wallis 1982), as I proposed in Chapter Three and as I will further argue in the following. This is further illustrated with precision by Beatrice, as she specifies the types of knowledge transmitted by Roberto and Francesca and their respective roles as both teachers and masters:

You can’t transmit a talent, you simply can’t. You can make available all you have, and sure this is what they do. But then it is up to others [the students]. They teach a lot, a lot, a lot, but for instance they do not rise themselves up as masters. Regarding the technique they are teachers, regarding the transmission they are masters exactly because they can transmit this thing. There are only a few living masters, really a few. All the others are [just] teachers and do their best. What is sure is that they transmit a lot, and so the opportunity that we have is incredible.<sup>56</sup>

As Beatrice emphasises, Roberto and Francesca are generous in their giving but then “it is up to” the students to make good use of what their teachers are capable of transmitting in the first place. In other words, without belittling the centrality of the teacher it is also important to mention that practitioners themselves have a key role to play in their process of apprenticeship. Next to this, Beatrice hints also at the fact that the process of knowledge transmission appears to be substantially composed by two distinct – although in practice absolutely overlapping – elements: the relatively unproblematic teaching of the “technique”, that is, that ensemble of technical skills related to the correct performance of the practice; and the transmission of spiritual or esoteric knowledge proper. Regarding

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<sup>55</sup> Sofia [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 20, 2018. For more details on this point see Note 24 Appendix One.

<sup>56</sup> Beatrice Morello, interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 16, 2018.

the former, Roberto and Francesca assume the role of “teachers”; while regarding the latter they are “masters”. A key aspect of this latter form of transmission is that teacher’s talent cannot be technically taught. Conversely, it can be “felt” and thus “embodied” by those practitioners that are particularly mature and prone to attune with their masters’ “charismatic energy” (Brown 2011) and to the “feel” created between the master’s and the students’ bodies (Brown and Jennings 2011: 69), of course understood beyond the mere physical layer, as the subtle body model posits. In this way, practitioners have the opportunity to be pervaded by their masters’ energy and qualities via a close observance and subtle resonance with them (Lucia 2014a). Here, the fact that “[t]here are only a few living masters” while [a]ll the others are [just] teachers”, emphasises the preciousness of this second form of knowledge transmission and as a consequence Odaka Yoga practitioners’ privilege in practicing closely with Roberto and Francesca, that in fact some consider nothing less than living masters.<sup>57</sup> Nonetheless, despite their talent, or charismatic energy, Roberto and Francesca “do not rise themselves up as masters”. As Giada mentions, “they are very accepting, they give you all they have but then they don’t make you feel obliged to repeat what they have taught you, to honor it, to not modify it”;<sup>58</sup> or as Lisa echoes, “they are teachers that do not put themselves in the position of the teacher, no, they are friendly, I do not know how to say it, they almost feel like fellow travelers”<sup>59</sup>. These remarks are important, as teachers are encouraged to carefully implement specific leadership models capable of softening the incredible status difference that occurs between them and their students in order to avoid criticisms that labels them as authoritarian, manipulating and even abusive (e.g., Lucia 2018a; Remski 2019).

Shifting the focus of the discussion towards practitioners’ own teaching experiences, I would like to underline how this is often the result of their embodiment of a specific habitus as brought forth and fostered by the teacher. Lisa’s narrative is a good example:

My first teacher transmitted this to me, to listen to the limit. It comes to mind now. She repeated it as a mantra. Look, she still teaches and she is 80 years old. She is so sweet, I love her, I am still in contact with her. Yes, yes, she was doing this work of great presence and listening and every instant [she would say] “Listen to your limits”. I mean, back then it bothered me because

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<sup>57</sup> For more details on this point see Note 25 Appendix One.

<sup>58</sup> Giada [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 22, 2019.

<sup>59</sup> Lisa [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, January 8, 2019.

I was 12 years old, but it was this “Listen to your limits. Never force. Exhale where you feel tension, bring the attention there”, this is more or less what I say now.<sup>60</sup>

Lisa’s apprenticeship process with her first teacher was so foundational that functioned as the bulk for Lisa’s later style of teaching. As she explicitly states, the core teaching of “listen to your limits” was interiorised by Lisa to the point of becoming a “second nature” (Bourdieu 1990a: 56). In this way, she was exposed to the cultivation of a *focusing/listening disposition* which in turn she now transmits to her own students. Daria, on the contrary, although learned a lot from her first teacher especially in terms of detailed technical knowledge over the correct performance of āsanās, substantially departed from her teacher’s style, which was martial in character. As she recounts:

She was annoyed and she would tell me “What the hell are you always laughing for?”, and I replied: “I mean, I am just fine”. So, she was really like this and I want to transmit the exact opposite...I don’t have to become friends with my pupils but they have to feel at ease with me and not only because I am teaching something technical. I also like, humanly, that some positive energy circles, right? It starts from me, it starts from them, it circles, and we all feel better. Also, I am really interested in transmitting the fact that there aren’t difficult or impossible things but there are different ways to do the same thing. And so the classics, all the different adjustments, the props and you can arrive to do anything and most importantly to have the same benefit also from those postures that you see and say “I will never make it” and instead you can do it. So, a bit like these superpowers that we do not know but they are here instead. This is what I would like and I hope to be able to transmit.<sup>61</sup>

Daria distances herself from her first teacher in terms of her approach to teaching, that is, she “want[s] to transmit the exact opposite”. Contrary to the inquisitive and overtly disciplining style of her teacher she wants to transmit, beside “teaching something technical” also a sense of “ease” to her students fostering a genuine human encounter and the circulation of “some positive energy”. Next to this mutual attunement – to borrow Sofia’s expression – she also wants to transmit “the fact that there aren’t difficult or

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<sup>60</sup> Lisa [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, January 8, 2019.

<sup>61</sup> Daria [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 10, 2018.



impossible things” but conversely “there are different ways to do the same thing”. In this way, she sees her role as a teacher as a facilitator in pointing her students towards those “superpowers” that practitioners often overlook although “they are here instead”. As a matter of fact, this type of narrative closely echoes – if not substantially overlaps – with those emerging from a number or closely connected – although distinct – sociocultural processes centered on individuals’ self-transformation, healing and empowerment processes.<sup>62</sup>

Connected to this, teaching yoga is also framed by practitioners themselves as a practice of “veridiction”, or “truth-telling” (Foucault 2010), that is, a practice that grants to the teachers the possibility to discover and exercise their autonomy and a certain truth about themselves, and in turn share their knowledge and teach, that is, governing themselves and their students. As Maria poignantly argues:

For me when you go on the mat to teach is like if you would get rid of all the masks that you may have, if you want to try to pretend to be what you are not you’ll fail. It is like if the mat would dress you off from all the veils, from everything, I mean, you can’t but be yourself. And as a consequence, who you are is revealed.<sup>63</sup>

Teaching is then first and foremost understood as an encounter with your own “true self”. It is a process of unveiling and unmasking where the yoga mat accomplishes the essential function of a “sacred space” that reveals the teachers’ truth about themselves to themselves, in a manner that is substantially empowering and self-transformative. Most importantly, in the light of the Foucauldian notion of veridiction, we can observe how yoga teachers are able to access their own truth about themselves only thanks to the mediation – transmission and interiorisation – of specific “*savoirs*” and the normative patterns of behaviors that these *savoirs* require in the first place. It is thanks to these three elements, a body of knowledge, the behaviors it prescribes and those it rejects and the

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<sup>62</sup> Most notably, I would like to refer to the multitude of religious or quasi-religious groups studied by Albanese (2007) under the label of “metaphysical religions” which includes Freemasonry, early Mormonism, Universalism, Transcendentalism, Spiritualism, Theosophy, New Thought, Christian Science and so on; The Human Potential Movement and its intermediary role between some of the central values of the counterculture of the 1960s and those of the New Age (Campbell 2007); and of course the New Age movement itself (e.g., Heelas 1996, 2008; Hanegraaff 1996, 1998, 1999). In fact, what all these groups and movements share – of course with their own specificities – is an interest in individuals’ inherent ability to connect with some form of dormant inner force (e.g., the self, soul, life force, god will, god self, consciousness, intuition, energy, prana and so on) as a means to gain health, balance and prosperity, align with divine energy, discover one’s own true self or access one’s own “superpowers” as Daria puts it.

<sup>63</sup> Maria [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 22, 2018.

constitution of a subject aligned with these (knowledges and behaviors) that yoga teachers can in turn teach to others, thus contributing to the continuous transmission and social reproduction of this tripartite relationship between knowledge, power – in the guise of self-government and the government of others – and truth telling. The following extracts digs deeper into these dimensions as Beatrice discusses how she became an Odaka Yoga teacher trainer elucidating some of the dynamics at play between herself and her teacher Roberto:

When you are chosen to represent a school, you are chosen and you think that the master saw something in you and so you make yourself available in turn. I have fought for a full year with Sensei because I did not want to do teacher trainings. At some point he told me “Listen you can’t say no anymore”. And there he was very serious, and so I, because I did not feel prepared, I did not feel it was the time, I did not feel ready, because I had all these things [insecurities]. At some point he told me “You did not get it! I am the founder and I am telling you that you are doing teacher trainings”. And there I surrendered. I surrendered to my small ego.<sup>64</sup>

This fragment is particularly instructive as it underlines the role of Roberto in substantially shaping Beatrice’s involvement within the teacher training programme of Odaka Yoga. This is very significant because it points to the continuous and pervasive influence and authority of the teacher even in the context of an increasingly secularised and commodified yoga field as well as in the context of relatively horizontal schools such as Odaka Yoga. In other words, if this happens in a school like Odaka Yoga, where, as we have seen, the founders are “friendly”, “very accepting” and “feel like fellow travelers”, we can claim that in less horizontally organised schools such as Asthanga or Iyengar Yoga for instance, these power dynamics may be even more marked. Moreover, Beatrice’s resistance to become a yoga teacher trainer for Odaka Yoga partially echoes with what recounted by other teachers who frame their experiences of teaching as a challenge, or again borrowing from Foucault (2010, 2011) as a very specific “test” of one’s own ability to govern oneself and others, that is, to embody and transmit what in turn was learned and received from their own teachers. For example, Aurora states that “yoga is a challenge...because teaching...is also a sort of responsibility” towards the

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<sup>64</sup> Beatrice Morello, interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 16, 2018.

students;<sup>65</sup> while Maria underlines that “teaching really challenges you much more” than simply practicing yoga.<sup>66</sup> However, Maria continues underlining how, besides being a challenge, teaching is also a very specific form of sharing:<sup>67</sup>

I like to see people become passionate about this style of yoga. I like being able to give, obviously is also a personal gratification, I don't hide it, the fact to have a class and have some people that finish the class happy.<sup>68</sup>

This position is echoed by Desire, as she states that “yoga is also giving, it is giving something because there is no competition”.<sup>69</sup> And this giving is the result of Desire's own experience of receiving in the first place:

I think, what did it give me? What did they [the teachers] give me that changed me and helped me to feel better? I want to share that, I want to give [it] to others, that is the message.<sup>70</sup>

Beatrice summarises the perspectives of her own students and fellow teachers as she frames her teaching experience in the following terms:

A fantastic opportunity because being able to share what you receive, have the chance to study and always learn new things, and I am not 20 years old any more, and being able to share them, measuring yourself up with your insecurities and your fears, so growing as a human being, I think that is the most fortunate point of view that one could have.<sup>71</sup>

Teaching then is not simply “[a] fantastic opportunity” because it allows you “to share what you receive” but is also “the chance to study and always learn new things”. This is perceived as particularly important as “being able to share” the “new things” that one has learned is equated to “measuring yourself up with your insecurities and your fears”, that is “growing as a human being”. In other words, teaching yoga is described as an empowering activity, a test, and as only one of the steps of a broader circular process

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<sup>65</sup> Aurora [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 17, 2018.

<sup>66</sup> Maria [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 22, 2018.

<sup>67</sup> For more details on this point see Note 26 Appendix One.

<sup>68</sup> Maria [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 22, 2018.

<sup>69</sup> Desire [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 10, 2018.

<sup>70</sup> Desire [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 10, 2018.

<sup>71</sup> Beatrice Morello, interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 16, 2018.

constituted by: first, receiving from your teachers; second, sharing what you received; third, keep learning.

The importance of constant learning and personal experimentation is another facet of the *practical/ascetic disposition* extensively discussed in the previous chapter. Its interiorisation shapes practitioners' attitude towards hard work and influences their valorisation of a certain self-conduct oriented towards self-improvement through knowledge acquisition. However, the importance of constant learning and personal experimentation is not merely the outcomes of teachers' zealous engagement with yoga but is also institutionalised in the structure and organisation of Odaka Yoga. More specifically, the institutionalisation of constant learning and personal experimentation within the Odaka Yoga system follows two distinct but parallel trajectories: first, the founders themselves offer an example of dedication to the practice where study, experimentation, and constant "questioning", modifying, and pushing forward of their own style are pivotal,<sup>72</sup> thus inspiring the broader community of practitioners. Second, and partly as a consequence of the previous point, Odaka Yoga teachers are formally required to engage in a constant work of study and updating, complementing their basic training certificates (usually of 200, 250 or 500 hours) with more hours of trainings on specific aspects of teaching such as "art of adjustment"<sup>73</sup> or "pranayama flow",<sup>74</sup> or simply participating in the master classes conducted by the founders, which in fact count also as actual moments of training delivering credits to the participants.

This attention to continuous and uninterrupted training closely reminds Bourdieu's remarks on the upward mobile fractions of the middle-classes as perpetual students sketched in '*Distinction*' (1984). As Bourdieu (1984: 155, emphasis in original) argues:

It is not surprising that such people should be drawn to schemes of 'continuing education' a perpetual studenthood which offers an open, (*education permanente*), unlimited future and contrasts diametrically with the system of national competitions designed to demonstrate, once and for all, and as early as possible, that what is done cannot be undone.

As Bourdieu (1984: 156) continues, this model of continuous education is deeply engrained, not only in the "taste" of a specific social group, but it "takes place as if the

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<sup>72</sup> Beatrice Morello, interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 16, 2018; Lisa [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, January 8, 2019; Roberto Milletti and Francesca Cassia, interview by author, audio recording, online interview, May 22, 2019.

<sup>73</sup> Desire [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 10, 2018.

<sup>74</sup> Beatrice Morello, interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 16, 2018.

new logic of the educational system and economic system encouraged people to defer for as long as possible the moment of ultimate crystallization”, that is, it is inscribed in a cultural matrix that values and favors flexibility, renewal and constant adaptation over “once and for all” biographical and professional affirmations. Similarly, the same cultural matrix seems to also inform, traverse and characterise Odaka Yoga’s teacher trainings (TTs), which, as witnessed by Lisa, are constantly readapted and renewed following Roberto’s and Francesca’s own experimentations:

Being a very new practice it is renewing. It is the third year that I do the teacher training and luckily for me it constantly renews. I mean, they [Roberto and Francesca] change it, change the movement, change very small things, very small changes...And this is because they also study very much, I don’t know if you notice how much Francesca is prepared, at every level I think, I guess you could ask her anything. At the anatomical level she is perfect and also at the spiritual level. I think she read the all Akashic library<sup>75</sup>...and so they are super prepared.<sup>76</sup>

As Lisa describes, Odaka Yoga is “a very new practice” and as such it is constantly “renewing”. The main drive behind these changes are Roberto and Francesca that with their study and experimentation are still modifying the style they created and teach. Of course, this institutionalisation of a specific declination of the practical/ascetic disposition as embodied by the founders and as inherently characterising this style, is reproduced by practitioners themselves as they try to step up to the norms, values, and requirements of the school. In the following fragment, Beatrice traces her training trajectory underlining her own engagement in constantly acquiring more and better tools to teach yoga, that is, her substantial dedication to follow the ethos of her movement and embody the model of “perpetual studenthood” evoked by Bourdieu (1984: 155-156) as a distinctive trait of the middle-classes and their particular strategies and positioning within the educational and economic fields:

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<sup>75</sup> Akasha (Sanskrit *ākāśa*) is a term for either space or ether in traditional Indian cosmology. For example, in Vedantic Hinduism it represents the basis and essence of all things in the material world and it is the first element created. It has a long-lasting history of usage also within Western esotericism. In particular its theosophical reinterpretation within the expressions “Akashic records” or “Akashic library”, that is, the etheric compendium of all knowledge and history of accessible to humanity, is renowned.

<sup>76</sup> Lisa [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, January 8, 2019.

Today it seems like that with 200 hours you have studied a lot. This is a world where yoga has become a business. And I am a daughter of that business because I have started with a 200 hours diploma. And after I have done other 200, other 200, other 200, other 200, other 200 and other 500 and so on. Because after 200 hours I said “I know nothing! How do I begin?”. And for me it has been a constant confrontation, rebuilding, saying, mistaking, thinking to know, give guidance and say “Shit! You should have been quite”. Also understand the theme of power that to be on that side [in the teaching position] triggers and try to escape it, because anyway is automatic. Discover you know nothing. Have in your class people that compared to you have more life experience, even if maybe they are 20 years younger...but this is a world where you take a teacher training and then you say “I am a teacher”...but the experience is also to feel that you are a teacher and after to understand that that thing is nothing.<sup>77</sup>

Beatrice clearly underlines the tension between the current certificate and teacher training system that allows somebody to say “I am a teacher” after a 200 hours course and the experience needed to confidently teach yoga.<sup>78</sup> Moreover, the training format she recounts shows how continuous education is a further test next to teachers’ experience of actual teaching. As clarified by Beatrice, “for me it has been a constant confrontation, rebuilding, saying, mistaking, thinking to know, give guidance”, “[u]nderstanding the theme of power” intrinsic in the role of the teacher, “[d]iscover you know nothing”. In other words, yoga teachers’ continuous education is a test that requires them to remain always open to further re-framing of what they know, how they act and who they are. It is a “test of veridiction” (Foucault 2010, 2011).

The theme of continuous education is emphasised by several practitioners. For instance, Sofia mentions that “[w]hen a teacher teaches the hope is that he can transmit something. To be humble<sup>79</sup> and constantly put yourself in the position of the student, actually doing classes as a student”.<sup>80</sup> Or Again, as Sarah argues:

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<sup>77</sup> Beatrice Morello, interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 16, 2018.

<sup>78</sup> For more details on this point see Note 27 Appendix One.

<sup>79</sup> For more details on this point see Note 28 Appendix One.

<sup>80</sup> Sofia [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 20, 2018.

you can't just be complacent "Ok I've had my education". You have to keep learning, you have to learn what new research is there, you have to learn new techniques, you have to learn...you know, education doesn't stop. If it does then you are not really teaching anybody. You have to constantly feed yourself.<sup>81</sup>

This focus on constant learning can be rightly considered as a particular instance of "credentialism", framed in Chapter Three as the acquisition of further qualifications as the ultimate ground on which one's legitimacy to occupy a leadership position is judged. Moreover, it could also be fruitfully theorised through the lenses of the concept of "lifelong learning" defined as the ongoing – voluntary or otherwise – acquisition of skills and competences convertible in the labor market, that is, in Bourdieusian terms, a very specific type of cultural and/or symbolic capital. A brief genealogy of this concept, as correctly argued by Paul Hager and John Halliday (2009: 47-65), reveals its affinity with the notions of renewal, of keeping up to date in a rapidly changing world and its increasingly vocational framing. More specifically, despite the challenges inherent in the implementation of lifelong learning programmes (Field 2005), lifelong learning is considered by neoliberal institutions, organisations, and policy makers as an essential tool to navigate the flexibility demands intrinsic in our knowledge-based economy and society, where it is largely left to the individual to continuously acquire the needed credentials or necessary capitals. Accordingly, lifelong learning is primarily praised as it is said to facilitate active citizenship, competitiveness and employability, not to mention personal development (e.g., Longworth and Davies 1996, 2013; Fisher 2000), values particularly dear to the middle-class fragments of society from which most practitioners come from and to neoliberalism as "a principle of civilisation" (McGuigan 2014). However, the concept of lifelong learning and its associated policies have been also problematised for their substantial alignment with the values promoted by and the demands of neoliberal forms of governance (e.g., Crowther 2004; Fejes and Nicoll 2008; Regmi 2015; Winch and Clarke 2003). For instance, Andreas Fejes' and Katherine Nicoll's (2008) edited volume '*Foucault and Lifelong Learning*' rightly underlines, among other things, the increasing pressure exercised on individuals to self-responsibility engage in a constant work of self-cultivation in order to improve one's own chances of

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<sup>81</sup> Sarah [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, Riverside, California, July 8, 2019.

employability. This signifies, among other things, the substantial erasure of the distinction between times and spaces dedicated to work, education and leisure and the collapse of the private-public divide. As a consequence, one's own learning, professionalisation and self-growth are not only relegated to formal trainings delivered by a variety of public or private institutions and organisations but extend to and pervade every aspects of individuals' everyday life, again echoing the analytical potentials of the Foucauldian concepts of "governmentality" (Foucault 2007: 144 emphasis in original) defined in '*Security, Territory and Population*' as follows:

First, by "governmentality" I understand the ensemble formed by institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations, and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific, albeit very complex, power that has the population as its target, political economy as its major form of knowledge, and apparatuses of security as its essential technical instrument. Second, by "governmentality" I understand the tendency, the line of force, that for a long time, and throughout the West, has constantly led towards the pre-eminence over all other types of power – sovereignty, discipline, and so on – of the type of power that we can call "government" and which has led to the development of a series of specific governmental apparatuses (*appareils*) on the one hand, [and, on the other]† to the development of a series of knowledges (*savoirs*).

Following Foucault, lifelong learning can then be accounted for as the expression of a particular form of government and as a *dispositif* connected to specific *savoirs* (chiefly economics), all of which are tailored in reference to the control of the welfare, wealth, longevity and health of the population through the pervasive government of individuals' conduct, that is, Foucault's (2008) famous formulation of biopolitical power.

In this chapter, I have attempted to delve deeper into the *dispositional affinity* between yoga and neoliberalism. More specifically, I emphasised the dispositional affinity between practitioners' middle-class habitus and the focused, flexible, and performative dispositions which – as I will discuss in more details in the following – are equally constructed and put into practice "on and outside of the mat". It is with these reflections in mind that, I contend, teachers' self-depiction as perpetual students as much as their accounts of self-transformation ought to be understood. In fact, in line with the overall critical approach to religion proposed in this thesis, I argue that these self-descriptions and accounts should be read within the cultural matrix of neoliberal societies, where they are inscribed as forced choices dictated by normative injunctions surrounding one's needs to continuously train and ameliorate oneself rather than being solely considered as expressions of practitioners' narratives of self-determination and free choices.



## 5. Practitioners’ “Journeys” of Self-Transformations: Between Healing and Self-Discovery

Most of the practitioners interviewed – especially those affiliated with Odaka Yoga – frame their yoga practice as a “journey”. With this expression they address three different things: first, on a technical level they mean the specific attention to the *transition* from a pose to another that characterises Odaka Yoga; second, the outcome of this focused attention to transitions, that is, the *moving meditation* that it fosters; and third, the broader *processes of self-transformation* that practitioners themselves undergo through a sustained practice over time. These processes of self-transformation are usually articulated as affecting the physical, the emotional and the spiritual dimensions of practitioners’ life, with a marked propensity for narratives focused on emotional self-transformations. However, while the first two interpretations of the term journey (as a transition and as a moving meditation) are only evoked by Odaka Yoga practitioners, the third interpretation (as a process of self-transformation) is instead also explicitly recalled by other teachers.<sup>82</sup> In the following pages, I am going to unpack each one of these three interpretations, starting from a discussion of the importance of transitions in Odaka Yoga.<sup>83</sup>

As Lisa poignantly argues:

It is all these transitions that they [Roberto and Francesca] make us do from an āsana to the other one, that is what in Odaka Yoga is often addressed as this “journey”. A very used word. “Wonderful” and “journey” are the two most used words in the context of Odaka, ahaha...this [element] of the transition is really a journey if you do it with enough presence.<sup>84</sup>

The fluid, water-like movements of Odaka Yoga are, according to Lisa, particularly conducive to what practitioners commonly refer as their “journey”. It is in the transition from one pose to the other that the specificities of Odaka Yoga come to the fore and can be fully enjoyed by those practitioners that practice with “enough presence”. As Beatrice comments:

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<sup>82</sup> For more details on this point see Note 29 Appendix One.

<sup>83</sup> For more details on this point see Note 30 Appendix One.

<sup>84</sup> Lisa [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, January 8, 2019.

This is the reason why I chose Odaka Yoga. Because to me Odaka Yoga is moving meditation. It is really the here and now, to stay in the journey, enjoy it, to feel small details but then do not stop on the small details, they become meaningless.<sup>85</sup>

In other words, Odaka Yoga' special attention to the transition makes of the practice a "moving meditation" where practitioners are guided in "the here and now", "to stay in the journey", enjoying "small details" without stopping there. Here, the practice is simultaneously conducive of the cultivation of a *flowing-fluid* and a *focusing/listening* disposition that find in practitioners' journeys as a "moving meditation" their privileged locus of expression. In turn, this moving meditation is also the beginning of a self-transformative journey of healing and self-discovery, where the physical, emotional, and spiritual levels are simultaneously affected. Nonetheless, this self-transformative journey starts off at the physical level. Emotional and spiritual transformations come only after – when they come – and cannot prescind from practitioners' constant work and dedication with the physical part of the practice, thus also underlining the importance of a *practical/ascetic disposition* in practitioners' journeys of healing and self-discovery, as poignantly illustrated by Linda:

Well, I think that word [journey] very much resonates, because it's a journey, it's a transformation, it's what's happening, whether you like it or not. Practice and your practice should change you. Your practice could change you for the better or for the worse, but if you dedicate yourself, even if you come just for the exercise, it will change you. In fact, dedicate yourself to anything and it will change you ahaha.<sup>86</sup>

Importantly, although Linda is not an Odaka Yoga practitioner, she seems to tune in with my invitation to elaborate on her experience of yoga as a journey, thus testifying to the common experiences of practitioners across styles and traditions. More importantly, Linda underlines that "even if you come just for the exercise" yoga "will change you", again a point of view shared by many of the practitioners interviewed. As Desire recounts, her "dynamic practice" is for her:

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<sup>85</sup> Beatrice Morello, interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 16, 2019.

<sup>86</sup> Linda [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, Riverside, California, April 9, 2019.

a journey, a journey into your body, a journey into your mind, into your experience. It is a journey that for me started because I had pain in one leg and I couldn't do anything else. But then there has been a complete transformation that started from the most physical part but evolved...into [changes of] behaviors and attitudes.<sup>87</sup>

How can we then explain practitioners' claims that their practice is transforming them beyond the physical level, although arguably they primarily engage with a rather physical form of yoga? To state that yoga means different things to different people in different contexts is little more than a truism. An alternative is to point to yoga's chief status among holistic disciplines and CAM, that is, its ability to integrally impact on practitioners' bodies, minds, and spirits. More specifically, the holistic promises of yoga have their roots in the subtle body model discussed in Chapter Three, which – whether in its earliest formulations in the '*Upanishads*', in its martial arts reinterpretation or again in its New Age renditions – frames practitioners' bodies as multilayered and interconnected systems that extend from the physical to the spiritual, passing through a series of other layers among which the energetic and the psychological are perhaps the most important ones, at least in the current dominant models. It is this model that guides the rationale behind yoga practice and therefore it is in the light of these remarks that we should understand practitioners' processes of self-transformation as being inherently multi-dimensional, that is to say, as simultaneously regarding different layers of practitioners' own being. As Sofia comments:

I always think that yoga means union and so the union of all of this. Surely from a certain point of view, without entering more religious perspectives that anyway are there, but staying on a basic level, we have a physical body, we have a mental and an energetic dimension. They are intimately, deeply interconnected. This on the ground of what I have studied but also of my direct experience.<sup>88</sup>

Following Sofia's representation of the subtle body model as involving the “intimately, deeply” and “interconnected” nature of practitioners' “physical body” with a “mental and

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<sup>87</sup> Desire [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 10, 2018.

<sup>88</sup> Sofia [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 20, 2018. For more details on this point see Note 31 Appendix One.

energetic dimension”, it appears evident how to work on one layer unavoidably means affecting also the others. However, most practitioners tend to engage with the practice with a physical focus in mind – whether in terms of healing injuries or simply getting fit – although they are also quick to recognise the holistic impact of the practice beyond the mere physical level. In the following fragment, Jane recounts how her engagement with Iyengar yoga provided an almost miraculous transformation for a variety of physical ailments, among other things:

I don't have back pain anymore. I still have artificial hips, I have fibromyalgia, scoliosis, I have endometriosis, so particularly this method, you know Iyengar Yoga is the method I did...I had surgery for the endometriosis and he [the doctor] said I would have to have it every couple of years but I have never had surgery any more...because there is a lot of yoga poses that help with endometriosis. People talk about the boost on the skeleton but all of that has a profound effect on the organic structure, so you wanna talk about, my cholesterol was high, its down [now]. My heart rate was lowish it is much slower now, 20 plus years later my heartbeat is 10 bits a minute slower than when I was in my mid-thirties. My heart rate is around 60 it was 72 when I was started Iyengar. Cholesterol is fine, my respiration is slower, and everything, all the indicators of the respiratory health are improved. I had to get up in the night to go to the toilet. I don't have to this anymore. My knees were a mess. I started yoga for backpain and to fix my knees...I couldn't walk a quarter mile without hurting my back and my knees. I even went back to skiing and my knees aren't bothering me anymore...and then there are just the anti-crazy stuff. Cause I am a pretty angry and pissed off person that like to get stuck into this side, but you know, I am sure yoga had its health effects on this, that it mattered.<sup>89</sup>

As Jane remarks, yoga is not only a “boost on the skeleton” but it has also “a profound effect on the organic structure”. Through yoga she was able to definitively overcome a series of medical conditions such as endometriosis and recover from her back and knee injuries. Nonetheless, as she hints at the end of the fragment, yoga’s “anti-crazy stuff” “mattered” in dealing with the “pretty angry and pissed off person” that she is at times,

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<sup>89</sup> Jane [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, Riverside, California, July 15, 2019

thus underlining the impact of yoga practice beside the mere physical plane, as other practitioners remarked.<sup>90</sup>

For some, the transformative possibilities offered by yoga are so all encompassing that it is not superfluous to speak of an actual experience of *conversion*. In the following fragment Linda eloquently discusses how the practice of yoga – and most notably the focusing/listening disposition that it prompts – functioned for her as a turning point in her life:

So that's what the practices gave me, it was more about wanting how to be with myself. Like I said that idea "Can you let it be? Can you let it be?". I am a fixer, I always wanna make it better, I wanna know what I need to do, I think I am very good in that regard, I wanna fix it, but "Can you just be with what is even though you can't fix it?". You need just to allow yourself to feel that. "Can you be curious about your own experience?". That idea of looking in for mere curiosity, no judgment. "Can I just be curious about my own experience just so that I can know about it, just so I can know?". And that was what yoga was able to give, for me with an hour on my mat finally I could turn off the noise from the outside and I could turn on the volume of what was going within and suddenly start listening what was going on with me, and that's when I started to recognise a lot of things needed to change for me. A lot of things do not feel in alignment for me. "Going out and partying every week-end doesn't feel great to me. I am recognising how really terrible I feel a lot of time, being in hang over is terrible". Whereas before I would just keep drinking, ahaha [nervous laughter]. But I started to feel what my life felt like and then of course when you actually feel things you are encouraged to make different choices, especially when you are very uncomfortable.<sup>91</sup>

A particularly productive manner to frame Linda's experience of conversion is Foucault's (1986, 2005) notion of *epimèleia heautoù* (literally care of oneself), namely the processes and practices of constitution of the individual as an ethical subject of reason that Foucault studied in relation to ancient Greece, Hellenism, and the early Roman Empire. Here, Foucault (2005: 11) defines *conversion* "...from the outside, from others and the world

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<sup>90</sup> For more details on this point see Note 32 Appendix One.

<sup>91</sup> Linda [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, Riverside, California, April 4, 2019.

etc., towards “one self” (Foucault 2005: 11) as an experience where individuals are encouraged to cultivate a specific introspective relationship “of attending to what we think and what takes place in our thought” (ibidem). Similarly, Linda was able to put aside – or at least counterbalance – her “fixer” attitude with an attention and an openness to her own experience exactly because she mastered a certain way of attending to her inner landscape. This shift of perspective, largely granted by the cultivation of a *focusing/listening disposition* and its encouragement to “allow yourself to feel”, to “be curious about your own experience” without “judgment”, signified that Linda was finally able to “turn off the noise from the outside” and conversely “turn on the volume of what was going within and suddenly start listening what was going on with” her. It is through the cultivation of this inner-directed, focused attention that she “started to recognise a lot of things needed to change” and therefore she was also able to take action in that direction. This type of conversion, I argue, is one of the crucial driving forces behind practitioners’ experiences of self-transformation, especially on the emotional and spiritual plane. In fact, as Roberto recalls:

Personally, having started because my fears were the drive. I started with time to dialogue with my fears, to know them, and so my fears became an ally, a tool to understand who I am, what I am doing, how I relate with the world. And through this extraordinary practice I learned how not to run away or demonise my fears. They coexist in and inhabit myself and in the end the dialogue is fundamental. And it is through the dialogue that I freed myself of many fears in life. I started that I was full, extremely full of fears. And now they are really an old memory. And this opened me to the beauty, it opened me, yes, to the wonders of this world. Yes, it opened me, because the fears grip you, close you down, they block you a bit. I feel more open, pleurably more open, yes, open to life.<sup>92</sup>

Roberto’s radical experience of transformation from the paralysing effects of his pervasive “fears” to an openness to “the beauty” and “the wonders of this world” was possible only because Roberto looked within, or as he says, “I started with time to dialogue with my fears”. It was “through the dialogue” with those fears that “coexist in and inhabit” him that he “freed” himself “of many fears” and finally was able to become “pleurably more

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<sup>92</sup> Roberto Milletti and Francesca Cassia, interview by author, audio recording, online interview, May 22, 2019.

open...to life”. Again, his experience of self-transformation started as he converted his own attention towards his own inner landscape.<sup>93</sup> Of course, these types of long-lasting self-transformations are hardly a matter of a single transformative experience but are the outcome of sustained and dedicated practice.<sup>94</sup> In fact, the importance of a *focusing/listening disposition* and its role in allowing practitioners to “dialogue” with their emotions such as “fear” is strengthened by the cultivation of the *practical/ascetic disposition* which fosters practitioners’ dedicated engagement with yoga and as such it multiplies opportunities for self-introspection and change. As Sofia recounts:

To increase the practice changed me a lot. It allowed me to be much more serene, much more accepting, less judgmental and it also taught me how to elaborate rage much better, that sensation of rage, or fear, you know? The rage and the fear. It taught me all of this. And in the end all of this brought me to be much more different in my relationships, and this is the feedback that my son gives meahaha, as he says “Mum you changed so much”... the most important thing that it [yoga] gave me is to listen to the emotions, to accept the emotions, do not freak out in front of the emotions.<sup>95</sup>

The emotional changes that Sofia experienced as a consequence of her sustained practice have, in turn, brought to a substantial transformation of Sofia’s relationships as well. Therefore, the experience of conversion fostered by the practice – if cultivated in time – has the potentials to transcend a mere focus on practitioners’ self-transformation but conversely extends also to his or her relationships. In fact, it was very common for the practitioners I interviewed to refer to the positive changes that the practice brought to their relationships with family, friends and colleagues.<sup>96</sup> Moreover, as Linda’s, Roberto’s and Sofia’s narratives testify, the experience of conversion fostered by a focusing/listening disposition grants to practitioners also the acquisition, cultivation and refinement of a certain “emotional capital” (e.g., Cottingham 2016; Reay 2004; Zembylas 2007), here defined as the ability to strategically dispose of one’s own emotional landscape. As we have seen in Chapter Four, this becomes a particularly valuable resource for yoga teachers whose image, professional attractiveness and charisma are largely

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<sup>93</sup> For more details on this point see Note 33 Appendix One.

<sup>94</sup> For more details on this point see Note 34 Appendix One.

<sup>95</sup> Sofia [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 20, 2018.

<sup>96</sup> For more details on this point see Note 35 Appendix One.

influenced by their ability to convey positive emotions (Bono and Ilies 2006) and assist their students in the management of their own emotional landscapes.

Finally, I would like to conclude this section with a reference to the spiritual experiences of self-transformations discussed by practitioners. Naturally, as already hinted at in the previous pages, it is not possible to trace a radical distinction between, for instance, experiences of emotional and spiritual self-transformation proper. This is so because, as we have seen, the emotional transformations at stake are often so radical and all-encompassing that they could be rightly addressed as spiritual in character. However, what divides these two types of experiences – despite their inextricable connections – is the former’s focus and self-improvement, self-care and self-growth and the latter’s focus on self-transcendence. Here, self-transcendence is understood in the light of prana’s postulated agentic power as it substantially re-defines practitioners’ self-perceptions of themselves and as a consequence their relationships with others and the world. As Sofia discusses:

There is a subtle experience, peculiar, almost perceptive. An intuition for which you feel that surely there is something that flows around you, above, below, and not necessarily above but you are within this thing and that there is a continuous becoming. Believing in previous life and so on, I see the body as a passage, a house that hosts me, that represents my temple in a moment of passage. And so I need to take care of it, I need to listen, feel, aware that this body has to be left behind and that there is a moment when you will go beyond, where, how, what’s the design I can’t tell you...so, the yoga practice, meditation, especially meditation, brought this [understanding]. Meditation makes you feel things, some forms elusory of rationality that have, at least to me, confirmed the existence of something beyond.<sup>97</sup>

This “subtle experience” or “intuition” that Sofia mentions evokes her own perceptual awareness of a certain spiritual substance that “flows around you, above, below”. This spiritual substance seems also to envelop her as she comments that “you are within this thing”. Here, the physical body is understood as being part of “a continuous becoming” and is framed as a “passage” from this to past and futures lives. In other words, Sofia seems to implicitly refer to the subtle body model and the correspondences it traces

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<sup>97</sup> Sofia [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 20, 2018.



between practitioners' consciousness body and bliss body (the two finest layers) and the most refined qualities of supreme reality (*Brahman*). As she continues, her sustained engagement with "the yoga practice" and "especially meditation" are the main reasons behind her heightened sense of awareness. Her narrative is echoed by Lisa as she states that:

what I think the real yoga gifts you with, I mean if you...allow yourself to be permeated, is this: that you can see things from a position of unity in some way because you are you but you are also you in your environment, and in your environment you know that person. And it is like if that person is tied to you by invisible grids that in turn connect you with other people and it is like if you could see from above a sort of grid that tides you to everybody fundamentally.<sup>98</sup>

Lisa poignantly states that "real yoga" "gifts you" with a "position of unity", that is, the ability to experientially grasp the interconnectedness among yourself, your environment and "everybody fundamentally". In other words, as much as according to the subtle body model the flow of prana determines transformations from the physical to the spiritual it also connects practitioners' body to that "innate intelligence" or more simply "energy" that flows outside of their bodily limits pervading everything. It is an awareness of this external energy – and not a mere belief in its existence – as described by Sofia and Lisa, that allows practitioners to re-frame their understanding of themselves in the light of a broader agentic power that transcends their subjectivity and intentionality. For those whose sensitivity has been refined enough through a sustained, flowing practice and the constant exercise of one's own focused attention, this "continuous becoming" or "position of unity" become an invaluable spiritual transformation able to completely overturn practitioners' sense of themselves, understanding of others and of "reality". More specifically, these processes of spiritual refinement could be aptly captured by the concept of "spiritual capital" (McDonald and Hallinan 2005; Verter 2003; Wortham and Wortham 2007), defined as a particular type of symbolic capital organised around practitioners' spiritual proficiency. As Lisa further stresses:

I think if a yoga practitioner manages...to really access into the breath and to feel the presence within and outside it changes your existence. It creates a

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<sup>98</sup> Lisa [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, January 8, 2019.

univocal relationship between the parts that you will never leave, whatever happens, beautiful things, unpleasant things, that contact between inside and outside will never leave you. It is what gives me a bit of an anchor in the most difficult moments and so when it happens, I practice.<sup>99</sup>

As testified by Lisa, accessing “into the breath” and feeling the “presence within and outside”, are two among the privileged signs of practitioners’ acquisition of spiritual capital. More specifically, practitioners seem to access an immanent spiritual plane and in so doing dislocate part of their subjectivity to the agentic potential of prana which “changes” their “existence”. Such a spiritual transformation “creates a univocal relationship between the parts”, again a reference to the different sheaths of the subtle body model and the correspondences it traces between the micro-cosmos of practitioners’ bodies and the macro-cosmos of nature. Finally, once this transformation is completed, Lisa remarks, “whatever happens, beautiful things, unpleasant things, that contact between inside and outside will never leave you”. In Bourdieusian terms, this equates to practitioners’ acquisition of sufficient spiritual capital so as to legitimise their spiritual status as advance teachers and their sense of unity, in turn a valuable resource if one is to attract the attention and receive the respect of one’s students and fellow practitioners. I will expand on the notion of spiritual capital in reference to Mooji’s teachings in Chapter Seven while in the following section I bring this chapter to a close with a brief discussion of the transposable nature of practitioners’ dispositions.

## **6. Conclusive Remarks: Yoga “On” and “Outside” of the Mat**

As I have extensively argued, there is a certain correspondence between practitioners’ middle-class backgrounds, their class-related dispositions and those cultivated on the mat and constituting the yogic habitus. I contend that the dispositions that constitute practitioners’ yogic and middle-class habitus are then specific instances of what Bourdieu (1984: 28, 170) names “transposable disposition”, defined as “a set of perceptual and evaluative schemes that are available for general application”. Of course, this correspondence, or transposable character, is multidirectional, that is, it moves simultaneously from practitioners’ backgrounds to their practice on the mat and from their practice “on” the mat to their life “outside” of it.

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<sup>99</sup> Lisa [pseud.], interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, January 8, 2019.

As I have attempted to show in this chapter, the processes of socialisation, knowledge acquisition and of cultivation of specific dispositions that characterise practitioners' apprenticeship processes as modern yogi have their roots in practitioners' life before and despite of their engagement with the practice on the mat, as their narratives testify. More specifically, before beginning to actively practice yoga, practitioners are already largely exposed to a set of values, practices and worldviews (read dispositions) that facilitate their development of a taste for the particular dispositions cultivated through the practice of postural yoga. Following this analysis, it is possible to detect a number of "elective affinities" (Weber 2011) between: first, the middle-class ethos that imbues practitioners' backgrounds, the flexibility demands of their working environments and the general biopolitical climate that inform their conduct; and second, the particular practices, dispositions and apprenticeship processes cultivated on the mat. In other words, there is a "symbiotic relationship" (Wacquant 2004) between the ethos of the yoga field and its transmission via postural yoga classes, teacher trainings and master classes, and a broader middle-class ethos. More specifically, this symbiotic relationship plays out at the intersection of: first, social structures (e.g., the organisation of social classes, the neoliberal economic model and the labour market) and practices (e.g., the varieties of practices that constitute the pedagogical and self-transformative portfolio of modern postural yoga); second, fields (e.g., the yoga field as a hybrid field but also the therapeutic/medical, fitness/leisure and spiritual/religious fields among others) and social actors' respective positioning of domination and/or submission (e.g., chiefly determined by the amount and types of capital possessed); and third, one's "primary habitus" (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977: 42-46 [1970]), that is, the set of dispositions one acquires in early childhood through primary socialisation and one's "secondary habitus" (Bourdieu 1984), defined as that set of dispositions acquired subsequently largely through specialised forms of pedagogical labour and here epitomised by the concept of yogic habitus.

Following this perspective, practitioners' early encounter with the practice of yoga and their decision to continue can be framed as the "natural" outcome of their processes of upbringing and socialisation into a new middle-class ethos that predisposes them to develop a taste that values exoticised Asian spiritual resources and their therapeutic, self-actualising, and self-transformative promises (Altglas 2014a). What is perhaps more important, however, is the substantial correspondence between those embodied and pre-

conscious orientations to the self, others and the world that constitute the scheme of dispositions from which the yogic habitus springs from and those cultivated in and required by practitioners' positioning in the labour market. Most of the practitioners interviewed are, in fact, particularly exposed to the demands of the knowledge-based, post-fordist, neoliberal economy. In this context, the cultivation and exercise of: concentration, self-management and obedience to a figure of authority (*focusing/listening disposition*); flexibility, acceptance and ability to skillfully navigate unexpected turns of events (*flowing/fluid disposition*); and constant engagement, performativity and dedication to one's own duties (*practical/ascetic disposition*), become essential to one's own ability to successfully inhabit the working environment and secure a career. However, next to the permeability between practitioners' backgrounds and working experiences and their practice on the mat, it is also important to underline a movement in the opposite direction, that is, the influence of practitioners' practice on the mat on their broader life. As we have seen through a discussion of their encounters with yoga, the meanings attached to it, their experiences of the teacher-student relationship and their journeys of healing and self-discovery, yoga has for them important repercussions on their relations with others and their broader life, whether in the guise of an aid to navigate the complexity of their demanding jobs, as a process of healing, self-discovery and self-growth, or again as an ethical system that helps them to reframe their conducts and cultivate a certain degree of self-reflexivity. It is here that the *focusing/listening*, *flowing/fluid* and *practical/ascetic* dispositions are translated and applied into a variety of contexts thus permeating practitioners' life of those core dispositions that they attempt to master on the mat. In other words, the yogic habitus assumes a relevance that is well beyond its mere cultivation on the yoga mat. In fact, as several practitioners clarify,<sup>100</sup> the practice on the mat informs and influences practitioners' conduct also outside of it. This point is poignantly illustrated by Roberto and Francesca:

*Roberto*:...you can also reproduce the three pillars outside of the mat and so apply them in the everyday life. Being centered, bending [the straight lines] and maintaining the rhythm. Therefore, yoga is also reproducible outside of the mat.

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<sup>100</sup> For more details on this point see Note 36 Appendix One.

*Francesca*: let me say that in reality when you are on the mat you are doing a fingerprint of how your nervous system will act in everyday life. And so the practice is only the mirror of what you will be educated to naturally do. For this reason the three principles are both physical and also at the level of conduct.<sup>101</sup>

As mentioned by Roberto, the three pillars or principles of Odaka Yoga (being centered, bending the straight lines and rhythm) are “also reproducible outside of the mat”. This is an important point because it clarifies how the philosophical foundations of Odaka Yoga are not merely cultivated on the mat through reiterated practice and the teacher’s guidance. On the contrary, this practice and this guidance spill over into practitioners’ “everyday life”. The same idea is expressed by Francesca as she further states that “when you are on the mat you are doing a fingerprint of how your nervous system will act in everyday life” thus substantiating a certain permeability between practitioners’ yogic habitus and their broader everyday conduct. In other words, practitioners’ dedication on the mat – and the habitus it fosters – is bound to influence what practitioners “will do” also outside of the mat. This point is confirmed by Maria, as she underlines how in her experience the work on the mat and the changes that it fostered corresponded to broader changes also outside of the mat:

I have personally experienced on myself that my flexibility has changed a lot. In these years I have acquire more and more flexibility, something I didn’t think possible, and this goes hand in hand with my path, I mean the transformation of my practice goes hand in hand with my personal transformation...and so I am more and more flexible in the body and also in my life.<sup>102</sup>

As Maria underlines, her physical flexibility morphed thanks to her sustained practice but it was not only her body that changed substantially. All her life, in fact, was imbued by a more flexible approach, pinpointing, once again, the correspondence between the dispositions cultivated on the mat and practitioners’ broader life.

To conclude, I would like emphasise that habitus, as I understand it conceptually – and following my own experience of apprenticeship also self-reflexively – functions as

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<sup>101</sup> Roberto Milletti and Francesca Cassia, interview by author, audio recording, online interview, May 22, 2019.

<sup>102</sup> Maria [pseud], interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 22, 2018.

an entry point into the study of the ethos of a new middle-class as its members move from their practice on the mat to their life outside of it. In fact, although nobody is born as a competent yogi, members of the new middle-classes are surely predisposed to develop a taste for yoga and in turn mobilise their resources for the acquisition and cultivation of certain dispositions, therefore naturalising their affinities with the practice.

However, although “habitus holds that practical mastery operates *beneath the level of consciousness and discourse*”, that is, it is “embodied pre-reflective knowledge” (Wacquant 2013a: 25, emphasis in original), this does not equate to practitioners’ inability to competently reflect – and to a certain degree also direct – their practical mastery of yoga and its embodied and pre-reflecting interiorisation. The narratives captured and systematised in these pages are a clear example of practitioners’ awareness of the influences that “pedagogical work” has in socially and discursively constituting “the conative and cognitive structures that make up habitus” which are in fact “malleable”, “transmissible” (Wacquant 2013a: 25), “transposable” (Bourdieu 1984: 28, 170) and partly open to practitioners’ reinterpretation and creative deployment (Bourdieu 2005). Nevertheless, how much the yogic habitus can be freely, that is, self-reflexively reinterpreted, deployed and modified by practitioners, ought to be assessed within the context of the limitations and the opportunities springing from the encounter between: first, the yogic habitus fostered in a certain school; second, the broader habitus one inhabits (e.g., middle-class habitus); and third, one’s own unique personal schema of dispositions. In fact, as Bourdieu (1977a: 86) poignantly argues discussing individual’s dispositional differences and variations within the same overall group or class habitus:

Since the history of the individual is never anything other than a certain specification of the collective history of his group or class, *each individual system of dispositions* may be seen as a *structural variant* of all the other group or class habitus, expressing the difference between trajectories and positions inside or outside the class ... “Personal” style, the particular stamp marking all the products of the same habitus, whether practices or works, is never more than a *deviation* in relation to the *style* of a period or class so that it relates back to the common style not only by its conformity - like Phidias, who, according to Hegel, had no “manner” - but also by the difference which makes the whole .. manner.

Similarly, the practitioners’ biographical trajectories and narratives accounts discussed in these pages should be read as first and foremost different manifestations of the very same middle-class habitus and its elective affinities with the yogic habitus I attempted to dissect in the last three chapters.

# **Chapter Six**

## **Introducing Mooji's Teachings: Philosophical and Discursive Foundations**

### **1. Introduction**

This chapter introduces the second empirical case study of this thesis, namely Mooji's teachings and his community of devotees, that following De Michelis' (2004) seminal typology can be rightly considered a paradigmatic manifestation of "modern denominational yoga" (more on this in a next section). The empirical material presented in this chapter is primarily composed of "discursive representations" (chiefly extracted from Mooji's insitutional websites and vast videography) in the attempt to trace the philosophical and discursive foundations of Mooji's teachings. In so doing, this chapter follows the lead of previous research on modern gurus and their marketability (e.g., Altglas 2008; Goldberg and Singleton 2014; Lucas 2011, 2014; Lucia 2014b; Squarcini 2006; Williamson 2010) with the specific intent to discuss the socially and discursive constructed nature of Mooji's teachings at the intersection of traditional Asian resources and their innovation, that is, the extent to which his teachings are reproducing, creatively drawing on, and innovating the philosophical and discursive references from which they claim to originate capitalising on their "exotic" capital. Chapter Seven, in turn, completes this exploration through an ethnographic study of the structure and social organisation of the ashram and its pedagogical repertoire in granting the transmission, interiorisation, and reproduction of these philosophical and discursive elements as they translate into an experiential promise of self-realisation which devotees attempt to pursue with total dedication.

This chapter is structured as follows: first, it parallels Chapter Three and provides a short exploration of the social organisation of modern denominational yoga through the lenses of the concept of the *yoga field* understood as an “hybrid field” (Pedrini, Brown and Aimini 2020); second, the chapter introduces Mooji’s teachings proper, with a specific focus on their philosophical and discursive foundations in neo-Advaita, a modern reinterpretation of the traditional Indian system of thought of Advaita-Vedanta. It is here that the tension between tradition and innovation finds its more systematic scrutiny; third, the chapter accounts for the figure of the guru, unpacking Mooji’s biography and suggesting the concept of *guru habitus* as a useful analytical tool to theorise about the processes of social and discursive contraction of the guru figure. In this section, the chapter also briefly introduces some of Mooji’s closer devotees, that is, those that have a quasi-public figure as they often appear next to the guru during the everyday life of the ashram, special events, and retreats; fourth, the chapter discusses Mooji’s larger community of devotees, both in relation to its ashram and to its transnational networks of followers.

## **2. The Social Organisation of Modern Denomination Yoga**

As I have already argued in Chapter Three, the concept of *social organisation* refers to the *organisational structure* and *pattern of relationships* that characterise the strategic functioning of specific social domains and the everyday life of those communities that inhabit them. In the context of this chapter, the organisational structure is represented by the landscape of denominational yoga groups and their competition and alliances over the acquisition of new converts. Here, these movements present themselves as offering viable “salvation goods” (Weber 1965, 1978; see also Stolz 2006, 2008) whose spiritual promises and their efficacy are legitimasied on the ground of the exocitised cultural and spiritual capitals of the traditions from which they are inspired (e.g., Advaita-Vedanta, Yoga, Hinduism), their charismatic leaders, not to mention their therapeutic potentials; while the expression pattern of relationships refers to Mooji’s communities of devotees’ everyday life, whether within the premises of its Portuguese ashram or in their



transnational branches across the globe. In other words, in this section I provide a preliminary analysis of the social organisation of modern denominational yoga as a means to contextualise this case study within the broader landscape of groups and organisations that constitute this particular portion of the yoga field. In order to do so, I start from a definition of modern denominational yoga, briefly problematising this analytical category in the light of other partially overlapping categories (e.g., New Religious Movements (NRMs), neo-guru and/or neo-Hindu movements); second, I redefine the contours of the yoga field accounting for it from the perspective of its non-postural variants (read denominational), thus complementing the analysis initiated in Chapter Three.

### ***2.1. Modern Denominational Yoga: A Short Analytical Problematisation***

De Michelis (2004: 189) defines modern denominational yoga as “...a later development that seems to have got fully underway only during the 1960s with the appearance of more ideologically engaged Neo-Hindu gurus and groups that incorporated elements of Modern Yoga teachings”. According to her analysis, these groups are characterised by a rigid social organisation and are sectarian in character. As a consequence, they are “collectivist and more tightly structured, they make more demands on members, and have more stable belief and organizational systems which often result in more intolerant and/or exclusivist attitudes” than other types of modern yoga (De Michelis 2004: 189). Moving from an analysis of the organisational structures of these groups to their practical repertoire, De Michelis specifies that they “...draw from the whole range of Modern Psychosomatic, Postural and Meditational forms of yoga in whichever way suits them” (De Michelis 2004: 189) but that contrary to them “they have not been instrumental in shaping, defining and elaborating more “mainstream forms of Modern Yoga theory and practice, and yoga is not their primary concern” (De Michelis 2004: 189). In other words, these groups seem to occupy a peripheral positioning in reference to the practical-discursive universe of mainstream forms yoga as their practices – although promptly manufactured to appeal to their largely Western audiences – are more overtly connected to Asian religious and philosophical traditions (such as modern re-interpretations of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sufism) than other types of yoga (chiefly postural), that are substantially sanitised from philosophical and religious elements (e.g., Newcombe 2019; Jain 2014a; Singleton 2010). As further argued by De Michelis (2007: 7) modern denominational yoga groups:

promote their own forms of (usually meditational) yoga, but seemingly as a means to propagate, affirm or reinforce very distinctive and sometimes controversial worldviews, belief systems and lifestyles, rather than to connect with wider societal, ideological or religious webs of meaning.

Denominational yoga groups are then not only peripheral to mainstream forms of yoga but also to mainstream society more at large. As a consequence, although De Michelis does not explicitly use this term, modern denominational yoga groups could be fruitfully theorised relying on the contested sociological concept of “cult” (e.g., Cowan and Bromley 2015; Dawson 2003; Richardson 1993), defined as a social group characterised by the shared cultivation of unusual beliefs (usually religious in nature), common values, practices and worldviews largely antithetical to those of mainstream society.

The peculiarities of denominational yoga groups vis-à-vis the other modern forms of yoga discussed by De Michelis (2004) (see the Excursus at the end of this thesis for more information on this point) become evident if we consider some of the elements that characterise their internal organisation: first, denominational groups are usually organised in *spiritual communities* (monastic or otherwise) dedicated to spiritual realisation. These communities largely follow a specific interpretation of “the monastic rule”, that is, they are organised following the moral, behavioral, and organisational imperatives typical of religious or ascetic life. Here, a core number of devotees (renunciates or otherwise) resides within the ashram premises while others only contribute to its everyday functioning but reside elsewhere. Some groups are so widespread that they are organised in a network of communities spanning across the whole world (e.g., Self-Realization Fellowship, Mata Amritanandamayi Mission, Siddha Yoga); second, modern denominational yoga groups typically flourish around a *guru*, the indisputable leader and highest authority of the group. The guru may be alive and reside in the community, spend most of his/her time travelling spreading his/her message of salvation, or may be long deceased. Although this last scenario is surely problematic for the collective identity and management of the community, the deceased guru continues to function as the organising principle of the internal articulation of the organisation and as a consequence of devotees’ everyday life. Prabhat Ranjan Sarkar (also known as Shrii Shrii Ánandamúrti); Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (more commonly known as Osho) and Yogananda are three prominent examples of deceased gurus whose figure and authority is still pivotal in the management of their organisations; third, these groups are usually concerned with devotees’ spiritual betterment, whose final aim is epitomised by the attainment of *enlightenment*, or self-

realisation. Although this goal does not always require renunciatory and ascetic practices it surely entails a level of commitment that other forms of yoga seldomly necessitate; fourth, these relatively closed groups usually organise *intensives*, *retreats* and *residential* stays, where the guru's *darśana*, “the experience of seeing and being seen by God” or “seeing and being seen by a living embodiment of the divine” (Lucia 2014a: 6), is made available to the larger community of devotees and spiritual seekers; fifth, the practices proposed by these groups largely rely on unpaid, voluntary work (*seva*, or *karmayoga*), introspection and meditations of various kind (*jñānayoga*), and devotional practices to the deity and the figure of the guru (*bhaktiyoga*), thus offering quite distinct avenues to self-discovery and self-cultivation than postural yoga styles, for instance. However, it is important to mention that the possible combinations of these five elements and their variations (which we will discuss at some length in this and in the following chapter in reference to Mooji's teachings), contribute to the constitution of an heterogeneous constellation of groups, each one characterised by its own “ethos”. Each group's ethos is then simultaneously the expression of its particular positioning in the yoga field and the practical-discursive matrix from which the specific habitus it fosters springs from.

Another point that needs to be spelled out at the outset of this chapter is the substantial overlaps between the scholarly categories of modern denominational yoga and NRMs (e.g., Barker 1989; Clarke 2006; Dawson 1998, 2006), especially in the guise of neo-Hindu and neo-guru movements (e.g., Altglas 2005, 2007, 2008, 2014a; Lucia 2014a, 2014b, 2014c). Following this literature, we can define NRMs as “new” or “alternative” religious/spiritual groups (Oliver 2012), where these labels (new and alternative) can either signify religions and/or groups new to the West (e.g., a plethora of Buddhist and/or Hinduist groups whose existence predated their transnational dissemination) – and thus alternative to Western countries' mainstream religious heritage – or new in the sense of newly formed (e.g., ISKON or Hare Krishan, Ananda Marga, Mata Amritanandamayi Mission and many others). Interestingly enough, many of the groups that could be rightly considered as paradigmatic instances of NRMs, such as the already mentioned ISKCON (e.g., Rochford 2000, 2007; Squarcini 2000; Squarcini and Fizzotti 2004), Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh's (e.g., Goldman 2005; Urban 2005, 2012) and Sai Baba's religious movements (e.g., Keul 2009; Srinivas S. 2008; Srinivas T. 2010), neo-Hindu groups such as Sivananda and Siddha Yoga (e.g., Altglas 2005, 2007, 2008, 2014a; Strauss 2005; Williamson 2010), not to mention Mata Amritanandamayi Mission (e.g., Lucia 2014a,

2014b, 2014,c; Warriar 2005, 2014), among other groups, are also first and foremost denominational yoga groups. This is simply another account of the fuzziness of scholarly categories and a hint that in order to fully grasp the complexity and contested boundaries of the yoga field it is not enough to rely on an analysis based on its postural manifestations. In this way, while the contours of the yoga field as reconstructed in Chapter Three are negotiated in relation to the fitness/leisure, spiritual/religious, and therapeutic/medical fields, in the next section I would like to problematise my own analysis adding a further layer of complexity, that is, rewriting the contours of the yoga field with a specific concern for its non-postural variants. This signifies accounting for the substantial disappearance of the fitness/leisure practical-discursive register, the apparent softening of the therapeutic/medical register, and conversely the intensification of religious/spiritual influences in shaping the internal articulation of the yoga field as a hybrid field accounted for from the perspective of denominational yoga groups.

### **3. The Yoga Field Revisited**

As previously argued, the *yoga field* is that fragment of the social world organised around shared representations and agonistic conflicts over “what yoga is” and as a consequence “what it is for”. When accounted for from the perspective of denominational yoga groups, the yoga field is simultaneously an autonomous sociocultural domain that follows its own “rules of the game” but is also a hybrid field whose internal articulation is the result of the merging of practical-discursive instances originating – and characterising – other neighboring fields, most notably the spiritual/religious field and to a lesser degree also the therapeutic/medical field. Moreover, the influences and partial overlaps between the spiritual/religious and the therapeutic/medical fields with the yoga field proper unite the postural and denominational portions of this field. However, while the postural portions of the yoga field are also substantially shaped by the practical-discursive register of the fitness/leisure field, its denominational portions are more thoroughly immersed in the spiritual/religious register to the point that they largely overlap with the NRMs field – that as we have seen in its neo-Hindu and neo-guru declinations equates with modern denominational yoga groups – and also with other religious groups and movements. To testify to the usefulness of this analysis is enough to mention how a modern denominational yoga group may share more with an Evangelical or Pentecostal congregation (in terms of their social organisation, overall teleology, and also theology)

than with a postural yoga school. In other words, in order to gain a more accurate picture of the yoga field when tackling the study of its denominational groups we must redefine its contours exacerbating its religious character and downplaying its fitness/leisure practical-discursive logics. Here, the fitness/leisure field and its concerns for the “body beautiful” and leisure activities recede on the background while more strictly religious concerns and dynamics become paramount: what is at stakes is one’s own salvation. Salvation that happens privately within the predestined and self-responsible individual but also publicly in relation to one’s own place within the community and under the omniscient eye of the guru, if not of god.

Naturally, these reflections on the shifting boundaries and variegated practical-discursive influences constituting the yoga field are also instrumental in underlining how the yogic habitus emerging from the yoga field is not a monolithic “structuring structure” (Bourdieu 1977a) that mechanically reproduces the conditions of production from which it originates. On the contrary, it is more accurate to speak of a plurality of habitus that while concurring in the reproduction of the social structures from which they originate – in the guise of the production and reproduction of a scheme of “durable, transposable *dispositions*” (Bourdieu 1977a: 72, emphasis in original) – do so mirroring the internal articulation and the practical and symbolic struggle inherent in the yoga field, thus contributing to the constitution of a “dispositional continuum” (Brown and Jennings 2013: 42). Transposing Brown’s and Jennings’ (2013) attempt to trace the contours of a “martial habitus” accounting for the dispositional continuum that occurs across schools and styles in reference to the cultivation of a specific disposition into the case of the yogic habitus, we could say that the *flowing/fluid*, *focusing/listening* and *practical/ascetic dispositions* delineated in Chapter Three and Four in relation to postural yoga and the *serving*, *contemplative* and *devotional dispositions* that I have traced in relation to Mooji’s teachings (Di Placido 2018; see also Chapter Seven), are not monolithic dispositions. On the contrary, they are “core dispositions” that “tend to have some significant congruence” (Brown and Jennings 2013: 34) across schools and styles while simultaneously being also the expression of the localised ethos of a specific school. In other words, although these dispositions (understood as core dispositions) could very well be found across virtually all styles and schools of postural and denominational yoga respectively, each school seems to place a different emphasis on one or more of these dispositions, thus contributing to its unique version of yogic habitus. Naturally, next to

this we have to stress the fact that the scheme of dispositions that emerges from modern denominational yoga groups has little or nothing in common with the scheme of dispositions that characterise modern postural yoga. As a consequence, the conceptual tool of the “yogic habitus” (Di Placido 2018) has to be understood as a rather flexible device able to capture the manners in which the yoga field produces “schemes of perception and appreciation” (Bourdieu 1977a: 17) that are delineated alongside a dispositional continuum and also in relation to different styles of yoga altogether (e.g., postural and denomination). I will expand my analysis of the yogic habitus in the Chapter Seven. For the moment and after this rather theoretical overview of the yoga field I would like to grant a more empirically grounded understanding of my analysis. In order to do so, I will present the philosophical and discursive foundations of Mooji’s teachings, emphasising their hybrid nature at the intersection of different practical-discursive registers. More specifically, I will argue that the conception of subjectivity that emerges from Mooji’s teachings and that guides the whole of its pedagogical apparatus is characterised by its ambivalent positioning between the religious/philosophical resources offered by a Neo-Vedantic register, with its understanding of consciousness and “god-self”; a simultaneously ascetic and “this worldly” interpretation of world religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity; and a therapeutic register, where individuals are increasingly framed as the sole responsible for their own (ill)health, healing, and self-transformations. The manners in which these apparently contradictory sociocultural domains interact defines the specific ethos of Mooji’s teachings and as a consequence their detailed scrutiny is crucial if we aim to understand the processes of apprenticeship of his devotees at a dispositional level, that is, at a pre-conscious, naturalised, and embodied level, a task that will be carried out in Chapter Seven.

#### **4. Mooji’s Teachings: Philosophical and Discursive Foundations**

The philosophical and discursive foundations of Mooji’s teachings are inherently connected with the complex processes of transformation, interpretation, and translation of neo-Hinduism and modern forms of yoga outside of the Indian continent. His teachings are another case in point of the merging between Indian religious and spiritual resources and esoteric and New Age instances that De Michelis (2004) has rightly identified as one of the defining feature of the neo-Vedantic reformulation of yoga during the Bengali Renaissance. Mooji, as much as Vivekananda and countless other religious reformers and

spiritual entrepreneurs, proposes a specific vision of yoga whose historical accuracy and doctrinal consistencies are less important than its promises of healing and “this worldly” salvation. It is within this general context that we have to understand Mooji’s take on yoga, as he argues that:

This is the real yoga of the life, that the mind which somehow becomes the house of the ‘I’ [personal identity] for a while must turn its face again to the Source, to the Heart. Otherwise, sometimes I say this human thing doesn’t work by itself, we are just surviving, struggling until we meet the Heart again, the Heart’s energy. Then it blesses the mind and absorbs it in unity and synchronicity with Universal Beingness. Then we are happy, very, very happy...this is the great gift of the human experience, the human form. It is said that to get a human body it is itself good fortune...because in a human form consciousness has such a wide display. When you conquer, transcend the limitations of the human projections you can conquer at every level, every world, in this body you can do it. Because the consciousness is sufficiently mature, its potential is very alive to contemplate even God, even to look at God, and to look from God, and then beyond the concept of God into Ultimate Reality.<sup>1</sup>

Mooji’s framing of “the real yoga of the life” as a conversion from the “I” (personal identity) to the “Source” is the landmark element of all his teachings. As this fragment illustrates, this core message is transmitted in the “lingua franca” of the New Age (Heelas 1996: 2) through terms such as “Source”, “Hearth”, “synchronicity”, “Universal Beingness”, “Hearth’s energy”, “Ultimate Reality”, here employed to address self-realisation, “the great gift of the human experience, the human form”. For Mooji the quest for enlightenment is first and foremost expressed through a “this worldly” understanding of salvation where “spiritual seekers can “conquer, transcend the limitations of the human projections...in this body”. When this happens, they can “contemplate even God”, or as he continues “even to look at God, and to look from God, and then beyond the concept of God into Ultimate Reality”. Here, god himself – or “the concept of God” – is first reached for, then seen and recognised, and finally transcended. The recognition of “Ultimate Reality” is spiritual seekers’ final destination, the only desire worth pursuing.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hm5xmgaCVB8> accessed April 02, 2019.

Mooji's teachings are also grounded in a theistic reinterpretation of the 'Bhagavadgītā' and its tripartite model of yoga (*karma*, *jñāna* and *bhakti*), as the next extract clarifies:

Most people, certainly in the West, would feel that yoga is a kind of, more to do with āsana or postures and stretching and all of these things. But the term yoga is much broader than the physical definition of yoga, the physical aspect of yoga...Yoga has many different aspects. There are aspects of yoga like karmayoga...which primarily is about selfless activity. There is jñānayoga, which is the yoga of knowledge or perfect wisdom. This is expressed in the form of self-knowledge and the emphasis is on self-inquiry, to look into one's inner nature, like this. There is bhaktiyoga, which means the yoga of devotion, of surrender to the supreme being.<sup>2</sup>

As a consequence, contrary to postural yoga schools such as Odaka Yoga, Mooji's teachings do not offer specific "techniques of the body" (Mauss 1968) able to operate a set of self-transformations starting from the manipulation, exercise, and mastery of one's own physical body. The body here is only an epiphenomenon of "consciousness" – or ultimate reality – and as such it does not occupy any special concern within this system of teachings and its philosophical and discursive foundations. Conversely, Mooji's teachings can be rightly understood as a particular "technology of the self" (Foucault 1988) aimed at the discovery of one's own "inner nature" via selfless-service, contemplation, and devotion to the figure of the guru and the divine. What emerges from Mooji's understanding of yoga is a particular framing of his devotees' selves at the intersection of a *refusal* of their personal identity and a *discovery* of their "true nature" or "god-self". Let us now see how these central orientations to the self are rooted into specific philosophical and discursive registers that Mooji re-actualises in its own spiritual teachings.

#### **4.1. Neo-Advaita and the "God-Self"**

Mooji's lineage is Advaita, the ancient path of non-duality, which teaches that our true nature is one with the pure awareness that is the indivisible reality. Through his intuitive and direct approach, Moojibaba imparts this

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<sup>2</sup> <https://youtu.be/vTWKqMZABew> accessed February 08, 2019.



understanding as a living experience with great immediacy and accessibility to seekers of Truth.<sup>3</sup>

Mooji's website positions him within the Advaita-Vedanta lineage initiated by the Indian sage Ramana Maharishi (1879 - 1950) (more on Mooji's lineage in the section '*Mooji: a Portrait*') who played a central role in the popularisation of Advaita-Vedanta outside of the constraining limitations of specific guru lineages (*sampradāya*) and "abstracted [it] from traditional monastic structures, thus sidestepping, at least initially, issues of institutional authority and traditional legitimization" (Forsthoefel 2005: 42). Furthermore, as poignantly discussed by Forsthoefel (2005: 43) Ramana Maharishi provided an inherently modern reinterpretation of Advaita-Vedanta as he argued for the primacy of personal experience as the primary source of his spiritual authority. As the previous fragment underlines, Mooji's teachings follow this direction. Here, Mooji's role is to "impart" – relying on his "living experience" – "that our true nature is one with the pure awareness that is the indivisible reality". Moreover, with Mooji self-realisation becomes an actual possibility for many and not a distant mirage for a selected few as he offers an "intuitive and direct approach" characterised by "great immediacy and accessibility". In other words, his teachings are grounded on an "experiential epistemology" that "...favor[s] "experience" and "practice" over "theory" and "doctrines"" (Altgals 2014a: 231). However, considering Mooji's lack of formal training in traditional Advaita-Vedanta philosophy; a consequent dismissal of textual authority in favor of direct experience; and finally, Mooji's attempts to modernise, adapt, and innovate traditional Hindu and yoga practices in order to easily match the epistemological framework of his mostly, Western devotees, Mooji's teachings are better characterised as Neo – or modern – Advaita.

Neo-Advaita is a contemporary spiritual doctrine composed of "teachers/oranizations who draw to a significant degree (though not necessarily exclusively) on the teachings of Advaita Vedanta" (Lucas 2014: 7). It then partially overlaps with neo-Vedanta, "a clearly defined ideological movement" (De Michelis 2004: 39) within neo-Hinduism who has reinterpreted Hinduism in modernist and Western terms (Halbfass 1988). Nonetheless, while neo-Vedanta is primarily a movement that developed within Indian sociocultural elites and whose functions were the promotion of

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<sup>3</sup> <https://mooji.org/monte-sahaja> accessed April 16, 2020.

a specific Hindu religious and political identity in the context of the British colonisation of India (and more specifically of the Bengali Renaissance), neo-Advaita is a later movement often times unconcerned with these dimensions of identity politics but particularly active outside of India and whose primary scope is the dissemination of Advaita-Vedanta as a means to reach enlightenment – or self-realisation – as fast and effortlessly as possible. The Neo-Advaita movement is best expressed by the contemporary “[n]eo-Advaita satsang movement” (Kosi 2019), a group of Western neo-Advaita teachers who largely studied with H.W.L Poonja (1910-1997) also known as Poonjaji or Papaji (Mooji’s own teacher), who popularised Advaita-Vedanta in the West starting from the 1980s proposing an effortless vision of enlightenment (e.g., Kosi 2019; Swartz 2012). Moreover, a fruitful way to position Mooji’s teachings is to refer to Lisotte Frisk’s (2002) formulation of the “satsang network”. As Frisk (2002: 66) poignantly argues:

The core teaching of the Satsang network is that enlightenment is here for everyone at the present moment. The only thing one need do to become enlightened is drop all concepts, ideas and beliefs, even about enlightenment, leave ego behind, leave mind behind, drop the idea of being unenlightened, that something is missing, and give up seeking. In this process, there is a total experience of everything as divine, and a willingness to embrace everything. Beyond the individual mind there is consciousness, nothingness, non-individuality, no sense of self, emptiness, and God or the divine. There is a clear emphasis that everyone is already enlightened – we only have to realize it.

In other words, enlightenment, or self-realisation, and its postulated effortless confirmation in the “here and now”, are the primary concerns of not only Mooji’s teachings, but of a plethora of other “Hindu inspired meditation movements” (Williamson 2010).

Both Neo-Advaita and neo-Vedanta originate from Advaita-Vedanta (literally not-duality), a branch of Vedanta (literally the goal of the Vedas), one of the six orthodox schools of Hindu philosophy (together with Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Samkhya, Yoga, Mīmāṃsā). Advaita-Vedanta “asserts that absolute reality is infinite, formless, non-dual awareness, and that the supreme goal of human life is to realize this awareness as the ground of one’s being” (Lucas 2014: 7). It postulates an ontological continuity between individuals’ “true self” or soul (*atman*) and “ultimate reality” or god (*brahman*) whose experiential realisation, or better knowledge (*vidyā*), is the purpose of the Advaita Vedantins. Those who recognise the illusory nature of all sensory perceptions and physical manifestations (*maya*) – including one’s own sense of self (*jiva*) – and

conversely identify with pure, non-dual awareness (*bhraman*), are said to have reached freedom or liberation (*moksha*). Their personal identity, once recognised its illusoriness, transfigures into the realisation of god, or “god-self” (*brahmajñāna*, literally god-realisation).

The textual roots of Advaita-Vedanta rest on the oldest ‘*Upanishads*’ (1800 – 300 B.C.E), a collection of Sanskrit sacred texts. More specifically, Advaita-Vedanta relies on three textual sources: the already mentioned ‘*Upanishads*’, the ‘*Brahma Sutras*’ (500 – 200 B.C.E), and finally the ‘*Bhagavadgītā*’, which are collectively known as the *Prasthanatrayi* (literally three sources). In a nutshell, what differentiates Advaita-Vedanta, understood as “a classic system of spiritual realization” (Deutsch 1988) from other Indian religions, philosophies, and Hindu schools is its emphasis on *jivanmukti*, that is, the possibility of one’s own liberation while still alive. It is through “this worldly” understanding of salvation that Advaita-Vedanta reinterpreted some of the foundational concepts of the metaphysical and soteriological teachings of the most important Indian religious traditions (Hirst 2005), such as brahman, atman, and moksha to name just a few. And again, it is “this worldly” understanding of salvation that has proved to be particularly appealing to the transnational developments of neo-Advaita and neo-Vedanta and their central concern with practitioners’ realisation of their “god-self”, a concept that, as eloquently argued by scholars such as De Michelis (2004: 127-140) and Altglas (2014a: 201-281), among others, has been progressively transformed by the individualistic and individualising ethos and self-centered nature of the New Age and its “self-spirituality” (Heelas 1996: 2). This is well exemplified in the ‘*Sahaja Precepts*’, an “[e]ssential guidance for all who are in search of that which is the highest and most true within themselves”.<sup>4</sup> In fact, as precept three explicitly prescribes:

Remain in harmony with God – the Supreme Self and Truth. Live within the recognition that the God-Self is the sole reality and the very essence of yourself and all that exists. All else is imagined. Therefore, live with the consciousness that you are always in the presence of God. Gradually, you will come to know that yourself and the presence of God are one.

Paraphrasing, Mooji’s teachings revolves around the attempt to transmit to his devotees the experiential access to the knowledge of “God – the Supreme Self and Truth”. Here,

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<sup>4</sup> <https://mooji.org/sahaja-precepts> accessed April 16, 2020.

“the God-Self is the sole reality and the very essence of yourself and all that exists” while “[a]ll else is imagined”. The non-duality proposed by Mooji is one in which individuals’ true selves and god – or ultimate reality – are one. There are substantially three ways that favour spiritual seekers’ self-realisation – or non-dual recognition of their oneness with god – whose textual and historical legacy largely reside in a neo-Vedantic reinterpretation of the ‘*Bhagavadgītā*’. Let us discuss each one of them in turn in the next section.

#### **4.2. Karma, Jñāna, and Bhakti Yoga(s) Against the Ego**

Mooji’s non-dual proposal of salvation needs to be further contextualised within the neo-Vedantic reinterpretation of the ‘*Bhagavadgītā*’ (III B.C.E.—I C.E.) that took place during the Bengali Renaissance (first three quarters of the nineteenth century). Yoga, during this period, was substantially sanitised and reframed through theistic lenses, Christian influences, and Western esoteric thought in order to match the “tastes” and political aspirations of both British colonisers and Bengali socio-cultural elites (e.g., De Michelis 2004; King 1999; White 2009). According to a neo-Vedantic reading, the ‘*Bhagavadgītā*’ or Song of God is positioned as one of the central texts of the philosophical and religious literature of India and is part of the Indian epic the ‘*Mahabharata*’ (IV B.C.E.—IV C.E.). It is written in the form of a dialogue between the Hindu deity Krishna and the warrior Arjuna. The ‘*Bhagavadgītā*’ introduces the classical neo-Vedantic model of the three yoga(s) (*karma*, *jñāna* and *bhakti*) in a systematic manner. The impact of this model to the state of the contemporary yoga field is testified by the fact that – to my knowledge – all denominational yoga groups rely on a selective combination of these three paths, of course blended with and adjusted to the specific ethos of each group, its doctrinal preferences, and the unique charismatic and pedagogical skills of their guru.

The core of *karmayoga*, or the yoga of action can be described, quoting directly from the ‘*Bhagavadgītā*’ (Chapter 2, Verse 47) as follows: “To action alone hast thou a right and never at all to its fruits; let not the fruits of action be thy motive; neither let there be in thee any attachment to inaction” (Radhakrishnan 1993). In simple words, *karmayoga* is presented as a form of self-less service, a form of practice, or action, where the individual is not concerned with gaining something for him or herself – economically or otherwise – from his or her activities: on the contrary, *karmayoga* is a duty (*dharma*) where the karma yogi cultivates an orientation towards just doing. This is one of the paths towards self-realisation proposed by Mooji. It is in this light that Mooji’s ashram,

alongside most contemporary neo-Hindu ashrams (e.g., Lucia 2014b; Pandya 2014, 2016; Warriar 2003), proposes a conspicuous and well-planned programme of karmayoga whose details are discussed later. Here, I would like to simply recall how this self-less orientation to action is translated within the ‘*Sahaja Precepts*’, especially precepts nine and twelve, which respectively encourage Mooji’s devotees to “[b]e in full service to the needs of the moment, even if it feels inconvenient to the mind. Don’t wait for someone else to fulfill that which is really your duty in the moment” (Precept Nine); and “[r]est but don’t be idle, complacent or lazy” (Precept Twelve). A critical reading of karmayoga cannot fail to capture the disciplinary instances and the lack of material gains (for the devotees) inherent in this self-less form of spiritual work which nonetheless is legitimised by those who propose it as it challenges spiritual seekers’ ego identity, as I have argued elsewhere (Di Placido 2018). Of course, karmayoga also grants “free labour” for the accomplishment of whatever project is desired by the gurus, ranging from the construction of their ashram’s infrastructures to the dissemination of their teachings (e.g., Lucia 2014b; Swartz 2012).<sup>5</sup>

The second path to self-realisation presented in the Gita is *jñānayoga*, or the yoga of knowledge, which postulates the need to discriminate between what is real (*brahman*) and the unreal (*maya*) if one has to attain salvation (*moksha*). The best-known method advocated within this path is *jñāna-vichara*, or *atma-vichara* (self-inquiry), made famous by the already mentioned Ramana Maharshi and then further popularised West via the mediation of teachers such as H.W.L Poonja and his students, among which figure the prominent neo-Advaita gurus Gangaji (1942 -), Andrew Cohen (1954 -) and Ganga Mira (born in 1947 as Genevieve De Coux) among others (of course next to Mooji himself). Self-inquiry is in fact thought to guide practitioners to self-realisation through the means of intuitive and constant effort in discovering the fallacy of the ‘I’ thought or self-identity (Osborne 2006) and is one of the core practices also promoted by Mooji. Although Mooji has always relied on this method in his twenty-three years of teaching, starting from the Winter of 2017 he has also begun to teach his own method of *jñānayoga*: this new method, known by his devotees as ‘*The Invitation*’, is a simplified version of self-inquiry. It is available in both audio and book format. The audio version, which comes in studio recording or live version of different lengths (10 and 30 minutes) simply requires

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<sup>5</sup> [http://www.advaita.org.uk/discourses/trad\\_neo/neo\\_vedanta\\_swartz.htm](http://www.advaita.org.uk/discourses/trad_neo/neo_vedanta_swartz.htm) accessed April 25, 2020.

practitioners' attention to the words of the guru for a short period of time as he guides them through a series of introspective questions oriented towards achieving the experiential confirmation of their divine nature. The book devoted to the exposition of Mooji's Invitation now functions as the Programmatic Manifesto of his teachings: its evocative title is '*An Invitation to Freedom: Immediate Awakening for Everyone*' (Mooji 2018a). It is described in his website as "...a master key to authentic freedom". As the book description continues, it is "[t]hrough *An Invitation to Freedom*" that "thousands of people around the world are waking up to the natural ever-present Truth as their living, unfading experience. This book dares you to be free" (emphasis in original).<sup>6</sup> In line with the pedagogical intentions of simplicity and accessibility or as Swarts (2012) calls it, "the democratic ethos" of neo-Advaita, '*The Invitation*' is presented as "...quick, simple and powerful". As quick, simple, and powerful that is enough to "[o]pen it, follow its guidance earnestly, and you will find yourself Home". A very appealing message of "Immediate Awakening for Everyone" that seems particularly suitable for contemporary Western spiritual seekers that, socialised to a culture that promotes "instant gratification" (e.g., Lash 1977; Roberts 2014) would be easily discouraged to pursue a spiritual path that promises to be long (perhaps even countless lifetimes), arduous, and intrinsically renunciatory.

The third path to salvation discussed in the Gita is *bhaktiyoga*, or the yoga of devotion. It implies practitioners' total commitment and surrender to the love and devotion of a specific deity, or the guru, which is in fact considered no other from god. As we will see in more details in the next chapter, this often translates into devotee's desire to be physically close to the guru (Srinivas T. 2010; Lucia 2014a, 2018a), do anything to please him such as work hard within the ashram's premises or sing and perform devotional songs and hymns to his figure, usually after *satsang* (the main pedagogical device of Mooji's teachings) and in other ritualised moments of collective prayer. As Mooji himself argues at the end of '*The Sahaja Precepts*' (2019): "Let your hearts be filled with gratitude to God. Know that grace produces the fruits of wisdom, kindness, humility and self-surrender; these quicken the journey Home". In other words, *bhaktiyoga* serves the purpose of entrusting the divine – and as a consequence the guru himself – with the power of shaping and guiding one's own life, relegating the workings

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<sup>6</sup> <https://mooji.org/books/an-invitation-to-freedom> accessed April 20, 2020.

of the ego as a momentary inconvenient that ought to be overcome by “gratitude to God” and knowing that “grace produces the fruits of wisdom, kindness, humility and self-surrender”. Self-realisation then follows naturally as one surrenders oneself to the guru.

To summarise, Mooji’s neo-Advaita teachings propose a neo-Vedantic reading of the *Bhagavadgītā*’s model of the three yoga(s) where work, contemplation, and prayer are promoted as the real means to salvation. Mooji himself synthesises this point with a certain clarity as he argues:

Know also that a life of discipline [karmayoga], Self-contemplation [jñānayoga] and prayer [bhaktiyoga] dissolves the ego-identity. Be open and compassionate towards all, knowing that every action expressed with love, wisdom and devotion to the Supreme One is in service to your own Liberation and to the happiness and spiritual upliftment of all beings.<sup>7</sup>

These teachings are framed in opposition to what are perceived to be the effortful and esoteric practices of Hatha Yoga, or more in general postural and “practice-based” forms of yoga, often mocked by Mooji with the derogatory expression “spiritual gymnastics”.<sup>8</sup> Postural yoga practices, in fact, are considered a lesser spiritual practice (*sadhana*) than the ones he proposes. However, the “repudiation” of physical and esoteric practices is not merely the “taste” of neo-Advaita teachers such as Mooji but it derives from both Orthodox Hinduism and Indian popular representations of yoga and yoga practitioners (Singleton 2010; White 2009). In fact, tantric yogis, that is, those traditionally practicing Hatha Yoga, were considered with “disgust” and as agents of ritual pollution well before the Western colonisation of India and the already mentioned Bengali Renaissance and were associated with promiscuous sexuality and unseemly conduct (White 2009).

What is interesting to notice then is how different types of yoga (for instance denominational and postural) produce radically different types of asceticism and therefore, models of salvation. Restricting our discussion to contemporary, Western manifestations of yoga, we can state that: on the one hand, postural yoga schools such as Odaka Yoga make of the body their unsurpassable starting point, that is, the *source of*, the *location for* and the *means to* (Shilling 2005) their promises of healing, self-

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<sup>7</sup> <https://mooji.org/sahaja-precepts> accessed April 21, 2021.

<sup>8</sup> [https://mooji.tv/freemedia/when-resistance-comes-you-are-on-to-something/?\\_fm\\_s=spiritual%20gymnastics&action=recent&\\_fm\\_video\\_subtitle=0&\\_fm\\_media\\_type=7&\\_fm\\_media\\_topic=0&\\_fm\\_length=0&\\_fm\\_media\\_source=0](https://mooji.tv/freemedia/when-resistance-comes-you-are-on-to-something/?_fm_s=spiritual%20gymnastics&action=recent&_fm_video_subtitle=0&_fm_media_type=7&_fm_media_topic=0&_fm_length=0&_fm_media_source=0) accessed April 20, 2020.

actualisation, and self-transcendence, thus taking care of, glorifying, and also divinising practitioners' bodies; on the other hand, neo-Advaita teachers and neo-Vedantic denominational schools (and more generally neo-Hindu and neo-guru movements) – here represented by Mooji's teachings – provide a vision of asceticism that does not impose any particular discipline or manipulation of the body but conversely is fully concerned with spiritual seekers' discovery of their "god-self". An important element of this soteriology is then to weaken devotees' ego, whether through work (*karmayoga*), contemplation (*jñānayoga*) or devotion (*bhaktiyoga*), or most often a combination of the three, providing a "this worldly" salvation primarily characterised by inner renunciation. In other words, while postural yoga attempts to transform practitioners' selves through the mastery of their bodies, denominational yoga takes a different route to salvation, framed by Mooji as "the most direct path" to enlightenment.<sup>9</sup> Here, it is devotees' ordinary sense of self that is the object of one's own attention, as it must be first understood in its (mis)functioning and then transcended if not removed or replaced by mystical knowledge or the presence of god. A close reading of 'Sahaja Precepts' number two and four clarifies this point:

Trust and follow wholeheartedly Moojibaba's guidance and pointings. They help you to overcome ignorance and arrogance which are the bitter fruits of the ego-mind. Like this you will be freed from all negative states and rest in the natural and effortless Presence you are (Precept Two).

Strive to discover the immensity of impersonal love, which is egoless, and sustains, embraces and nurtures the whole world (Precept Four).

Within the framework of Mooji's teachings ordinary personhood equates to "ignorance and arrogance" as "false identity is at the root of all suffering on this planet", as Mooji himself underlines elsewhere.<sup>10</sup> The guru is then needed to overcome "the bitter fruits of the ego-mind" and guide practitioners to discover the immensity of impersonal love", which is inherently "egoless". Here, personal realisation (e.g., self-actualisation), desires, and life projects are nothing but illusions. All that counts is beyond one's own ego.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/moojiji/photos/come-to-this-most-direct-path-of-inquiry-to-be-cured-from-the-delusion-of-egonot/10154341495848962/> accessed April 21, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mredBWXvxYg> accessed May 04, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> For more details on this point see Note 37 Appendix One.



What strikes me as paradoxical about this anti-egoic conception of individuality inspired by and legitimised on the ground of the Advaita-Vedanta notion of the “god-self” is that it seems to inadvertently foster a certain psychologisation of salvation (Altgals 2014a). Although it is the “god-self” – as intrinsically egoless and all-encompassing – that constitutes the true self of the individual it is also true that to reach this realisation involves a certain mastery of one’s own “false self”, or “ego-mind”. As Swarts (2012) puts it, self-realisation to be more than a flicker experience requires “a mature adult” as “enlightenment takes place in the mind”. In other words, there seems to be an ambiguous connection between a “this worldly” notion of salvation as effortlessly available “here and now” and the psychologisation of spiritual seekers selves, whether godly or otherwise. I set myself the task to briefly unpack this tension in the next sections.

#### 4.3. *The Contended Self*

The self at the center of Mooji’s teachings is inherently a *contested self*. It is contested as it sits in between the world of ordinary consciousness or ego-personal-identity (the unavoidable starting point of spiritual seekers’ search for enlightenment) and the world of self-transcendence, that is, one’s own identification with *brahman*, the realisation of the “god-self” (the aspired aim of the self-discovery provided by Mooji).<sup>12</sup> This contested self is then the battleground between ignorance (*avidya*) and self-realisation (*ātma-jñāna*), two opposing forces which tear apart spiritual seekers’ sense of self as they attempt to detach from the former and fully conquer the latter. In other words, the contested self is first and foremost an analytical category I introduce to deify the incommensurability between personal identity and self-transcendence and thus to theorise the spaces in between these different conceptions of subjectivity.

On the one hand, there is the ordinary sense of self, namely the identification of the person with its body-mind unity, psychological make up, desires, aspirations, performed actions, memories and so on, or as Mooji (2016: 54, 66) calls it, “the spell of personhood” or “the theater of consciousness”. Here, individuals’ sense of identity is biographically determined and is understood as the source of individuals’ agency as they self-reflexively navigate the constraints and opportunities of everyday life in the attempt to actualise their lives as “projects” (e.g., Giddens 1991: 33; Shilling 2012: 4). Moreover, this is also a

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<sup>12</sup> See for instance Mooji’s (2012, 2018a, 2020) reflections on this ambivalence between practitioners’ sense of self as separate individuals and their “essence” as “pure consciousness”.

portrait of the “neoliberal self” (McGuigan 2014) in action, the ideal-typical model of subjectivity of contemporary, neoliberal societies where the normative ideals of self-responsibility, self-actualisation, and self-care govern individuals as they govern themselves. On the other hand, there is a somehow “extraordinary” sense of self (extraordinary from the perspective of a traditional Western conception of subjectivity), where the dual distinction between personal identity and that which is external to it (e.g., all that exist beside the body-mind of the individual) collapses under the spiritual insights of mystical knowledge. Here, “the person vanishes”<sup>13</sup> and what remains is only the “god-self”, the all-pervading principle that animates all of creation. Personal identity is meaningless to say the least and individual’s agency, or social action, needs to be drastically re-thought to be made sense of. The realised person moves guided by a “divine energy” that washes away the ego. His or her actions are perfected by the conquered oneness with god who “substitutes” the limited sense of identity of ordinary consciousness.<sup>14</sup> The realised person acts but is god himself that acts through them, or as Mooji (2012: 175) eloquently states, he or she becomes “emptiness walking in the form of a human being”.

The contested self is in fact simultaneously human and divine, ego-centered and ego-less, illusory and real (in neo-Advaita terms). It is a project oriented toward a future horizon of self-actualisation while it is already accomplished in its godly nature. Nonetheless, the contested self aspires to salvation, a salvation that here is not a matter of extreme austerities or long-lasting practices (*tapas*) but is the fruit of a “this worldly” asceticism of “inner renunciation” which contributes to blur the boundaries between the earthly (inherently changing, illusory, and unreliable) and the divine (unchanging, real, and timeless). As Mooji’s website persuasively states in presenting the guru’s teaching:

Awakening to our real nature does not mean we are to acquire something new, but rather that we must discover within ourselves that which is timelessly pure and in harmony with God. Therefore, there is no need to renounce one’s family, worldly duties, ambitions, religion or any other human expression. It

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<sup>13</sup> <https://mooji.tv/freemedia/you-must-disappear/> and <https://mooji.org/quote-of-the-day/12-02-2019> accessed April 24, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TfMBd9nXWXs> accessed April 16, 2020.

is this very universality, simplicity and naturalness which bring people from all over the world to sit with Moojibaba.<sup>15</sup>

Mooji's version of perennial philosophy does not require "to renounce one's family, worldly duties, ambitions, religion or any other human expression". On the contrary, on the ground of the ontological continuity between *atman* and *brahman* and the doctrine of *jivamukti*, "this world" is considered as the locus where self-realisation occurs. The renunciation required is primarily an "inner renunciation". Paradoxically, then, the illusory nature of "this world" presupposed by systems of knowledge such as Advaita-Vedanta is momentarily suspended as "god's grace"<sup>16</sup> imbues this very world with significance. It is within this conception of "this worldly" salvation and its model of inner renunciation that enlightenment does not merely function as "[t]he highest purpose of life"<sup>17</sup> as often claimed by Mooji. Conversely, on the path to enlightenment spiritual seekers progress also in terms of personal growth and self-transformation (at the personal level), thus contributing to a paradoxical scenario where *self-discovery*, *self-denial*, and *self-improvement* closely interact within the very same *contested self*.

As I have previously argued, within the context of Mooji's teachings self-discovery is primarily a matter of realising one's own "god-self" while self-denial is framed as the inner renunciation of one's own ego.<sup>18</sup> What remains to be seen is then how self-improvement and personal growth play out in a scenario that apparently challenges them at their roots. However, as a closer look is bound to reveal, Mooji's teachings do not deny the possibility and even the importance of self-improvement and personal growth but simply relegate these dimensions to the background. In simple terms, Mooji does not teach how to become a "better person" but grants it as a welcomed side-effect of one's own spiritual refining.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> <https://mooji.org/monte-sahaja> accessed April 16, 2020.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P6ky7vsB75Q> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TfMBd9nXWXs> accessed April 24, 2020.

<sup>17</sup> <https://mooji.org/mooji> accessed April 24, 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Mooji reiterates this central dimension of his message of salvation in a recent stasang as he argues that: "Once freed from the cage of personhood, you are coming to the place of 'I Am'. The 'I Am' removes the 'I-person' identity and again abides naturally in the 'I'. Now you are experiencing yourself more as being. This is the first great step of awakening - the shift from person to presence." Mooji's newsletter, October 18, 2020.

<sup>19</sup> <https://mooji.tv/freemedia/your-awakening-is-your-gift-to-the-world/> accessed May 05, 2020.

#### 4.3.1. *Therapy or Salvation?*

The person is not really true, is not the Truth. It is just imagined from the Self. It is imagined. So I call it the imaginary self or the imagined self. And it is the sense of the person that is experiencing all these crises and difficulties and is feeling in some way distracted by or caught up in its own projections. But it doesn't see it as just merely projections...And is the exposure of the egoic identity as unreal that frees you into the real. To see from the true place. Please contemplate that, continue to do it in fact until this tendency is cleared until you are cured, cured of the habits and of the reflex to identify with the person, to keep functioning from personhood.<sup>20</sup>

The “sense of person”, what Mooji calls “the imaginary self or the imagined self” suffers as it experiences “all these crises and difficulties” that pertain to human existence. Salvation from this suffering is here described as seeing “from the true place”, that is, to cease to identify with ordinary identity and the suffering that comes with it. In order to conquer what Mooji elsewhere refers as “true knowledge”<sup>21</sup> or “real health”<sup>22</sup>, spiritual seekers have to “contemplate” his teachings and “continue to do it” until they are “cured” from personal identity. Given these premises it may then not be surprising that Mooji frames salvation as “the greatest healing”<sup>23</sup> while ego identity is defined as “the great disease of mankind” (Mooji 2020: 57). This is somehow paradoxical as he also rejects a reading of his teachings as “a replacement for any therapy or other medical treatment or diagnosis”.<sup>24</sup> For instance, in an extract from his book *Vaster than Sky, Greater than Space*, Mooji (2016: 211) poignantly states:

You must decide: do you want therapy or Truth? If you want therapy, you can find many reputable therapists and doctors who can help you in some way. If you want Truth, pay attention to what I am pointing to.

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<sup>20</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UqeVqOHgdII> accessed April 22, 2020.

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/moojiji/photos/true-knowledge-means-to-be-emptyempty-of-identity-and-belief-inand-attachment-to/10156392892548962/> accessed April 24, 2020.

<sup>22</sup> <https://youtu.be/vTWKqMZABew> accessed February 08, 2019.

<sup>23</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RXXPu\\_be8RA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RXXPu_be8RA); <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T-2CQJ-NoCA>; and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=czFQAhDQSQw> accessed April 22, 2020.

<sup>24</sup> <https://mooji.org/physical-and-mental-well-being-faqs> accessed April 22, 2020.

However, despite the overt rejection of a therapeutic reading of his message of salvation, the therapeutic bending of Mooji's teachings is not only evidenced by the language he relies on to frame them but also - and perhaps most importantly - by the time he devotes to teach or reply to questions that regard: "body/mind", "ego/personality", "emotions/thoughts", "experiences", "family", "fear", "identity", "love", "relationship" and "worthiness".<sup>25</sup> These themes figure prominently as some of the main areas of concern of psychological interventions across approaches and techniques not to mention their importance within the contemporary self-help literature, as a cursory exploration of any physical or online library testifies. In fact, the inextricable nexus between "therapeutic culture" (Furedi 2004; Illouz 2008) and contemporary spiritualities signifies a conflation between the poles of physical, emotional and psychological health (read therapy and wellbeing), and salvation (Altglas 2014a). In this context, therapy and wellbeing seem to offer the categories of thought and the rationale through which to interpret salvation. Categories such as normality, pathology, subjectivity, mind, emotions, self, healing and so on are in fact landmark elements of therapeutic culture as much as of today's spiritualities (e.g., Palmisano and Pannofino 2021; Epstein 2006; Fuller 2006; Hammer 2004; Rakow 2013). Of course, modern forms of yoga, Mooji's teachings included, are not immune to these general sociocultural trends (e.g., Altgals 2014a; De Michelis 2004, Jain 2014a).

However, there are a number of unbridgeable differences between therapeutic approaches in *stricto sensu* such as psychotherapy and Mooji's teachings, the most important being the different aims they set themselves to accomplish. In fact, while the former has the primary

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<sup>25</sup>[https://mooji.tv/freemedia/?\\_fm\\_s=ego+delusion&\\_fm\\_video\\_subtitle=0&\\_fm\\_media\\_type=7&\\_fm\\_media\\_topic=0&\\_fm\\_length=0&action=Search&\\_fm\\_media\\_source=0](https://mooji.tv/freemedia/?_fm_s=ego+delusion&_fm_video_subtitle=0&_fm_media_type=7&_fm_media_topic=0&_fm_length=0&action=Search&_fm_media_source=0) accessed April 22, 2020.

purpose of resolving individuals' tensions reestablishing a healthier relationship with their own ego - or to say otherwise, to improve their lives - the latter aims at its transcendence. Here the ego is not something to be healed or to be perfected but simply something to be rejected on the ground of its illusory nature which furthermore is framed as the cause of all suffering.<sup>26</sup> In other words, the ambivalent picture that emerges from this analysis is that Mooji's teachings rely on the language of therapeutic culture and touch upon themes that are pivotal across therapeutic approaches and techniques, thus being substantially in line with the psychologisation of the contemporary religious/spiritual field; but nonetheless, their guiding principle remains the "god-realisation" of neo-Advaita. Here, the language of therapeutic culture is used to legitimise an understanding of spiritual seekers' individuality that is substantially at odd with the mainstream conceptions of subjectivity, self-improvement, and personal growth that usually underpins the usage of this language. This ambivalence, however, becomes the all more plausible if one considers Mooji's preference for self-transcendence over self-improvement within a general cultural context where, as rightly argued by Altglas (2014a: 282):

...exotic religious resources are popularized as authentic and efficient means to manage emotions and attitudes, in relation to an increasingly pervasive ideal of self-realization. This ideal, while desired by social actors, also reflects increasingly strong demands of autonomy and flexibility made upon them. Thus, exotic religious resources, along with other religious and therapeutic techniques, contribute to the wider trend of the psychologization of contemporary social life.

Within this sociocultural climate it becomes incredibly difficult for spiritual teachers and seekers alike to transmit an ideal of enlightenment that is completely unmixed with a "pervasive ideal of self-realisation" framed in therapeutic and psychologising terms. Here, as argued by Altglas (2014a: 218), "contemporary gurus' adaptation to the ethos of personal growth is striking in their presentation of what salvation is about" as "they have undertaken an inner-worldly interpretation of "Self-realization"" where "the notion that Vedanta's ultimate goals (the knowledge of Brahman) entail the denial of individuality has been lost in contemporary neo-Hindu movements, while personal growth has become the ultimate objective". Although I agree with Altglas that contemporary gurus blend and

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<sup>26</sup> For more details on this point see Note 38 Appendix One.

bend their teachings following the logics of a widespread “ethos of personal growth” I contend that at least within Mooji’s teachings this ethos and its consequent notion of “inner-worldly interpretation of “Self-realization”” is far from having fully replaced a notion of self-realisation understood as the “knowledge of Brahman”. Conversely, I would be more inclined to state that self-realisation is still central to neo-Hindu and neo-Advaita groups although it is increasingly reframed through the language of therapy, personal growth, and self-improvement. In fact, accounting for Mooji’s teachings it is possible to notice how the realisation of the “god-self” still functions as their organising principle at a discursive as much as at a practical level, as I will unpack in the next chapter. What is certain, however, is that these two practical-discursive universes, the therapeutic/medical and the spiritual/religious, increasingly lose their respective boundaries as they interact, dialogue, and influence one another as spiritual teachers and entrepreneurs of the soul innovate and rework specific notions of salvation in order to match the “tastes” of contemporary spiritual seekers.

## **5. Mooji: A Portrait**

Mooji (born Anthony Moo-Young in 1954-), also affectionately known as MoojiBaba by his devotees, is a modern or neo-Advaita, Jamaican born teacher. According to the ‘*Watkins’ Spiritual 100 List for 2019*’ and ‘*2020*’ Mooji is respectively listed number 37 and 48 among the most influential living spiritual teachers of the year.<sup>27</sup> I have seen him for the first time in 2013 on a YouTube video after a friend recommended him to me and I have met him in person in October 2015, during a 7 days silent retreat. The retreat was held in the echovillage Zmar, located about one-hour drive from *Monte Sahaja*, Mooji’s ashram, where later I had the chance to return a few times as both part of my seva and my research.

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<sup>27</sup> The three main criteria taken into account when compiling this list are: first, “[t]he person has to be alive as of January 1st” of the year; second, “[t]he person has to have made a unique and spiritual contribution on a global scale”; and third, “[t]he person is frequently googled, appears in Nielsen Data, has a Wikipedia page, and is actively talked about throughout the Internet” <https://www.watkinsmagazine.com/watkins-spiritual-100-list-for-2019> accessed July 09, 2020.



**Figure 1:** Mooji.<sup>28</sup>

Mooji is considered by his devotees to be a direct representative of the lineage of the Indian sage Ramana Maharshi and H.W.L Poonja, Mooji’s own teacher. His website, under the heading ‘*Salutations*’, provides a list of “...saints, sages, prophets and ambassadors of Truth”<sup>29</sup> that have actively played a role in Mooji’s own spiritual path or that Mooji feels particularly drawn to. The first to be mentioned is of course H.W.L Poonja, addressed also with the powerful label “The Dispeller of Ignorance”; the second is Ramana Maharshi, also known as “The Sage of Arunachala”; the third is nothing less than Jesus Christ himself, a figure often recalled in Mooji’s talks and teachings and – as we will see – one of the central inspirations in Mooji’s earlier religious upbringing; other important references are Sri Ramakrishna (1836-1886), whose book ‘*The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*’ (1942) touched Mooji profoundly contributing to his “turn East” and the rationalisation – in neo-Advaita terms – of his own spiritual experiences; Sri Nisargadatta Maharaji (1987-1981), also called “The Sage of Mumbai”, whose teachings on the nature of “the Self” are often referred to by Mooji himself; Sri Yogi Ramsuratkumar (1918-2001), “The Divine Beggar”, with whom – together with Ma Devaki (1952-),

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<sup>28</sup> <https://photos.mooji.org/> accessed October 12, 2020.

<sup>29</sup> <https://mooji.org/salutations-to-all-masters> accessed April 24, 2020.



Ramsuratkumar's closest devotee or "eternal slave"<sup>30</sup> as the yogi himself addressed her on the ground of her unfading devotion – Mooji spent some time in Arunachala during his first travel to India (1993-1994); and finally, the only woman mentioned among Mooji' "spiritual heroes", the renowned Indian saint Sri Anandamayi Ma (1996-1982).

Importantly, however, according to the traditional Hindu conceptions of *paramparā* (lineage), *sampradaya* (tradition), and *guru-shishya* (teacher-student relationship), neither Poonja nor Mooji were entitled to claim their roles as representatives of Ramana's lineage (e.g., Lucas 2011, 2014; Swartz 2012). Poonja had visited Ramana Maharshi only a few times before the sage passed on and had never received a formal endorsement for his succeeding role as a teacher. In a similar vein, despite Mooji spending several months "at his Master's feet"<sup>31</sup> in 1993-1994 and later in 1997, and the two sharing a very close master-disciple bond, formal rituals of succession were not performed or put in the record. Moreover, Mooji himself, next to other Poonja's students if not the majority of contemporary gurus, has been repeatedly accused of a plethora of misbehaviors (e.g., CEI 2017; Kosi 2019; Scofield 2019; White 2019) whose mediatic resonance exploded as Monte Sahaja has been recently at the center of Be Scofield's investigation published on March 4, 2019 in her anti-cult website 'The Guru'. Here, through a series of interviews with ex-members (and possible current members too), Scofield argues – leaving the informed reader wondering about the objectivity of her inquisitory tones – that: Mooji runs an abusive cult characterised by coercive measures such as isolation and lack of food for undisciplined devotees; sleeps with his students; practices exorcisms; and has built "his Portuguese empire" with over 200.000€ of unreported cash smuggled into Portugal with the help of a number of devotees (Scofield 2019). Of course, these accusations are fully rejected and framed as "rumors and distortions" by Mooji's closest devotees, who "know first-hand that these claims are untrue and bear no resemblance to life in the ashram nor to our beloved Moojibaba".<sup>32</sup> Moreover, as they add in a letter entitled 'Response to Rumours and Allegations about Mooji, the Sangha and Monte Sahaja Ashram in Portugal'(2019) "[t]hose who have been touched by Mooji's presence and wisdom in the heart should not be easily swayed by such shallow and baseless accusations

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<sup>30</sup><https://www.beezone.com/Ramsuratkumar/DevakiMa.html> and <https://hohmpress.com/authors-hohm-press/ma-devaki-author.html> accessed April 24, 2020.

<sup>31</sup> <https://mooji.org/mooji> accessed April 24, 2020.

<sup>32</sup> <https://mooji.org/monte-sahaja-response-to-allegations-of-abusive-cult> accessed April 25, 2020.

but should refer back to their own heart's testimony".<sup>33</sup> This implies that if they are "swayed by" it is not on the ground of Mooji's supposedly unseeing conduct but as a consequence of their lack of real connection with the guru. The tone of this letter seems to echo with what Lucia (2018a: 975) observed in relation to "guru transgressions" which are either fully justified "as evidence of their divinity" or completely denied by devotees, as in this case. Moreover, this letter is also an example of "mitigating statement" (Remski 2019: 269), that is, an attempt to redirect accusations away from the (supposed) perpetrator towards the victims, therefore implicitly or explicitly denying their experiences and narratives of abuse. Naturally, neither judging Mooji guilty of these accusations (as Scofield masterfully does) nor attempting to deny or downplay their truthfulness (as Mooji's devotees faithfully do), is the scope to this thesis whose primary concern, instead, is largely analytical rather than journalistic or hagiographical.

Nevertheless, Mooji is not only considered by his devotees as the direct representative of this lineage, but also as an embodiment of the divine. In scholarly terms, these traits can be fruitfully accounted for with Max Weber's (1968: 215-54) theory of legitimate forms of domination, and more precisely with his notions of "traditional" and "charismatic authority", partly explored in Chapter Three. Traditional authority is defined as "resting on an established belief in the sanctity of immemorial traditions and the legitimacy of those exercising authority under them" (Weber 1968: 215). Mooji's claim to represent Ramana's lineage could therefore be read as Mooji's attempt to legitimise his role and validate his teachings through his identification with a well-respected guru and the "authentic" and authoritative tradition he embodies. This type of authority, however, can also be framed as being discursively legitimised on the ground of what Stephen Jacobs (2015: 129-70) calls the "authoritative principles" of "the guru" and "the Vedic tradition". Charismatic authority, in turn, is defined as "resting on devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person, and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him" (Weber 1968: 215). As I have previously discussed in relation to Roberto and Francesca, the charismatic type relies on very low levels of institutionalisation, does not rely on external formal structures or norms, and is primarily legitimised by the teacher's "exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character", or in Jacobs' (2015: 129-70) terms, by his or her "personal

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<sup>33</sup> <https://mooji.org/monte-sahaja-response-to-allegations-of-abusive-cult> accessed April 25, 2020.

experience". In this light, Mooji' supposed "supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities...regarded as divine in origin or as exemplary" (Weber 1968: 241), contribute to legitimise him to authoritatively guide others and transfer his knowledge and experiences to them despite the lack of consented formal succession. In fact, Mooji is considered as an embodiment of the divine and he openly addresses himself as a realised master.<sup>34</sup>

Moreover, the figure of the guru, as correctly underlined by Aravamudan (2006: 8), "...features powerful parental and psychoanalytic functions for the disciple". As Aravamudan (ibidem) elaborates, "[t]he guru's function for the disciple, within the framework of an open-ended religious transaction, is therefore potentially unlimited in the manner in which it could transgress personal and social boundaries". In other words, the guru-disciple relationship appears to be characterised by a plethora of visceral emotional streams channeled into devotion, surrender, and submission to the guru. The possible misuses and abuses of powers and emotions mobilised within this human (yet divine) relationship have to be carefully navigated by gurus and disciples alike as the ever-growing list of gurus accused of some sort of misconduct seems to testify.

Following on this, as underlined by Amanda Lucia (2018a), charismatic authority often functions as a fertile ground for unbalanced and exploitative power relations between teachers and their devotees. More specifically, this form of authority can be a conduit of exploitations and abuses in the context of South Asian traditions and neo-guru movements, as in both cases religious and spiritual communities are governed by certain "haptic logics", that is, "disciplinary logics of physicality" that "reinforce the devotee's desire for proximity to the guru by sacralizing physical contact with the guru" (Lucia 2018a: 953). To this point, Mooji' spiritual authority and his powers of transmission, are not merely channeled through the devotee's close observance of Mooji's message of salvation, but also often through the devotee's physical and highly emotional attempt to conquer the "supernatural" or "superhuman" state embodied by the teacher, through the perceived power of his touch, embraces, smiles or passing glimpses, and in some cases, covert sexual rapports (e.g., CEI 2017; Kosi 2019; Scofield 2019). In other words,

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<sup>34</sup> "I am going to bring you the message of Ramana Maharshi, I'm going to bring you the message of Shankara, which is not only just a message, I AM their message right now. And I'm not afraid to say that, that is not pride, but someone has to have the courage to say. I have the courage to say what I AM, so I have to say this on your behalf, because you're afraid to say it" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HgJIM4rK-w> accessed May 04, 2020.

devotees thrive to tune in with Mooji's "embodied charisma" (Brown 2011: 46), a "tangible presence" emanating from the teacher's body. More specifically, embodied charisma fascinates, persuades, and influences Mooji's followers, to the point of dictating the devotee's "bodily hexis" (Bourdieu 1977a: 193), that is, one's own minute gestures, bodily postures, ways of talking, and even the types of clothing and adornments worn. Within this context, the "feel" from body to body between the teacher and his followers (Brown and Jennings 2011: 69) becomes a "significant channel of inter-corporeal communication" (Brown 2011: 42) through which the transmission of knowledge and the legitimisation of the teacher's authority unfold. Mooji's charismatic authority, then, especially in its embodied form, plays a central role in guiding the devotee's attempts to simultaneously mediate and emulate the character of his movement, mirror his behaviours, and even transfigure their sense of self (e.g., Brown 2011; Brown and Jennings 2011; Jossee 2012, 2014, 2017; Lucia 2014a).

Nevertheless, the disciplinary logics of physicality that Lucia talks about transcend the mere physical and direct contact between the guru and his devotees (whether legitimate or abusive). In Mooji's own case, it is not only his body that becomes fetishised, that is, framed as an "object" to be seen, touched, conquered, and possessed – even if just for an instant – by his devotees. In addition, also his own spiritual powers are fetishised. For instance, *malas* (prayer chains) and bracelets "blessed by Mooji" are sold for different prices (up to 45€ each); while small containers of Sahaja sand – literally a handful of dust – are sold in the guise of holy relics in the attempt to sustain devotees' intimate relationships with their teacher even when he is not physically present with them, alongside photographs, stamps, books, t-shirts and other merchandising. As we will see in the closing section of this chapter, the fetishisation of the guru's body and spiritual powers becomes pivotal to one's relationship with him as his community has developed to the point that it becomes impossible for the guru to impart his darśana in presence to all those that feel drawn to receive "Guruji's blessings".<sup>35</sup> But before approaching a more detailed discussion of the processes of discipleship and knowledge transmission in the context of his transnational community of devotees, I briefly sketch a portrait of Mooji's own spiritual journey. More specifically, through a close look at his biography I show how – through a series of serendipitous events – a Jamaican black man with Chinese

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<sup>35</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vy9\\_GsQQNCI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vy9_GsQQNCI) accessed April 24, 2020.

heritage (as Mooji's father side of the family is ethnically Chinese) managed to successfully mobilise and capitalise on his own "exotic" physical and cultural capital to construct the figure of one of the most prominent neo-Advaita gurus of the contemporary "satsang network" (Frisk 2002). Moreover – and perhaps most importantly – I also provide a preliminary analysis of the processes of becoming a spiritual teacher based on a dispositional approach, that is, tracing the continuity between the scheme of dispositions cultivated by Mooji before enlightenment and their foundational role in contributing to its success as a guru.

### **5.1. *From Anthony Paul Moo-Young to Moojibaba***

Mooji is a true light in this world, whose presence, wisdom and loving guidance point us to who we are beyond the limitations of our personal conditioning and identity. In open interactions with this great spiritual Master, seekers of Truth from all backgrounds and traditions are introduced to the direct path to freedom through self-inquiry and The Invitation – which is proving to be one of the most effective aids for true and lasting Self-realisation. Universal in his appeal, Mooji's wisdom, compassion, openness and humour profoundly touch the hearts of those who meet him, thereby inspiring each one to find within themselves the deep peace, love and silence they recognise in him.<sup>36</sup>

Mooji was not born as "a great spiritual Master" but as Anthony Paul Moo-Young, in 1954, Porto Antonio, Jamaica, the third largest commercial port of the island and one of its most important touristic attraction (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2020). Anthony was the son of Enos Moo-Young, an ex-officer of the British Royal Air Force stationed in Jamaica and later "a respected accountant at the Jamaica Reef Hotel"<sup>37</sup> and Euphemia Bartlett (later Euphemia Hamilton), a local who shortly after Anthony's birth migrated to England as part of the "Windrush generation", the Caribbean migrants "diaspora" of the immediate post-war period to the United Kingdom. Although his mother left to work abroad, Anthony remained in Jamaica with his father and his extended family where he lived the first sixteen years of his life. "Anthony had an extraordinarily close relationship with his

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<sup>36</sup> <https://mooji.org/mooji> accessed April 27, 2020.

<sup>37</sup> <https://mooji.org/mooji> accessed April 27, 2020.

father and speaks of him with great adoration, respect and love”.<sup>38</sup> Unfortunately, his father died unexpectedly of pneumonia in 1962, leaving “young Anthony” in the ends of his father’s brother, George (Uncle George), who had four children on his own and cared for the family business (a grocery shop in front of their house). Uncle George, “had strong religious views, and he had felt for a while that his nephew needed more discipline rather than the outpouring of affection he had experienced with his father”.<sup>39</sup> The strict disciplinary regime that Anthony had to put up to with uncle George, including working in his shop after school while his friends were playing, physical conditioning and religious education, “actually contributed greatly to his later life”.<sup>40</sup> More specifically, this strict religious socialisation assumed a particular importance in Anthony’s maturity. In fact, “it was during this period with his uncle that he was introduced to the Bible in a very intimate way” and “[a]long with his cousin, Joan, he had to get up early each morning to read and discuss passages from the Bible with his uncle before going to school”.<sup>41</sup> Framing Mooji’s religious socialisation through a Bourdieusian framework, we can say that it was during this period that Anthony begun to develop a “taste” (Bourdieu 1984) for religious matters (more specifically Christian thought, the figure of Jesus Christ, and the Bible). He was actively exposed to the disciplined cultivation of a *religious disposition* characterised by ascetic, introspective, and devotional tones, elements that played a central role in what ought to become Mooji’s own relationship with the divine and crucial also for the social organisation of his Portuguese ashram, as we will see in some more details in the next chapter (see also Di Placido 2018).

Later on, when Anthony was already a teenager uncle George migrated to United States. It is in this period that Anthony begun corresponding with his mother, “which reawakened a mutual yearning to be together”.<sup>42</sup> After a failed attempt to rejoin with her in 1968 (which costed him a night of detention and the repatriation to Jamaica), “by Grace” Anthony “entered the UK in 1970 to join his mother and the rest of his UK family; he was 16 years old. A new chapter had begun”.<sup>43</sup> Here, after having completed his education and worked “in a few odd jobs” he became a quite popular street artist “making charcoal and pastel portraits of tourists outside the National Portrait Gallery on Charing

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<sup>38</sup> <https://mooji.org/mooji> accessed April 27, 2020.

<sup>39</sup> <https://mooji.org/mooji> accessed April 27, 2020.

<sup>40</sup> <https://mooji.org/mooji> accessed April 27, 2020.

<sup>41</sup> <https://mooji.org/mooji> accessed April 27, 2020.

<sup>42</sup> <https://mooji.org/mooji> accessed April 27, 2020.

<sup>43</sup> <https://mooji.org/mooji> accessed April 27, 2020.

Cross Road and later on in the famous Shaftesbury Avenue at Piccadilly Circus”.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, in 1985 “all this came to an abrupt end”.<sup>45</sup> During a police operation his eldest sister, Cherry, was accidentally shot by the police and remained paralysed as “police broke the door down and crashed into her house, searching for her son Michael who had a history of petty crime”.<sup>46</sup> The news of this umpteenth act of police brutality quickly spread around the Afro-Caribbean community giving rise to the “infamous Brixton riots”<sup>47</sup> where one person died, fifty were injured and two-hundreds got arrested, according to the BBC.<sup>48</sup> Unwillingly, Anthony “found himself in the uncomfortable position of spokesperson for the family [and the larger Afro-Caribbean community]”<sup>49</sup> with repeated media appearances. “The impact of this experience brought an end to his life as a street artist”.<sup>50</sup>

But there is another experience that proved to be more significant in Anthony’s life trajectory and progressive metamorphosis into Mooji: the encounter with a young Afro-Caribbean pastor that Mooji simply addresses as a Christian mystic. His name was Michael. After he had left his work as a street artist, Anthony was teaching art at a college in Brixton and exposing his own artworks. The story goes that “Michael had been impressed by a stained glass window made by Moo and wanted to meet him” (Science and Non-Duality 2016).<sup>51</sup> It was 1987. It is in this serendipitous manner that Mooji and Michael begun to “have very deep and inspiring conversations about the life and teachings of Jesus Christ and living with the daily challenges of a present day disciple”.<sup>52</sup> As the relationship with Michael was strengthening and revitalising Anthony’s religious disposition one evening Anthony asked the pastor to pray for him. Michael reply was simple and direct: “Sure, but why nor now?”.<sup>53</sup> So, as Michael “cupped his hands on Moo’s head in a blessing...they prayed together”.<sup>54</sup> “Mooji himself also prayed spontaneously, and found some words flowing by themselves, ‘Please enter my heart. Fill

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<sup>44</sup> <https://mooji.org/mooji> accessed April 27, 2020.

<sup>45</sup> <https://mooji.org/mooji> accessed April 27, 2020.

<sup>46</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2018/sep/09/the-buddha-of-brixton-whose-spiritual-quest-started-when-his-sister-was-shot-mooji-tony-young> accessed October 12, 2020.

<sup>47</sup> <https://mooji.org/mooji> accessed April 27, 2020.

<sup>48</sup> [http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/september/28/newsid\\_2540000/2540397.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/september/28/newsid_2540000/2540397.stm) accessed April 27, 2020.

<sup>49</sup> <https://mooji.org/mooji> accessed April 27, 2020.

<sup>50</sup> <https://mooji.org/mooji> accessed April 27, 2020.

<sup>51</sup> <https://www.scienceandnonduality.com/article/97547-2> accessed April 27, 2020.

<sup>52</sup> <https://mooji.org/mooji> accessed April 27, 2020.

<sup>53</sup> <https://mooji.org/mooji> accessed April 27, 2020.

<sup>54</sup> <https://www.scienceandnonduality.com/article/97547-2> accessed April 27, 2020.

my heart completely. Guide me to You”<sup>55</sup> This prayer proved to be a drastic turning point in Anthony’s life – a real conversion – as he “experienced a great lightness and peace inside his being” that did not fade away – as he feared – as he woke up the next morning. On the contrary, “to this day, the deep inner peace has remained undisturbed”<sup>56</sup>. In other words, Anthony had just experienced what he later recognised as his first awakening.<sup>57</sup> In fact, this experience was so transformative that Mooji “...felt” he “was moving in the footsteps of a higher power, guided by an unseen force”<sup>58</sup>. As he states, “I was a changed man from there on. All that I had lived before, including who I considered myself to be, became insignificant overnight”<sup>59</sup>. God entered his heart and Anthony began to thin away as the first seeds of who later ought to become the internationally acclaimed neo-Advaita guru Mooji were planted and started to blossom.

Anthony “resigned from his work as an art teacher at the local college in Brixton and began moving about freely”, that is, “spend[ing] a lot of time on his own, deeply absorbed in this new state that had come over him” and having “...little inclination to be in the company of worldly minded people. The sense of past and future was disappearing rapidly. His mind was becoming increasingly introverted, rooted in the love of God”<sup>60</sup>. It is here that Anthony’s earlier religious disposition increasingly assumed a mystical twist, which lead him “to look for anyone who could guide him more quickly into higher states of consciousness in order to transcend the personal tendencies that were still coming up”<sup>61</sup>. In the attempt to quench his spiritual thirst and increasingly dissatisfied by the traditional religious offer available to him in Brixton,<sup>62</sup> he turned his attention to the bookshelves of the Watkins Library, whose esoteric, New Age, and self-help collections are a reference point for countless spiritual seekers and curious alike – past and present –

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<sup>55</sup> <https://mooji.org/mooji> accessed April 27, 2020.

<sup>56</sup> <https://mooji.org/mooji> accessed April 27, 2020.

<sup>57</sup> Michael’s prayer, and his touch of Anthony’s head, are akin to the sacrament of baptism discussed by Foucault in the first part of *The Confession of the Flesh* (2018), his last volume of the *History of Sexuality*. Here, Foucault frames baptism as a “mechanism” which functions simultaneously as “the remission” of sins and as “a procedure of access to the truth” (Foucault 2018: 60, my translation). As Foucault’s analysis develops, it becomes clear that the vision of baptism as a “death to death itself” proposed by the Fathers of the Church resonates with Mooji’s understanding of enlightenment, or self-realisation, that is, practitioners’ recognition of their divine nature. See for instance the section entitled *To Die Before I Die* discussed in Mooji’s (2012: 23-29) *Before I am*. Due to space and time constraints, I reserve myself to delve deeper into the affinity between the early Christian notion of baptism and Mooji’s teachings in a separate publication.

<sup>58</sup> <https://mooji.org/mooji> accessed April 27, 2020.

<sup>59</sup> <https://mooji.org/mooji> accessed April 27, 2020.

<sup>60</sup> <https://mooji.org/mooji> accessed April 27, 2020.

<sup>61</sup> <https://mooji.org/mooji> accessed April 27, 2020.

<sup>62</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oujv\\_JYDWu8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oujv_JYDWu8) accessed May 05, 2020.



as poignantly illustrated by Newcombe's *'Yoga in Britain'* (2019). Here, after feeling attracted by the "serene-looking face on the cover of a very thing book", *'Who Am I?'* (1948) of Ramana Maharishi he opened the book and "was unable to grasp the self-inquiry".<sup>63</sup> He thought that such a serene face could not possibly match with such a verbosity and that it must have been placed there by mistake. Although his recognition of the value of the teachings of Ramana had to be postponed of a few years, he left the library with the already mentioned *'The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna'* (1942). As he recounts:

I was so moved by the few words I read in this book that I was unable to put it down. Ramakrishna's words were speaking directly into my heart confirming much of what I had an intuitive sense but was not clear enough to articulate.<sup>64</sup>

Ramakrishna's impact on Anthony was so profound that he was determined to travel to India to visit his tomb. Until this moment his religious path was characterised by an overtly Christian tone, where – in line with his early religious upbringing – the theistic god of Christianity and his son Jesus Christ were the primary inspirations. But with this book Anthony flavored the exotic and seductive power of the perennial philosophy of neo-Advaita that together with the devoted mysticism of Ramakrishna contributed to translate into concepts what he began to experience after his awakening.

In 1993 Anthony finally set himself to visit Ramakrishna's tomb in Dakshineswar, Calcutta, after having spent some time in Delhi and then in Rishikesh, the "Mecca of Yoga", at the foothills of the Himalaya. Funnily enough, he would come back to Rishikesh years later, this time to participate as Moojibaba to its acclaimed International Yoga Festival. Nevertheless, Anthony never made his way to his planned destination. When in Rishikesh he had an "auspicious encounter" with three devotees of Poonja by "the holy Ganga".<sup>65</sup> These devotees insisted "he should travel back with them to meet Sri Poonjaji" but Anthony "had no desire to meet any sages, gurus or holy beings".<sup>66</sup> Instead, he decided to go to the holy city of Varanasi where he had a brief stay of ten days until one morning "he woke up with a strong urge to visit Papaji, and bought a train ticket to

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<sup>63</sup> <https://mooji.org/mooji> accessed April 27, 2020.

<sup>64</sup> <https://mooji.org/mooji> accessed April 27, 2020.

<sup>65</sup> <https://mooji.org/mooji> accessed April 27, 2020.

<sup>66</sup> <https://mooji.org/mooji> accessed April 27, 2020.

Lucknow that day”.<sup>67</sup> It is in this way, that is, following his inner voice, that he finally found himself at the feet of Papaji. As Mooji himself recounts:

When I met Papaji, I knew in my heart that my steps were guided by grace. The urge to go to Calcutta and to visit Ramakrishna’s place began subsiding. I was in the presence of a living Buddha. It was my time with Papaji in Lucknow that really brought me into the experiential recognition of the Self as pure awareness.<sup>68</sup>

As previously recalled, during this first visit to India Anthony travelled also to Arunachala where he spent some time with Sri Yogi Ramsuratkumar and his affectionate devotee Ma Devaki. While there, as already happened when in Varanasi, Anthony woke up one day infused with the desire to see Papaji again. Bad news was waiting for him. As he learned upon his return, his eldest son had died of viral pneumonia and although Anthony had to go back to London “[h]e felt that he returned home with Papaji’s presence inside his heart”.<sup>69</sup>

Upon his return, Anthony began to work as a street vendor in Brixton market. It is during this period that people began to “approach him in search of the direct experience of Truth” (Mooji 2012: 239). After a short visit back to India, in 1997, just before Papaji’s own death, Anthony completely faded away replaced by Mooji. His street vendor activity evolved into Mooji’s Chai Shop, “a small, colourful stall”<sup>70</sup> where he would sell drinks such as chai, kombucha, and Red Rhino, a health drink he created. It was here that more and more people started to come to meet him “recognising the peace and joy that was emanating from him”.<sup>71</sup> Quite naturally, these meetings began to take place in his “tiny apartment in Brixton Hill”<sup>72</sup> and although Mooji was not particularly inclined to talk back then he prayed god to give him the strength and the inspiration to support those seekers that were drawn to him. “This was the birthing of Satsang – and this is when people began calling him ‘Mooji’”.<sup>73</sup> Since then Mooji’s popularity has begun to steadily rise to the point that very soon his apartment could not contain the growing crowd. As his following expanded so did his fame and Mooji began to travel to share his “good news”. Although

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<sup>67</sup> <https://mooji.org/mooji> accessed April 27, 2020.

<sup>68</sup> <https://mooji.org/mooji> accessed April 27, 2020.

<sup>69</sup> <https://mooji.org/mooji> accessed April 27, 2020.

<sup>70</sup> <https://mooji.org/mooji> accessed April 27, 2020.

<sup>71</sup> <https://mooji.org/mooji> accessed April 27, 2020.

<sup>72</sup> <https://mooji.org/mooji> accessed April 27, 2020.

<sup>73</sup> <https://mooji.org/mooji> accessed April 27, 2020.

he continues to hold retreats in several locations across the globe he has begun to spend significantly more time in Portugal where in 2011 – together with some longtime devotees – he purchased a 30 hectares of hilly and wild terrain. As Mooji (2012: 240, emphasis in original) states, “I was compelled to come to this land, led by an unseen presence, so that the seekers may meet the *real* land-Lord inside their own hearts”. It is on this land that his ashram, Monte Sahaja, slowly developed into a fully-fledged – although spartan – spiritual community. Moreover, Mooji also spends around three months each year in India, where he travels regularly during the Winter season to held weeks long events of free satsangs, usually in Rishikesh and to a lesser degree also in Tiruvannamalai. Naturally, due to the Covid-19 pandemic Mooji’s ability to share his “good news” around the world in momentarily suspended.

I would like to conclude this narrative portrait with a more sociologically grounded reflection, again borrowing from Bourdieu’s central analytical concepts of “disposition” (e.g., 1977a, 1984, 1990) and “capital” (1986). I have already mentioned that Anthony’s earlier *religious disposition* proved to be central in Mooji’s later spiritual path and understanding of salvation. Similarly, we can underline how his role as an art teacher at a college in Brixton as much as his popularity within the local community (both as unwilling spoke-person and as an emergent artist) contributed to the development of dispositions that allowed him to more easily transit in his new role as a guru. In reference to the former, that is, his experience as a teacher, we can say that teaching granted him – at least to a certain degree – the necessary pedagogical skills to convey his message of salvation with “uncommon clarity, wisdom, compassion and profound simplicity”.<sup>74</sup> In other words, Anthony cultivated a *teaching disposition* well before his transformation into Mooji, a disposition that is crucial if gurus have to successfully transmit their messages of salvation via dialogue and verbal pointing next to other forms of darshan such as silence, mere presence, and other inscrutable avenues of spiritual communion with their devotees (e.g., Lucia 2014a, 2018a; Warriar 2014; Williamson 2010). In reference to the latter, Anthony was already a popular figure around Brixton before his first awakening, largely due to his activities as an artist. In fact, as a street artist he had a certain exposure to the community and was well-known within the local artistic and alternative milieus. This popularity was soon strengthened by his “designs for a stained

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<sup>74</sup> <https://mooji.org/mooji> accessed April 28, 2020.

glass window on the Tree of Life for St Matthew’s Church in the centre of Brixton”<sup>75</sup> and by his fame as “self-taught Jamaican artist” who exposed together with Sex Pistol’s graphic artist Jamie Reid at the Brixton Art Gallery. Unfortunately, next to the popularity gained through his artistic trade, Anthony found himself at the center of other media accounts reporting his “peaceful appeal” regarding the Brixton Riots following his sisters’ shooting (Moorhead 2018). To be clear, I am not attempting to say that Mooji’s popularity as a spiritual teacher derives from his artistic background or his role as an unwilling spoke-person for the Afro-Caribbean community of Brixton. I am simply pointing to the fact that Anthony was accustomed to be at the center of attention also before becoming Mooji, thus being familiar with what could be named as a *popular disposition*, that is, “a set of perceptual and evaluative schemes” (Bourdieu 1984: 28, 170) regarding popularity and notoriety that are as important for artists as for spiritual teachers, as both need to carefully navigate the exposure that their position often implies, of course when they are successful at what they do.

Moreover, Mooji’s success derives at least in part also from his ability to capitalise on his persona. More specifically, the authority granted to him by the revelation of god – of course coupled by his pedagogical skills and general popularity – legitimised his subtle subversion of the post-colonial order of things where the capitals inherent in his Jamaican, migrant black body could be readily converted and transformed into a proof of his authenticity and predestination to embody the divine. In fact, through his appearances, that is, his dark skin, Asian face-features, draping dreadlocks, a Zen master like beard, and Indian clothing (surely exacerbated after his “turn East”), Mooji represents the fetishised ideal of exoticism (read authenticity) so crucial for the middle-classes’ appeal to Asian cultural and religious resources (e.g., Altglas 2014a). In other words, he managed – whether consciously or not – to convert part of his physical, cultural, and symbolic capitals into service to his public figure as a neo-Advaita guru.

Summarising, we can say that the early cultivation of a *religious disposition* (later partly modified and enriched with a certain mystical and neo-Advaita twist), together with *teaching* and *popular dispositions*, facilitated Anthony’s full transition into the role of the self-realised, pedagogically savvy, and internationally renowned Mooji. It must be added that a teacher’s religious disposition – whether Christian, neo-Advaita, or Muslim, just to

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<sup>75</sup> <https://mooji.org/mooji> accessed April 28, 2020.

mention three among its possible declinations – can only be fully capitalised if channeled through a very specific teaching disposition (of which Mooji’s pedagogical style is only a form) and it can only spread in relation to the teacher’s popular disposition. In fact, the spiritual knowledge of, let us say, an enlightened master, would be of little use to the larger spiritual and religious fields if challenged by a poor pedagogy or a lack of notoriety. This is not to say that such cases do not exist but that the enlightened masters in question are either bound to develop better pedagogies and so acquire a larger following or to remain virtually unknown.

Finally, I contend that it would be very interesting to further explore if and how this scheme of disposition (*religious, teaching, and popular dispositions*), that together contribute to the constitution of the *guru habitus* inhabited by Mooji, could be traced also in reference to other gurus or even other spiritual teachers regardless their specific title and tradition of reference. If this study would be successfully undertaken – and to my knowledge it has not yet been done – we, as sociologists of religion, NRMs scholars, neo-guru and neo-Hindu movements researchers and so on, would be better equipped with a flexible yet analytically powerful theoretical tool tailored to inquire into the processes of becoming a spiritual teacher, or more specifically a guru. This, of course, besides being interesting on a case to case bases, could offer a promising avenue of research into a preliminary taxonomy of those “core dispositions” (Brown and Jennings 2013) that cannot be missing in any charismatic leader of international reach that here I preliminary identify as being composed by: some sort of mystical knowledge (*religious disposition*); the pedagogical means to transmit it with authority (*teaching disposition*); and finally, the ability to stand under the spotlight of fame (*popular disposition*). Naturally, next to these three core dispositions others are likely to be identified as equally if not more important, but only future inquiries can tell.

Following this line of research concerning the internal articulation and the processes of construction of the *guru habitus* we could unpack Weber’ (1968) seminal concept of “charismatic authority” through a dispositional approach, thus exploring how religious leaders’ charisma is socially and discursively constructed in practice through long standing and largely unconscious processes of socialisation and the conversion of previously held capitals and is not only the fruit of the legitimate discourse of the tradition of reference that usually wants it granted by god or other superhuman entities. Moreover, on a more empirical note, we may profit from an approach capable of theorising some of

the core traits that spiritual teachers ought to have also with a reference to their life before their roles as leaders. It is self-explanatory that this would add to our understanding of the processes of becoming spiritual directors in a manner that current research on gurus, again to my knowledge, has not yet begun to discuss.

## 5.2. *Mooji's Close Entourage*

A short discussion of Mooji's close entourage is due as it allows to capture, in practice, some of the power dynamics discussed in the previous pages and the manners in which Mooji's devotees relate with him, a topic that will be discussed at greater length in the following chapter in reference to the pedagogical repertoires mobilised by this guru and the transmission of his message of salvation. Here, I devote my attention to Shree, Krishnabai, and Lakshmi, arguably three among Mooji's closest devotees. I have chosen to introduce them as they occupy a quasi-public role next to Mooji's figure and within its organisation. Unfortunately, after a lengthily process of negotiation with the ashram's publications team Mooji denied me the possibility to conduct interviews at his ashram and with his devotees. As a consequence, the material here discussed is derived from the following secondary sources: a series of twelve interviews conducted in 2015 by Bill Free (Mooji's devotee and spiritual teacher in his own right) as part of the project '*A Journey with Mooji*', freely available on SoundCloud<sup>76</sup>; a recent piece on the online Spanish newspaper '*El Confidencial*',<sup>77</sup> where a number of Mooji's devotees were interviewed with a focus on their life before and after meeting him; and finally, a section of Mooji's website called '*Voices from Satstang*'<sup>78</sup> where a total of seventy-seven videos and written testimonials are gathered among Mooji's closest devotees, ashram's residents, and retreat' participants.

Shree Suzanne Montenegro is one of Mooji's longtime devotees and the General Manager of Mooji Foundation, "a UK registered charity which helps to bring Mooji's pointings, presence and love to people all around the world so they can discover what their hearts have longed for: true freedom".<sup>79</sup> Among the main activities supported by the Foundation figure the organisation of "open Satsangs, international Satsang events and

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<sup>76</sup> <https://soundcloud.com/billfree/sets/a-journey-with-mooji> accessed April 30, 2020.

<sup>77</sup> [https://www.elconfidencial.com/mundo/europa/2019-09-02/ganaba-120-000-euros-en-endesa-pero-soy-mucho-mas-feliz-en-esta-comuna-espiritual\\_2204499/](https://www.elconfidencial.com/mundo/europa/2019-09-02/ganaba-120-000-euros-en-endesa-pero-soy-mucho-mas-feliz-en-esta-comuna-espiritual_2204499/) accessed April 30, 2020.

<sup>78</sup> <https://mooji.org/voices-from-satsang> accessed April 30, 2020.

<sup>79</sup> <https://mooji.org/donate> accessed April 30, 2020.

the development and growth of Monte Sahaja ashram in Portugal”<sup>80</sup>, of course next to the dissemination of Mooji’s teachings via “online channels”, a “free translation service” and “scholarships and concessions for those who are unable to participate in a Satsang with Moojibaba due to financial constraints”.<sup>81</sup> Shree, in her “previous life was...[a] programmer that grew up in a rich family of Manhattan and a student of one of the colleges of the Ivy League”,<sup>82</sup> that is, she was born into the heart of United States’ sociocultural elites. Nevertheless, although she does not condemn the luxurious lifestyle she was privileged to enjoy, she frames it as not essential for happiness, contrary to Mooji’s teachings. This is why she walked away from it to follow his guru and live with him.<sup>83</sup> Shree plays a central role in the social organisation of Mooji’s teachings not only because she is the General Manager of the Mooji Foundation. She also very much functions as a presenter and facilitator especially during satsangs and retreats where normally she is the one that opens up each satsang with a number of practical announcements, for instance regarding the flow of the day or of the retreat and other important matters of general concern for the participants. Moreover, she also functions very much as a messenger between the larger community of residents and retreat participants and Mooji, as people often time approach her to ask for a private meeting with Mooji or to give a letter or a present to be delivered to him. Her closing sentence during her announces prior to satsang, “Moojibaba is coming and will be with us shortly” is as familiar to Mooji’s devotees as Mooji’s pointings are.

Shree must be in her late forties or early fifties at maximum. Before taking the lead of Mooji Foundation she served the community remotely from Philadelphia where she was working at the time. In introducing her, Bill Free describes Shree as “Mooji’s finest assets”.<sup>84</sup> During the interview she recounts how she first came into contact with Mooji underlining that:

I was one of those people that had some intense suffering in my life and also as I child, you could call it mystical experiences or glimpses of the person being gone that were so, so beautiful and profound.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> <https://mooji.org/donate> accessed April 30, 2020.

<sup>81</sup> <https://mooji.org/donate> accessed April 30, 2020.

<sup>82</sup> [https://www.elconfidencial.com/mundo/europa/2019-09-02/ganaba-120-000-euros-en-endesa-pero-soy-mucho-mas-feliz-en-esta-comuna-espiritual\\_2204499/](https://www.elconfidencial.com/mundo/europa/2019-09-02/ganaba-120-000-euros-en-endesa-pero-soy-mucho-mas-feliz-en-esta-comuna-espiritual_2204499/) accessed April 30, 2020.

<sup>83</sup> For more details on this point see Note 39 Appendix One.

<sup>84</sup> <https://soundcloud.com/billfree/shree> accessed April 29, 2020.

<sup>85</sup> <https://soundcloud.com/billfree/shree> accessed April 29, 2020.

Her “life took a normal course” although she was “never really believing everything as everybody else did or taking everything as seriously as other people did and always having this yearning for god, not knowing what to call it at that time”.<sup>86</sup> Finally, one day she decided to use the internet to try to quench her spiritual thirst and she ended up on “a page for Shri Ramana Maharshi” and she “had such a visceral reaction of “No, no, it cannot be! An Indian in a linen clothe” and she “closed the page right away”.<sup>87</sup> Nevertheless, the day after, at the end of a yoga class in a studio she had never been before, the teacher advertised that that Friday they would have “an enlighten being come to speak” and as she recounts, “right away all my cells started to wow, wow, “An enlighten being, oh my god, coming to Philadelphia””.<sup>88</sup> So she grabbed a poster on her way out from the class and “it said by the grace of Shri Ramana Maharshi and wow, I just knew “This is for me””.<sup>89</sup> The teacher in question was the satsang teacher Pamela Wilson.<sup>90</sup> “That’s what started my love for satsang” says Shree, “[a]nd that love before too long took me to India, to Arunachala the home of Ramana Maharshi where I’ve met Guruji”.<sup>91</sup> Although I failed to retrieve the date of Shree’s travel to India it surely predates the foundation of Monte Sahaja in 2011 of a few years. To briefly comment on her narrative, she seems to describe a fairly standard account of spiritual seekers’ “turn within”. Moved by a deep dissatisfaction with ordinary existence or “intense suffering” – despite her privileged background – and by her childhood’s “mystical experiences”, her lifelong “yearning for god” brought her, serendipitously, to satsang, first with Pamela Wilson and shortly after with Mooji. Of course, her encounter with Mooji was so transformative and her devotion towards him so unshakable that – as I remember Mooji mentioning during a satsang – he asked her to assume a central role in his organisation as they were walking in Central Park one day . Of course, Mooji’s proposal must have been informed also by the desire to be supported by such a skilled and high profile professional and not only by her devotion to him, as I will expand discussing Mooji’s devotees preexisting skills and their conversion into viable capitals within the social organisation of the ashram in the next chapter.

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<sup>86</sup> <https://soundcloud.com/billfree/shree> accessed April 29, 2020.

<sup>87</sup> <https://soundcloud.com/billfree/shree> accessed April 29, 2020.

<sup>88</sup> <https://soundcloud.com/billfree/shree> accessed April 29, 2020.

<sup>89</sup> <https://soundcloud.com/billfree/shree> accessed April 29, 2020.

<sup>90</sup> <http://www.pamelasatsang.com/> accessed April 29, 2020.

<sup>91</sup> <https://soundcloud.com/billfree/shree> accessed April 29, 2020.



Krinshnabai (whose legal name is unknown to me) is another longtime Mooji's devotee and his main personal assistant. She is originally from Sweden and was twenty years old when she met Mooji for the first time in Tiruvannamalai, India. As for many other devotees meeting him was enough to trigger an actual experience of conversion. She has not left Mooji's side since then. There are rumors within Monte Sahaja that she is more than Mooji's personal assistant and close devotee. In fact, as I have been told by another longtime devotee and member of the ashram that knows Mooji since its Brixton period, "Everybody knows that they are together in Sahaja". Krishnabai, along with two other female disciples (Lakshmi and another one which I often saw moving around the ashram attending to Mooji's laundry or gathering ingredients for his meals), "live in Mooji's private and gated area of the property".<sup>92</sup> As recounted by Scofield, "these disciples rarely leave the gated area, not even to eat with the group much"<sup>93</sup>, or I would add, at all. They spend all their time glued to the guru. In fact, every time that Mooji steps out of his hut in Monte Sahaja, Krishnabai and Lakshmi are by his side. Similarly, during satsangs and retreats they are always next to him when he enters and lives the satsang hall. The third personal assistant, in turn, had a more peripheral and temporary role and in my 2018 stays I did not see her any longer.

As Krishnabai recalls in the context of discussing her first meeting with Mooji, "[i]t feels like I've known him forever, before the beginning I've known him, I've been one with him". Krishnabai, elaborates on this, adding that:

But in its physical presence I've met him first time in Tiruvannamalai, I think it was 2009. A friend invited me to come to Tiruvannamalai. I didn't know anything about satsang not much about meditation nor anything similar to his teachings. And I showed up early one morning for satsang, sitting waiting for Guruji to come I felt there was a very strong, beautiful vibration just being in the room and then after some time Guruji entered the room, went up on the stage and I remember seeing him and just overflowing with joy and love and tears started pouring out of my eyes and I said "Oh my god, finally I meet you again". Like a long-lost friend but more intimate than a friend. "I've known you for long, long, long before" and I was very touched by the meeting".<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> <https://gurumag.com/becoming-god-inside-moojis-portugal-cult/> accessed April 30, 2020.

<sup>93</sup> <https://gurumag.com/becoming-god-inside-moojis-portugal-cult/> accessed April 30, 2020.

<sup>94</sup> <https://soundcloud.com/billfree/krishnabai-a-journey-with-mooji> accessed April 30, 2020.

Krishnabai's transformative first meeting with Mooji was characterised by "joy", "love" and a sense of reunion with "a long-lost friend" or perhaps more appropriately her beloved. As she further elaborates, these feelings were justified by the fact that "Guruji is mirroring and reflecting, of course, that pure self within us, he is reflecting our essence, the supreme god within us [a few seconds of silence] yeah, which is very rare".<sup>95</sup> In other words, in meeting him she was instantly brought back to herself, exactly what Mooji advocates is the core message of his teachings.

As the interview proceeds, Bill Free underlines Krishnabai's central role in the social organisation of the ashram, commenting on her active stance in the grand works that were preceding a big retreat, around three and a half years prior to the interview while Bill Free was staying at the ashram for the first time. Krishnabai, after thanking him for his recognition, adds:

Actually I don't feel I am doing anything, I am just here and then whatever is need in the moment kind of arises by itself. Yeah. I would say I keep my head at Guruji's feet and then he somehow guides me from within and I let this yes for truth burn in my heart and that takes care of everything.<sup>96</sup>

As we will see in more details in Chapter Seven, the idea that hard work in the ashram is performed without the ascription of one's own agentic power to the actions and the duties performed characterises Mooji's devotees karmayoga activities. Moreover, I would like to underline that Krishnabai's expression of her surrender to Mooji, "I keep my head at Guruji's feet", has been the object of intense critique by Scofield's (2019) article as she frames it as a practice encouraged or even requested by Mooji himself to prove his disciples' trust in his guidance. Conversely, it is important to mention that Mooji is quite uncomfortable when devotees perform this gesture<sup>97</sup> perhaps also on the ground that it could be interpreted as the suspension of one's own sovereignty over one's own thoughts and actions. When devotees physically place their heads to his feet, as sometimes happens after a particularly moving interaction in satsang, Mooji is quick to raise them up and convert this devotional but extreme manifestation of surrender into a hug, an equally powerful act in actualising "the haptic logics of proxemic desire" (Lucia 2018a) inherent in the guru-disciple relationship. To further testify to then strength of the bonds of this

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<sup>95</sup> <https://soundcloud.com/billfree/krishnabai-a-journey-with-mooji> accessed April 30, 2020.

<sup>96</sup> <https://soundcloud.com/billfree/krishnabai-a-journey-with-mooji> accessed April 30, 2020.

<sup>97</sup> For more details on this point see Note 40 Appendix One.

relationship, Krishnabai relies on the following evocative formula: “He is the sun himself and we are the little stars around”.

Another little star next to Mooji is Lakshmi, Mooji’s personal assistant together with Krishnabai. The three, in fact, seems to move in unison, at least when Mooji’s is publicly moving around his ashram or before and after satsangs and during the retreats. Lakshmi is originally from South Africa and is now in her late twenties or early thirties. As she comments, recalling her first meeting with Mooji:

I met him 2007 in Brixton at his home in a satsang there and it was one of those love at the first sight kind of moment that I’ve never experienced before. Meeting someone that just, love just starts to pour out of you. That’s never happen to me before. So it is quite a profound meeting, one of those events in your life that you know your life is going to change forever and it really did, in the most profound, beautiful, Godly way.<sup>98</sup>

Again, meeting Mooji represented a real turning point in Lakshmi’s life. “The impact of meeting him was just so profound because there was so much suffering in the way that I was living my life and I didn’t know that there was another way”.<sup>99</sup> Fortunately for her she met Mooji, whose message of salvation helped “...to see that all of that you have invested into and in a way it kind of dictates your life, is not true, it’s actually not true”.<sup>100</sup> Conversely, the alternative Mooji gives to his devotees, that is, to “follow his words”, allows them to “really discover it’s not true”<sup>101</sup> and relate with their pain differently if not transcending it completely. And how could his words be doubted when he is considered as “the living truth” or even as “god moving”?<sup>102</sup>

Summarising, the biographical trajectories and views held by Shree, Krishnabai, and Lakshmi are fairly common among Mooji’s devotees. First there is a life of sorrow – no matter what material circumstances one finds oneself to be in – and then Mooji’s message of salvation, usually met serendipitously, provides some solace. This experience must be so totalising that his devotees are often inclined to leave everything behind to pursue a life next to this “living Jesus”.<sup>103</sup> Also, as these experiences testify, his devotees arrives

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<sup>98</sup> <https://mooji.org/voices-from-satsang/lakshmi> accessed April 29, 2020.

<sup>99</sup> <https://soundcloud.com/billfree/lacksmi-south-africa> accessed April 29, 2020.

<sup>100</sup> <https://soundcloud.com/billfree/lacksmi-south-africa> accessed April 29, 2020.

<sup>101</sup> <https://soundcloud.com/billfree/lacksmi-south-africa> accessed April 29, 2020.

<sup>102</sup> <https://soundcloud.com/billfree/lacksmi-south-africa> accessed April 29, 2020.

<sup>103</sup> <https://soundcloud.com/billfree/lacksmi-south-africa> accessed April 29, 2020.

to him by chance, often via personal networks, but then the experience is framed in fatalistic terms, as Krisnabhai's encounter with Mooji (a reunion with "a long-lost friend" that she has known "for long, long, long before"). Finally, although Shree, Krishnabai, and Lakshmi encountered Mooji's teachings in person, as most of his earlier devotees did, today the internet provides the most common avenue of access to his teachings. In fact, the ranks of his following are constantly enlarged by spiritual seekers that aptly become his new devotees as they stumble upon his message of salvation through the hundreds of thousands of videos (full satsangs or satsang' excerpts) available both on YouTube and on his Mooji's website companion webpage '*Mooji TV*'.<sup>104</sup> I will expand on the role of the internet in discussing Mooji's international sangha groups in the final part of next section. For the moment, I would like to provide a short introduction to the community of devotees living in his ashram, Monte Sahaja.

### **5.3. *Mooji's Sangha: Monte Sahaja and Beyond***

*Sangha* is a Sanskrit term meaning "association", "assembly", "company" or "community" and it usually denotes either political or religious associations. More specifically, the term does not refer to the institutional structure of these organisations *per-se* but addresses the ensemble of members of the community in question. It is in this latter sense that the term is amply employed to refer to Mooji's community of followers by its own members. For instance, Lakshmi describes what Mooji's sangha is in the following terms:

a sangha are those that come in search of this truth and actually find it you know, because that's what actually binds us, is the recognition of what Guruji is pointing to. And you see it in each other, you know it in each other. And Guruji's sangha is like this for me, like I know those that have Guruji in their heart you just know, you just know and there is a family bond, a family connection...even stronger than family in a sense cause is not blood family, is soul family, spirit family and you just know it. And I think that...if you

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<sup>104</sup> <https://mooji.tv/> accessed April 30, 2020. In preparing a contribution for a panel on '*Digital Yoga*' hosted by the American Academy of Religion National Conference (2019) I counted the astonishing number of 1.304 videos, the first of which was recorded in February 2011. Data gathered November 23, 2019.

have Mooji in your heart, that is sangha for me and is reflected in how you talk, in how you receive things and how you give.<sup>105</sup>

The sangha is first of all a “soul family” a “spirit family” whose bonds are “even stronger” than familiar ones. Its rationale is “the recognition of what Gururji is pointing to”, that is, devotees’ close observance of their guru’s teachings. Here, total surrender to the guru figure is a prerequisite to successfully interiorise the mystical contents of his teaching which is hardly only a personal, private matter but in the communitarian context of Mooji’s ashram, Monte Sahaja, is publicly available as it is “reflected in how you talk, in how you receive things and how you give”. As it will become clearer in the next chapter, to be a Sahajan (a member of Monte Sahaja) means to conform to and embody the “thought style” (Fleck 1979; see also Douglas 1987; Squarcini 2000) of the organisation and to accept one’s own role within it. As discussed by Squarcini (2000: 255) in reference to converts’ search for identity within the Hare Krishna Movement, a thought style is “a sort of collective representation which involves guiding, directing and training the perceptions of the social group, influencing the accumulation of knowledge inherent to its very sense of identity”. Using the words of Fleck himself (1979: 41 in Squarcini 2000: 255), “[t]he individual within the collective is never, or hardly ever, conscious of the prevailing thought style which almost always exerts an absolutely compulsive force upon his thinking, and with which it is not possible to be at variance”, similarly to what pointed out by the Bourdieusian notion of “doxa” (1977a), the practical-discursive universe taken for granted in a given social group.

As I will discuss in Chapter Seven, Sahaja’s thought style is crucial in the production, transmission, and embodiment of the specific declination of yogic habitus promoted by Mooji’s teachings and the sangha and also in the constitution and maintenance of a certain “collective consciousness”, to say it with Durkheim (e.g., 1984, 2001, 2013), that grants group cohesion and devotees’ acceptance of their roles within the community. According to Durkheim’s seminal analyses, collective consciousness is that social phenomenon through which social groups are bound together by a set of shared beliefs, values, and ideas, which are then continuously re-actualised through the adherence to social norms, the performance of religious and secular rituals, and a variety of institutional constraints imposed by traditions, morality and laws. As Durkheim (1984) specifies, the maintenance

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<sup>105</sup> <https://soundcloud.com/billfree/lacksmi-south-africa> accessed April 29, 2020.

of collective consciousness is jeopardised by the emergence of modern societies and their heterogeneous social organisation and division of labour. Here, contrary to the “mechanical solidarity” (Durkheim 1984: 31-64) typical of primitive or earlier societies and that was entirely based on the shared social and moral universe of a given group, modern societies are socially integrated chiefly through what Durkheim names “organic solidarity” (1984: 101-174), that is, a type of social integration that arises out of the need of individuals for one another’s services. Applying this Durkheimian perspective to the case of Mooji’s ashram, helps to point out the complexity of its social organisation as both types of solidarities delineated by Durkheim are here simultaneously implemented: on the one hand, a mechanical solidarity based on a shared social and moral universe grants the unproblematic emergence of the single and totalising “thought style”, or “collective consciousness” that characterise the everyday life of the ashram and its implicit rules; and on the other hand, an organic solidarity based on pragmatic and function concerns favours individuals’ adaptation to the roles they are assigned to and their reliance on the other members’ disciplined acceptance of their own roles as a prerequisite for an integrated, cohesive, and functional social organisation of the ashram and of its communitarian life.

Moreover, devotee’s acceptance of their role within the ashram is double-faced: first, it implies, unavoidably, one’s own subordinate position to the guru. This applies to everybody, no matter how long they have been following Mooji or living in Monte Sahaja. Second, the social organisation of the ashram requires a multitude of positions and a variety of duties allocations. As a consequence, to become a Sahajan means also to accept your place within these larger schemata of everyday activities. In order to better understand this point, I will briefly sketch the contours of Mooji’s ashram and its internal organisation.

Monthe Sahaja is a non-monastic, neo-Advaita ashram located in Southern Portugal. It was founded in 2011 and it extends for 30 hectares of hilly land. It counts around 200 residents, most of which reside in the ashram only temporarily (for a period that ranges from three months to a couple of years although there are notable exceptions). These devotees tend to leave the ashram only for short periods of time, usually to visit their families or to work just enough to pay for their stay in the ashram for a few more months. Those that decide to leave for good usually come back for a second or a third stay or simply for shorter visits. They are very much treated as core members of the community,

that is, once you live in Sahaja for long enough then you are a Sahajan even when you move out.

The ashram arrives to host up to 800-900 people during retreats (4-5 per year, mostly during the summer period). Based on my direct involvement in the community and my subsequent ethnographic observations, it is possible to provide some preliminary socio-demographic coordinates regarding the ashram's residents: most of the permanent residents are Europeans, although there is a rising presence of North American, Russian, and Indian devotees; the main macro-ethnic group is Caucasian; devotees' average age is between 25 to 45 years of age, also due to the restrictive admission policies that privilege fit applicants able to carry out physical work on steep hills and still partially wild terrains; finally, the gender ratio of the ashram appears to be rather balanced, although the allocations of duties seems to reproduce certain stereotypical gender norms (e.g., cleaning and cooking duties for women and hard labor for men). Of course, due to the Covid-19 health crises the ashram has closed its premises starting from March 10, 2020 and has suspended all activities and programs for the remaining of the year.

The ashram is constituted by several structures, located across different hills, and often connected by steep paths that cut across the luxurious vegetation of the area. Most of the buildings are built with wood, although there seems to be an increasing reliance on other materials (concrete and prefabricated metal structures). Among the most important structures that constitute the ashram are: a series of offices allocated to the management of visitors and other tasks such as residents' monthly contributions (which during my stays amounted to 300 euros per month inclusive of room and board); the Mooji Mandir, the central sacred space of the ashram where satsangs and other ceremonies are regularly held (e.g., fire ceremony, naming ceremony, guru purnima and so on); a number of spartan dormitories, small huts and tents scattered around the land; the kitchen and the connected dining area, where three vegetarian meals are served daily and consumed in complete silence; several contemplative spaces, such as gardens and meditation platforms; two cafes that serve light meals and non-alcoholic drinks, where residents tend to chill or plan the ashram's activities; and finally, a small gated area comprised by a handful of small huts, where Mooji resides together with his two personal assistants.

As I will expand on in the next chapter, the ashram is organised around three imperatives: work, devotion, and contemplation. According to the ashram's "doxa" (Bourdieu 1977a), these three dimensions are *de facto* overlapping. For instance,

members are constantly encouraged by their respective “team leaders” – those individuals that organise, supervise, and manage the organisation of everyday tasks such as cooking, construction activities, land care, and other office tasks – to work with a devotional and contemplative attitude. Work, in other words, is framed as instrumental to deepen devotees’ devotional and contemplative attitudes. Work is the identity marker par excellence of the Sahajans.

Next to those devotees living in Monte Sahaja, the sangha members in *stricto sensu*, there is also the broader community of close devotees who have a burning desire to stay near their guru but for a number reason (e.g., health, work, family and so on) prefer not to live in the spartan environment of the ashram or simply could not find a spot within its premises. Usually, these devotees live in the neighboring rustic villages of São Martinho das Amoreiras (basically a colony of Monte Sahaja), Ourique, and Garvão. Many have kids, some of whom are born in Portugal where their parents moved to follow their teacher or where they met at their teachers’ feet. There is another option for those devotees attracted to Mooji’s presence that are either unable nor unwilling to live in Sahaja: Mooji Sangha Bhavan, a small ashram considered “the sister land of Monte Sahaja”<sup>106</sup> located only 5km away from it. I have met several devotees that would regularly walk this distance every morning (before sunrise) and every evening (either before or after dinner) just to attend to their seva in Monte Sahaja or to sit in satsang. Interestingly enough, while during retreats some of the Sahajans are asked to leave the ashram’s premises for the duration of the retreat so as to allow more participants to reside in the ashram, it is here that they are momentarily allocated. For those who are forced to move to Mooji Sangha Bhavan – even if just for a brief period of time – this experience usually feels like a rejection coming from Mooji himself and an ostracism from the community.<sup>107</sup> It is probably also on the ground on these unexpected requests to move out from the ashram’s premises – actually without any formal guarantee of being able to come back in Monte Sahaja once the retreat is over – that Scofield’s (2019) accusations regarding Mooji’s coercive measures and punishments to undisciplined devotees find some foundations. According to my direct involvement in the community and my subsequent ethnographic observations, the choice over “who stays” and “who goes” is usually taken by the

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<sup>106</sup>[https://www.google.com/search?q=Mooji+sangha+bhavan&rlz=1C1CHBF\\_enIT878IT878&oq=Mooji+sang&aqs=chrome.69i59j0l2j69i57j0l2j69i60l2.3305j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8](https://www.google.com/search?q=Mooji+sangha+bhavan&rlz=1C1CHBF_enIT878IT878&oq=Mooji+sang&aqs=chrome.69i59j0l2j69i57j0l2j69i60l2.3305j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8) accessed May 01, 2020.

<sup>107</sup> For more details on this point see Note 41 Appendix One.



ashram's management following an utilitarian approach, that is, in the light of those skills that the ashram needs the most at the moment. Naturally, also Mooji's predilection and sympathy for specific devotees influence this choice. Nevertheless, not all those who stay are necessarily Mooji's favorite devotees, but many are simply the most useful to the social organisation and economy of activities of the ashram in that specific moment.

Mooji's sangha is also constituted by a third layer of members, those who do not live in Mooji's community nor in its picturesque surroundings in the Portuguese countryside. Of course, this is the largest group of devotees and represents the main audience of his retreats. They are typically those who travel the world to spend a week or ten days in his presence. Many of them are also ex residents of the ashram, thus showing a certain overlap with the previous and closer groups of devotees. Likewise, many of them are more peripheral to both Mooji's teachings and his community. They are those who have not committed to him as their unique spiritual director but that nonetheless finds in him a valuable and legitimate spiritual authority. This variegated and internally differentiated group of physically more distant devotees is organised in sangha groups, "a wonderful opportunity to come together in your local area and to be immersed in Satsang with Mooji".<sup>108</sup> There are countless sangha groups in around sixty countries spanned across five continents. Contrary to the social organisation of other neo-denominational or neo-Hindu religious movement such as Amma's Mission (Lucia 2014a) or the less popular Ananda Marga (Crovetto 2008), the local branches of Mooji's followers are not officially part of Mooji's central organisation. This is the case largely on the ground of two and interconnected reasons: first, this would pose serious authority issues in relation to who is in power within the organisation. In fact, even though Mooji's authority would not be likely challenged by the institutional affiliation of these transnational branches of followers, the overall harmony and internal coherence of the movement would, with the potential for certain sangha groups to become more important and thus exercise pressure on the central organisation being a real concern; second, Mooji has no interest in enlarging the institutional reach of his organisation so as to formally include the flowering international sangha groups. On the one hand, part of the reason why he is not interested can be referred to Mooji's own dislike for organisations<sup>109</sup> which he usually equate with Ramana Maharishi's and Poonja's own resistance to organise their teachings and their

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<sup>108</sup> <https://mooji.org/sangha-groups> accessed May 01, 2020.

<sup>109</sup> <https://mooji.org/voices-from-satsang/moojibaba> accessed May 01, 2020.

followers within well-defined organisational structures. Nevertheless, Mooji, among the three, is certainly the one that pushed – perhaps unwillingly or only to serve his devotees – to the extreme the project of building a large, transnational ashram. On the other hand, part of Mooji’s lack of desire to enlarge his organisation may be due to the fact that – again contrary to many other denominational yoga groups or neo-guru religious movements – his movement is not directly engaged nor funds the promotion of any sort of humanitarian projects. Mooji’s teachings are the sole purpose of the existence of his community and a larger institutional framework would possibly impair their transmission rather than facilitate it.

### 5.3.1. *Mooji’s Teachings and the Cyberspace*

The accessibility and dissemination of Mooji’s teachings via online resources is – together with the appeal of his message and his charismatic and magnetic personality – what grants him such a high visibility. The revolutionary impact of the internet on the manners in which religious teachings circulate, on the image and power dynamics of specific religions and religious movements, not to mention on new avenues of involvement for distant and potential devotees, have been at the center of intense debates within the sociology of religion and the study of digital religion (e.g., Campbell 2010; Campbell and Vitullo 2016; Dawson and Cowan 2004; Helland 2004). More specifically, the distinction between “religion online” and “online religion” (Helland 2000) can prove very useful in theorising about the cyber presence of Mooji’s teachings. On the one hand, religion online understood as “the provision of information about and/or services related to various religious groups and traditions” (Dawson and Cowan 2004: 7) allows to consider ‘*Mooji.org*’ as the main platform where spiritual seekers and devotees can gather information about Mooji’s teachings. More specifically, the website provides useful information regarding the guru’s biography and its lineage; its spiritual community and the different avenues to organise one’s stay there; its main pedagogical tools (e.g., satsang); a number of testimonials gathered among Sahaja’ residents and retreats’ participants alike; a vast collection of Mooji’s videos (available for free); a variety of other resources such as music produced by the sangha, pictures of the everyday life of the ashram or of specific retreats, Mooji’s quotes and so on; and finally, a range of products for sales, such as books, malas, devotional music and images of the guru. In other words, ‘*Mooji.org*’ provides the institutional presentation of Mooji’s community and its

teachings to a broader audience of devotees, spiritual seekers, and casual observers. Of course, this is a strategy that does not pertain only to Mooji and his community but is ubiquitous among all the religious affiliations and spiritual groups and across the all spiritual/religious field.

On the other hand, online religion simply understood as the participation in religious practices via the mediation of the internet (Helland 2000) is one of the distinctive features and strategic devices of Mooji's online presence. As one of his devotees stated during a 2018 satsang, "Thank you to you and your team for making all of this available on YouTube and thank you god for the internet". Although Mooji is surely not the only neo-Advaita teacher whose disciples largely connect with via the internet, his charismatic and "exotic" persona, his humorous style, and the dialogical and confessional nature of his satsangs (Di Placido forthcoming) seem perfectly tailored to be successfully packaged in products easily consumable online. In fact, although in some cases he encourages his devotees' physical presence to ripe their self-understanding, he also often underlines that in order to experience self-transcendence it is enough that one follows earnestly what he teaches and says. This is exactly his definition of a good devotee.<sup>110</sup>

Speaking of online religion in reference to Mooji's teachings, it is important to mention also '*Mooji TV*', a platform defined as "the home and heart of Mooji satsangs shared online".<sup>111</sup> As the website continues, addressing its audience:

You are invited to enter this site with the inner sense of visiting an ashram, open to the timeless, distanceless and ever-present truth. Here you will find a large and growing searchable collection of the audio and video recordings of Satsang with Mooji. You can join all the live satsang broadcasts, where you can sit in real time with Mooji at home. Mooji TV also offers a video subscription channel of spontaneous talks called Sahaja Express.<sup>112</sup>

In other words, '*Mooji TV*' is a sacred cyberspace that attempts to emphasise devotees' sense of proximity to the guru where the distance from those present in the satsang hall and those following from home is nullified by the miracle of the internet as much as by the guru's grace. In fact, the latter allows his darshan to be received even through the screen of one's own television, ipod or smartphone as the testimonials shared in satsang

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<sup>110</sup> <https://mooji.org/voices-from-satsang/moojibaba> accessed May 01, 2020.

<sup>111</sup> <https://mooji.tv/> accessed May 03, 2020.

<sup>112</sup> <https://mooji.tv/> accessed May 03, 2020.

often testify. Most recently, starting from April 1, 2020, Mooji has also started a new online rubric entitled ‘*Mooji Answers # During Coronavirus*’, for the moment comprised of seven different videos (plus three other videos targeting spiritual seeking during coronavirus).<sup>113</sup>

However, the internet it is not only an opportunity for the spread of Mooji’s “good news” and for its accessibility by far distant devotees, that is, a chance to strengthen and disseminate the groups’ ideological and normative ideas about salvation. The internet, like the printing press before it can also be a tool through which power dynamics drastically shift out of the control of specific communities and religious groups as “[d]octrines and teachings that were once centralized and controlled can now be openly challenged, contradicted, or ignored through a medium that is accessed by hundreds of millions of people every day” (Helland 2004: 30). This is well exemplified by Tanya White’s (2019) experience of excommunication from Mooji’s spiritual community openly published first on her Facebook page and then on YouTube, subsequently reinforced by various other allegations such as that Mooji runs a cult, uses brain-washing techniques, manipulates and silences his devotees and sexually abuses his younger and most vulnerable devotees, among other things (e.g., Actualized.org 2018; CEI 2017; Kosi 2019; Scofield 2019).

Finally, I contend that the participation to online and offline religious/spiritual communities and practices should be understood on a continuum and not as two radically different pedagogical environments. In the case of Mooji’s teachings, the kind of practices that are promoted through the use of the internet are largely an online transposition of offline or everyday practices. In this sense, I agree with Miller and Slater (2000: 5) when they argue that “[w]e need to treat internet media as continuous and embedded in other social spaces, that they happen within mundane social structures and relations that they may transform but they cannot escape into a self-enclosed cybernetic apartness”.

In the next chapter, I will provide a closer ethnographic exploration of Mooji’s teachings within his Portuguese ashram with a particular attention to its social organisation and allocation of duties, the central practice of ‘*The invitation*’, the retreat format, and finally Mooji’s satsangs as the privileged pedagogical environments where he grants his darshan to his devotees.

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<sup>113</sup>[https://mooji.tv/freemedia/?\\_fm\\_s=coronavirus+&action=recent&\\_fm\\_video\\_subtitle=0&\\_fm\\_media\\_type=7&\\_fm\\_media\\_topic=0&\\_fm\\_length=0&\\_fm\\_media\\_source=0](https://mooji.tv/freemedia/?_fm_s=coronavirus+&action=recent&_fm_video_subtitle=0&_fm_media_type=7&_fm_media_topic=0&_fm_length=0&_fm_media_source=0) accessed May 05, 2020.



## Chapter Seven

# Pedagogies of Salvation: Mooji's Ashram and its Dispositifs of Veridiction

### 1. Introduction

This chapter is dedicated to discussing how the philosophical and discursive backbones of Mooji's teachings translate into practice via specific *pedagogies of salvation* within the context of his Portuguese ashram's everyday life and of course also during retreats. Here, his teachings are organised in and amplified by what, following Foucault (e.g., 1978, 2007, 2008, 2014, 2018), could be addressed as a series of *dispositifs of veridiction* whose primary function is to guide spiritual seekers and devotees to the permanent discovery of their "true self", that is, to conquer enlightenment. As we will see in more details in the following pages, the careful study of these dispositifs is pivotal not only to better grasp what is at stake within Mooji's ashram and the pedagogical relationships he entertains with his devotees. Most importantly, a focus on those dispositifs of veridiction constituted by the practices of *karma*, *jñāna*, and *bhakti* yoga and the performance of *satsangs* is capable of unveiling how certain discourses about the self, god, and salvation are translated into practice via "pedagogical devices" (Bernstein, 1990, 1995, 2000, 2001) aimed at facilitating, delivering, and of course also assessing, devotees' self-realisation, the most coveted "salvation good" (Weber 1965, 1978; see also Stolz 2006, 2008) of the entire yoga field. In other words, to study Mooji's pedagogies of salvation as framed within these specific dispositifs of veridiction has the tripartite merit to: first, shed light on some of the most important dynamics that characterise the processes of knowledge transmission and status acquisition within Mooji's community of devotees. This is, of course, in line with the general orientation of this thesis that frames the teacher-student

relationship as the organising principle and unsurpassable presupposition of modern yoga communities of practice; second, it emphasises the circular relationship – too often overlooked by sociocultural analyses regardless of their specific disciplines and objects of inquiry – between discourses and practices. What is important to stress in relation to this second point is the potential of this focus on the dispositifs of veridiction mobilised by Mooji to clarify how social actors embody – largely pre-consciously and in the guise of a “second nature” (Bourdieu 1990a: 56) – the “truth” formulated in the discourses that inform their virtuous performances of specific practices (e.g., seva activities, contemplations of various kinds, and devotional practices); third, the study of Mooji’s dispositifs of veridiction shows how localised struggles to reach enlightenment (for instance within the ashram premises or during retreats) have to be contextualised within a larger network of practical-discursive logics (the yoga field) dominated by the competition over the acquisition of salvation goods, of which enlightenment is the finest assets. Here, spiritual seekers’ capitals (whether preexistent to their involvement in the field or subsequently acquired) become essential to understand individuals’ trajectory of *spiritual distinction* (from other spiritual seekers and devotes) as they acquire and convert them with the final aim of conquering self-realisation.

I have already begun to lay down the premises of these analyses in the previous chapter through a reliance on a discursive study of the philosophical and discursive foundations that inform Mooji’s teaching. In this chapter, I intend to bring them to a close, this time primarily engaging with the ethnographic material at my disposal. More specifically, the ethnographic material here discussed is the result of my own apprenticeship as a good devotee through “observant participation” (Wacquant 2010, 2015) within Mooji’s ashram, coupled with an increasing “epistemological break” (Bachelard 1986 [1938]) from the truth of Mooji’s teachings, or to say it with Bourdieu (2010), from the “illusio” of the field. In other words, the stake of the chapter is the reconstruction of his devotees’ processes of apprenticeship as good devotees, that is, as he says, as devotees who earnestly listen and do what he teaches them in the attempt to embody the knowledge he conveys.<sup>1</sup> In the light of these reflections then, my personal experience functions only as an embodied point of intersection between his teachings (and the truth they convey) and the project of self-transfiguration from one’s own ego-

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<sup>1</sup> <https://mooji.org/voices-from-satsang/moojibaba> accessed May 01, 2020.

self to the “god-self” that regulates the life in the ashram and the unfolding of retreats. In other words, here too the yogic habitus transmitted and embodied within Mooji’s ashram is simultaneously mobilised, to say it with Wacquant’s (2004, 2013a) as a “topic and tool”.

This chapter is structured as follows: first, I provide an account of *Monte Sahaja* as a “total institution” (Goffman 1961) with a focus on issues of *access* to its premises and the management of *devotees’ time* and the *ashram’ spaces*; second, I discuss how *karma*, *jñāna*, and *bhakti yoga* as *dispositifs of veridiction* are used to weaken individuals’ sense of egoic identity and predispose them to the interiorisation of the teachings of the guru. Here, following Shilling (2012), I also inquire into the role of *devotees’ bodies as the multidimensional medium for the constitution of the everyday life of the ashram*, thus emphasising the productive and generative features of the disciplinary power enforced and the practices performed in the ashram; third, I introduce the “Satsang Dispositif” (Di Placido forthcoming) as a *disciplining, confessional, and self-transformative apparatus* tailored to guide spiritual seekers to the direct recognition of their divine nature; fourth, the chapter ends summarising some of the most relevant implications emerged in relation to the processes of constitution of a *yogic habitus* composed of *servicing, contemplative, and devotional dispositions* and the *dispositifs of veridiction* that support its creation and reproduction.

## 2. Monte Sahaja: The Ashram as Total Institution

Monte Sahaja is not a traditional ashram. For some people, it is more like a monastery; for others it is a retreat centre or a place of pilgrimage or a temple, but no word really defines what Monte Sahaja is. It doesn’t fit into any classification. The word ‘Sahaja’ means the natural state of Being. Monte Sahaja is a sacred place dedicated to supporting true seekers who deeply aspire for liberation from the grip of ego identity. It is a rare place in this world as it is entirely dedicated to the complete realisation of the Self.<sup>2</sup>

The emic framing of Monte Sahaja, a “sacred place” deifying “any classification” and “entirely dedicated to the complete realization of the Self”, could be fruitfully theorised following Goffman’s (1961) concept of “total institution”. According to Goffman (1961:

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<sup>2</sup> <https://mooji.org/monte-sahaja> accessed May 15, 2020.



xii) a total institution is “a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life”. Typical examples of these types of institutions are mental hospitals, prisons, training camps, and of course monasteries, of which the ashram is only a particular declination. A parallel reading to Goffman’s theorisation of total institutions is provided by Foucault’s (1975) notion of “disciplinary institutions”, defined as institutions where people are made useful and obedient through the repression of any deviation from the norm. What unites these conceptualisations is an emphasis on how specific “truths” about normality, health, morality and so on translate into the supervised regimentation of individuals’ everyday life to the point that their identity is substantially redefined on the ground of the premises of the “truth” advocated by the institution in question. Here, individuals’ bodies and selves become the privileged surfaces of the workings of totalising and disciplinary power which it inscribes into them transforming the individual (who once was) into who one ought to become. In other words, the redemptive power of these institutions is pivotal to their existence. But before providing a more detailed account of Monte Sahaja as a total institution I would like to sketch some preliminary remarks on how the ashram can be accessed in the first place.

### ***2.1. Accessing the Ashram***

To access the ashram’s premises is not straightforward. In line with its totalising and disciplinary features, “drop-ins” and “casual visitors” are not contemplated “at any time”.<sup>3</sup> Conversely, to enter the ashram, one must prove one’s own commitment and dedication to the teachings of the guru. As a consequence, aspiring residents go through a rather lengthy online application and a subsequent skype interview. This application is more than a formality. It functions as an actual “test” (Foucault 2010, 2011) where aspiring residents are preliminary evaluated on the ground of their utility for the current projects carried out at the ashram (which is in constant expansion since its foundation in 2011) and in reference to their connection with the guru. More specifically, the application requires applicants’ disclosure of their history of mental and physical health, how they think they could actively contribute to the life at the ashram (thus resembling a

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<sup>3</sup> <https://mooji.org/monte-sahaja> accessed May 15, 2020.

regular job application), preferred periods of stay, and the type of relationship they have with the guru (of course discipleship is privileged over a more causal interest in Mooji's teachings). As a rule of thumb, only healthy and fit applicants are accepted. These selection criteria seem justified on the ground of three interrelated points: first, the ashram's overall spartan and monastic environment. In fact, most residents live in small tents or dormitories, toilets are public, and the everyday life of the ashram is largely lived outdoor and paced around working, contemplating, and praying activities; second, the ashram is located on a rather hilly land clustered of steep paths that connect one area to the other (it can take up to 15 minutes-walk up-hill to reach certain peripheral areas of the ashram from the main area). Moreover, during the Summer season the temperature easily overcome 40 degree Celsius (104 degrees Fahrenheit) although the ashram's activities do not slow down; third, for ashram's residents a regular week day consists of an early wake up (before sunrise regardless of the season) and continues with a rather demanding working schedule, as we will shortly see. In other words, one ought to be physically fit in order to aspire to increase his or her spiritual fitness level.



**Figure 1:** Main Entrance to Monte Sahaja.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup>[https://www.google.com/search?q=Monte+Sahaj&rlz=1C1CHBF\\_enIT878IT878&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjEluyoy\\_3tAhVDCewKHbGFBGMQ\\_AUoAnoECAUQBA&biw=1366&bih=625#imgrc=zMHprRsd xh75bM](https://www.google.com/search?q=Monte+Sahaj&rlz=1C1CHBF_enIT878IT878&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjEluyoy_3tAhVDCewKHbGFBGMQ_AUoAnoECAUQBA&biw=1366&bih=625#imgrc=zMHprRsd xh75bM) accessed January 01, 2021.

There are substantially two ways to access Monte Sahaja and, in both cases, only those that have previously attended at least one retreat with the guru (in presence) are qualified for application. The first way to visit the ashram are “guest stays” of one or two weeks. In this case the fitness level of applicants (and as a consequence their age) is secondary as those who apply for this type of stay do so with the main intention to “visit Sahaja to be immersed in Satsang and contemplation with a focus on the daily ashram program, which includes activities such as silent sittings, video satsangs, aarti, bhajans [both of which are devotional practices] laughing yoga and the Invitation”.<sup>5</sup> If they engage in seva activities is largely due to their desire to contribute to the working life of the ashram and not as a precondition for their stay. In other words, guest stays resemble retreats but are less constraining on individuals’ conduct. In fact, retreats are usually conducted in complete silence, with zero tolerance for any form of socialisation among participants themselves and Mooji’s staff.

The second way to access the ashram’s premises are “extended programs” lasting from two to three months and amenable of prolongation. Within this format, there is a two weeks trial period after which the applicant (or resident to be) is evaluated. The ashram, that is, the team leader together with the human resources responsible, decides whether the applicant’s conduct is aligned with the life and the precepts of the ashram and therefore whether the stay may continue or not. Of course, this trial period is also an important resource for applicants themselves as they have an early chance to understand if the life at the ashram suits them or if they prefer to “go back home”. Although Mooji is used to mention – as a negative example – those who arrive at the ashram and fail to comply to its rules and regulations (perhaps finding them too strict), I must say that during my seven months spent in Monte Sahaja I never heard or personally met anybody that decided to leave the ashram before the set time. On the contrary, it is through the extended programs format that most of the permanent residents of the ashram have accessed its premises and then decided to stay longer upon proposal from their team leaders.

The extended programs are described as “a beautiful opportunity to deepen in Satsang while engaging in daily ashram activities and participating in the daily ashram program that supports genuine introspection”.<sup>6</sup> More specifically, they are “ideal for those who enjoy activity and wish to put into practice their contemplation in daily ashram

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<sup>5</sup> <https://mooji.org/monte-sahaja> accessed May 15, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> <https://mooji.org/monte-sahaja> accessed May 15, 2020.

life. This requires a reasonable amount of physical fitness and stamina”.<sup>7</sup> Finally, in order to be eligible to apply for an extended stay, that is, to become an ashram’s resident, one must “feel a deep resonance with Mooji’s pointings”; “stayed in Monte Sahaja for at least a week (e.g. for a Guest Stay)”; and as previously recalled, “have attended a retreat or intensive with Moojibaba”.<sup>8</sup> In reference to the extended stays there are several positions that one can apply for, according to the needs and the ongoing projects of the ashram. Usually applicants are recruited for a variety of duties such as prepping and cooking meals, construction, land care, maintenance, laundry, music playing, translation of the guru’s teachings, and a variety of other technical and administrative duties such as audio-video activities, the management of the inflows of goods such as food stuff and construction material, caring for the ashram’s public relations, and Mooji’s publications.

As we have seen, the length of one’s stay varies from a few weeks up to several months. There is also a core group of devotees that has been living in the ashram for many years, in certain cases since the ashram was established in 2011. The allocation of duties and the roles held by the devotees within the ashram seem to reproduce, at least partially, traditional gender roles: for instance, women are more likely to be assigned to the care (e.g., cleaning, organising, guarding) of the contemplative spaces and to kitchen duties, while men are more likely to engage in hard labour such as construction and land care. Naturally, there is no lack of notable exceptions. For instance, Tara, a middle-age German carpenter serves in the construction team, while Joshua, an Italian cooker and long-time Mooji’s devotee, is a central member of the kitchen team. In fact, as I will discuss more extensively in the following pages, devotees’ previously acquired capitals (most notably in terms of practical skills related to previous careers or occupations) are not only one of the essential eligibility criteria for selection of aspiring residents but also define – to a large extent – devotees positioning within the ashram. In other words, devotees’ role within the hierarchy of possible positions of the ashram seems to largely reproduce traditional forms of “division of labour” and “social stratification” typical of contemporary society.

Finally, while guest stays are usually organised all year round extended programmes are “offered seasonally”,<sup>9</sup> that is, chiefly during the Spring and Summer periods where

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<sup>7</sup> <https://mooji.org/monte-sahaja> accessed May 15, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> <https://mooji.org/monte-sahaja> accessed May 15, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> <https://mooji.org/monte-sahaja> accessed May 15, 2020.

the ashram's activities touch their peak. In both cases "[i]t is essential to apply and receive confirmation that it is possible to come".<sup>10</sup> At the moment both guest stays and extended programs are suspended for the all duration of 2020, due to the current Covid-19 global pandemic.<sup>11</sup>

## 2.2. *The Social Organisation of Time and Space in the Ashram*

One of the defining features of total and disciplinary institutions alike is their deployment of *time* and *space* in order to pursue whatever normalising and disciplinary aim they set themselves to accomplish (e.g., rehabilitation, cure, education, salvation and so on). The relationship between the management and regulation of residents' time and the morphological, spatial, and architectonical layout of Monte Sahaja should in fact be understood as the primarily means through which the *social organisation* of the ashram and the *transmission* of Mooji's teachings are brought forward and impact on devotees' bodies and sense of self. In other words, the study of time is an essential component (although too often left on the background of sociocultural analyses) in any careful exploration of the social organisation of groups, institutions, and societies and of course a powerful organiser of individuals' lived experiences (e.g., Zerubavel 1981). The importance of these reflections seems inescapable when time is considered within the framework of Goffman's and Foucault's concepts sketched above. In fact, the ashram (as any other monastic or quasi monastic institution) makes of the minute subdivision of activities, tasks, and duties following schedules and calendars its primary and most powerful intervention into the life of those who inhabit it. In order to have their identities transformed and re-defined from the dismissed identification with the ego-self to the encouraged recognition of their "god-self" (the final aim of Mooji's teachings), spiritual seekers and devotees have to first and foremost give up their sovereignty over their time and hand it over to the tight schedule and regulated activities of the ashram. Of course, these schedules and activities (chiefly constituted by work, contemplation, and prayer) (for a preliminary analysis see Di Placido 2018) are organised within specific spatial and architectonical configurations of which the ashram is only the larger unit.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://mooji.org/monte-sahaja> accessed May 15, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> <https://mooji.org/monte-sahaja> accessed May 15, 2020.

### 2.2.1. *The Schedule and Everyday Activities*

“A typical ashram day”<sup>12</sup> generally adheres to the following schedule:

- 06:00 – 06:30 Mantra Chanting
- 06:30 – 07:30 Aarti and Silent Sitting
- 07:30 – 08:00 Breakfast
- 08:30 – 12:00 Ashram activities or Contemplation
- 12:30 – 13:00 Lunch
- 14:00 – 17:30 Ashram activities or Contemplation
- 18:00 – 18:30 Dinner
- 19:15 – 20:30 Aarti and Evening Program

In order to participate to the earliest activities of the everyday life of the ashram (not mandatory but highly encouraged), residents and/or visitors have to wake up well before 6 am as most of the accommodations are not in close proximity to the MoojiMandir, the Satsang Hall where all the most important contemplative and devotional activities are carried out. More specifically, mantra chanting involves the routinised and repetitive utterance of a mantra, in this case an invocation of the divine power of the guru. The primary function of this mantra is to prepare the mind for the following contemplation.

Straight after mantra chanting there are the main devotional (*aarti*) and contemplative (silent sitting) activities of the morning. The aarti is the Hindu religious ritual of lightening a lamp to the deities, god or/and the guru, which is accompanied by devotional chants; while the silent sitting, as the expression suggests, is a meditation practice where spiritual seekers and devotees contemplate in composed silence, usually with their eyes closed. While the participation to the earlier chants is not always fully embraced by residents, which in most cases prefer to sleep in an hour more than face Sahaja’s cold and foggy mornings, the subsequent aarti and silent sitting are usually attended by the greatest majority of residents. To not participate or to arrive late to them is seen as a sign of disrespect towards the guru and his efforts to guide his flocks to salvation and in certain cases it can also lead to generalised calls for a tighter self-discipline. These calls are usually articulated around two points: first, to participate to all the activities scheduled by the ashram, although not mandatory, is supportive of devotee’s

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<sup>12</sup> <https://mooji.org/monte-sahaja/a-typical-ashram-day> accessed May 15, 2020.

processes of introspection. Therefore, these activities should be attended; second, being usually long-timers those that feel entitled to skip these earliest activities, they are reminded that their conduct is looked upon by newcomers and as such that they should live a life of example. The contexts where this type of disciplinary remarks are conveyed are in turn: right before a satsang; during team meetings; in specifically tailored meetings attended by all residents; or again, in casual announcements during meals' time.

Right after the morning program there is breakfast. Meals are served for half an hour, following a buffet like format, and are consumed in complete silence. Any small deviation from this rule is perceived as a violation and if persisting is met with judgmental looks if not a more verbalised reproach from some of the surrounding diners. In those rare cases where a diffuse chatter – or the noises of the cutlery colliding with plates and cups – seems to take over the silence of the dining area, a small bell is ringed, usually by the head of the kitchen team. This is a formal request to return to a more composed and silent meal. When devotees are done with their food they proceed to wash (by hand) their own cutleries in the adjacent dish washing station (during retreats or in special occasions there is a dish washing team that collects, washes, and places back in place everybody's cutleries). Meals are rigorously vegetarian although in very rare occasions fish is served (in seven months I recall it be served not more than five times in total). The time allocated for meals is usually tight considering the number of people that eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner at the ashram. In fact, next to the ashram's residents (nearly two-hundreds) there are also a few dozen seekers and devotees who commute daily to the ashram to do their seva. During retreats the time allocated for meals is usually doubled. In this context, some residents (e.g., the members of the dishwashing team or those who prepare the MoojiMandir for satsang) can eat first as they must prepare for the retreat's activities. Then come the participants and the other residents, which in certain cases are divided in four groups to facilitate the inflow of people in the limited spaces available in the dining area.

From 8:30 to 12:00 in the morning and from 14:00 to 17:30 in the afternoon the greatest majority of Sahajans is engaging with seva – or karmayoga – activities. Contemplation during this time is usually reserved for visitors who spend a very limited time on the ashram's premises or to team members that are either just arrived or are about to leave the ashram. In other words, the expression “Ashram activities or Contemplation” is partly misleading as what goes on during these times is first and foremost dedicated

karmayoga. Moreover, the amount of time dedicated to work well exceeds the balanced representation provided by the schedule: in practice, work tends to take over devotees' free time, that is, time dedicated to rest and contemplation, in some extreme cases completely devouring devotees' day and evening time. Naturally, this hyper emphasis on work has to do with both building anew from wild lands and guru/seva culture and as a consequence it plays a pivotal role in a variety of NRMs and neo-guru movements.<sup>13</sup> I will expand on this important facet of the life at this ashram in the following pages. For the moment, I would simply like to mention that Mooji, recognising the demanding and in some cases strenuous working culture of the ashram, has decided to intervene.

He has then introduced, starting from the Fall of 2018, what he calls "contemplative afternoons" and "stops moments". The former are usually held Friday afternoons and are meant to be dedicated to introspection; while the latter are ten minutes break, twice a day, signaled by the sound of the gong, where everybody at the ashram is supposed to stop what they are doing and instead contemplate. However, even after the introduction of these correctives, at least within the activities carried out by the construction team where I have militated extensively, there remains a strong emphasis on work, constant availability, and willingness to sacrifice one's own free time. Paradoxically, this totalising working ethic is often time mobilised when the teacher desires to have a specific project done quickly, either because a retreat or some other deadline is approaching or because he simply wishes so. In any case, devotees are working hard for their guru. As we will shortly see, devotees are not merely disciplined into at times extenuating working routines but deliberately immerse themselves into their seva activities in order to please the guru and receive his approval, perhaps the most valued currency within the struggle over one's positioning in the ashram's hierarchy and in relation to one's physical proximity to the guru (e.g., for similar analysis in relation to other neo-guru movements see Lucia 2014a; 2014b, 2018a; Srivinas 2010).

Finally, after dinner there are the evening aarti and the evening program. Again, these activities are not mandatory. Nonetheless participation is highly encouraged. Usually, they have a rather successful turn out, with the MoojiMandir full of devotees gathered together to sing and pray for their guru and for their own salvation. After the aarti, the evening program is comprised of the projection of a satsang excerpt considered

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<sup>13</sup> I would like to thank Amanda Lucia for sharing this reflection. Personal Communication, November 11, 2020.



particularly important for its salvific potential either because Mooji articulates his message with particular clarity and directedness or because the interaction recorded captures some rather diffuse pattern of resistance to and misunderstanding of Mooji's teachings. Occasionally, the program may involve *bhajans* (traditional devotional songs) or in rare occasions, such as right after a particularly demanding working period, the projection of a fun movie (again in seven months-time I remember having seen three movies in total). After the evening program everybody is tired and considering the early wake up of that day and of the following day the ashram tends to go to sleep quite early. By nine o'clock very few devotees are still around the main areas. The ashram quiets down. As the sun sets the only lights that remain are either the ones emanating from the stars and the moon – that can be seen with exceptional clarity given the secluded location of the ashram – and those of a few electric torches, as devotees walk back to their accommodations, clustering the surrounding hills. Nevertheless, it is not uncommon for certain devotees to be working well past this time, especially when there is some urgent task to be finished.

During the everyday life of the ashram satsangs are not scheduled regularly. This signifies that devotees may be notified the same morning or even the same afternoon that in the evening a satsang will take place (usually via their team leaders or a generalised word of mouth). When this occurs most of the ashram's working activities shut down and everybody participates in satsang, although this is not always the case. Also, a satsang may start from a spontaneous talk between Mooji and somebody else. What happens in these cases is that devotees start to gather around the guru, as bees attracted by a particularly colorful flower. A small crowd is quickly formed and keeps increasing to the point that Mooji asks for it to be turned into a formal satsang. This is signaled by the blowing of a horn whose profound sound echoes across the valleys where the ashram rises. Usually in an hour time the MoojiMandir – or during the warm Summer days the airy dining area – is set for satsang. Moreover, during the week-ends activities slow down a bit, although for certain teams two days break is an exception rather than a rule. This is particularly true for the construction, land care, and kitchen teams, whose working routines are particularly demanding and totalising. On Sundays there is a brunch served between 10:00 to 11:00 and the ashram feels less hectic as those devotees who usually commute to do their seva remain home. Moreover, those residents that have the means to (e.g., a car, the available free time, and a certain seniority within the ashram) tend to leave

the ashram from a day at a beach or perhaps for a lunch or a dinner in one of the nearby towns. It is also very common, during these times, to see Mooji leaving the ashram in his grey van together with his closest devotees. Once he rented a few busses and as a father would with his family, brought everybody at the beach with him, where the atmosphere oscillated between the playfulness of a vacation to the seriousness of a sacred meeting.

The main differences between the everyday schedule discussed above and the deployment of time during retreats are the substantial cessation of all those activities that are not strictly necessary for the functioning of the retreat, that is, for the delivery of satsangs and the management of the hundreds of people that colonise the ashram from seven to ten days at the time; and of course, the daily performance of satsang which are usually scheduled for 9:45 in the morning and 19:30 in the evening and last two hours each, approximately. When retreats are hosted elsewhere, for instance in the previously mentioned echovillage Zmar or in other venues abroad, the everyday activities of the ashram tend to continue unchanged although devotees may try to listen and glimpse at satsangs through their smartphones. Next to these major changes there are also a number of other scheduled activities that characterise the retreat format. In particular, it is important to mention the opening and closing ceremonies, where Mooji formally declares the beginning and the end of the silent retreat and respectively welcome all the participants (opening ceremony) and thanks them for their disciplined and dedicated engagement with their own introspection (closing ceremony); the performance of bhajans, usually once or twice per retreat; the provision of one afternoon of laughing yoga, a form of yoga presented as being created by Mooji and that involves the induction of laughter through the expressive mobilisation of the body. More specifically, laughing yoga is thought to facilitate the release of stained energies and as a consequence, a smoother interiorisation of the guru's teachings; the daily offering of a recorded version of *'The Invitation'*, scheduled before the morning satsang; one silent sitting or guided meditation with Mooji; and finally, the last evening, a fire ceremony where all the participants and team members get a chance to throw one – or more – piece of camphor in the sacrificial fire symbolising the dissolution of the ego and formulating any prayer for their own salvation or for their loved ones. During this ceremony also Mooji throws whatever amount of camphor is left after everybody has collected his or her piece into the fire on the behalf of all the online participants.

### 2.2.2. *The Spatial Layout and the Material Environment of the Ashram*

To give a better sense of the spatial layout of the ashram, that is, the material environment in which the everyday schedule just discussed unfolds, I briefly introduce and comment on a map of the ashram (figure 1) that I have collected the last time I visited Monte Sahaja in September 2018. Considering the pace to which the ashram develops it would not be surprising if new major structures would have been introduced in these two years. In any case, the map is only representing the main public areas of the ashram where most of the activities pertaining to Mooji's devotee's everyday life are performed daily and excludes a depiction of the peripheral accommodation sites. Starting from the left side it is possible to see the actual religious and administrative centers of the ashram, respectively the MoojiMandir, the office just above it, and the Mooji Mala right next to the legend. The MoojiMandir, as we have already seen, functions as the main sacred space of the ashram. It is a round structure, entirely build in wood and which can host up to a few hundred individuals. Its interior is constellated by the pictures of different gurus, among which figure prominently Ramana Maharishi and Papaji to whom are reserved bigger pictures. In the right-back side of the room there is a few meters-long black desk, the audio video work station necessary for video projection and for the recording of satsangs.



**Figure 2:** The Map of Monte Sahaja. Picture by the author.

On the other side of the main door there is a small altar with incense and sage burning constantly. Devotees are required to leave their shoes on the shoe racks outside and usually, upon entering the Mandir, bow to the small altar inhaling its sacred fumes trying to absorb their cleansing properties. Interestingly enough, while devotees are entering the Mandir before a satsang, one of the devotees (usually a woman) stands, smiling and rigorously dressed in white, in front of the main door. As she does so, she holds a ritual tray with burning sage and incense and in this way, those entering can perform this cleansing ritual more neatly and faster and the inflow of people can continue without major interruptions. On the opposite side, right in front to the main door there is the stage where Mooji sits during satsang. The stage is a simple wooden platform, fifty centimeters higher than the rest of the floor of the Mandir. This platform hosts Mooji's armchair (on whose back it is possible to see a big Om sign hanging from the roof), two small side tables usually holding a picture of Ramana Maharishi and Papaji (and lately also of Mooji's parents, which are increasingly depicted within the Pantheon of the ashram) and some colorful orchids. Occasionally, on these side tables is also possible to find a book brought in by Mooji (among his favorites figure the '*Ashtavakra Gita*' (IV-V B.C.E.) and the '*Avadhuta Gita*' (IX-X A.C.)) from which he reads, at times, one or more passages; the letters of those devotees that are following the satsang or the retreat online; and sometimes, also a small note left there by one of his personal assistants that reminds him practical things, such as the time to end the satsang or some important announcements to make. Finally, behind the stage there is a very small room completely veiled by beige curtains where the music team keeps the instruments needed for accompanying the morning aarti and playing devotional music before and after each satsang.

The central office – a beautiful wooden structure surrounded by a patio – hosts the ashram's human resources office and a large room dedicated to co-working with both personal and publicly available computers. Members of several teams (most notably the audio video, photography, translation, and publication teams) have a privileged access to this space with a number of reserved seats. Also, long-timers can use these computers in case of absolute need (such as booking a flight or checking other important personal matters). The Mooji Mala, in turn, is a round wooden building almost entirely constituted by a central courtyard with exotic plants and paved with white gravel. On the one side there is the reception, where everybody accessing the ashram has to pass through to receive the first information regarding their stay and where residents' monthly payments

are collected (300 euros inclusive of room and board); on the other side, there is the seva desk, basically a stall where non-residents receive the preliminary information regarding their seva activities in the ashram. Next to the central office and the MoojiMandir there are also a number of smaller but crucial offices, most notably the audio video hut and the containers of the translation, publication, and construction teams. In the same area there is also another container, that I, together with other two members of the construction team, have transformed from a rectangular metal box into two separate offices for Shree (the General Manager of Mooji Foundation) and Lakshmi (one of his personal assistants), of course sometimes working well past dinner time.

On the right-lower side of the MoojiMandir there is the dining area, a two floors wooden structure to which I have also worked extensively during my first few weeks in Sahaja. Most notably, I worked at its flooring and other small details such as refining the shelves and some of the downstairs' beams. The structure has a beautiful view on the central part of the ashram, from which it is possible to see the verdant vegetations of the surrounding hills (chiefly constituted by eucalyptus) and the ashram's gardens (e.g., palm, olive, oaks trees, and even some fruit trees among other plants). Next to the dining area there are the kitchen and the previously mentioned dishwashing station. Right above this cluster of interconnected structures there is Bodhi Leaf, a pagoda which functions as a meeting place where every morning the construction and the painting teams (formally a subdivision of the construction team) meet to discuss the allocation of the daily duties to each team member and to make the point of the ongoing projects. Moreover, although it is not represented in the map, a few dozen meters away from Bodhi Leaf and the central office and right in front of Shree's and Lakshmi' offices there is a small gated area where Mooji lives with his personal assistants. Moving down, passed the Mooji Mala, again although not represented in the map, there is the laundry station of the ashram. Here the laundry team manages the laundries of Sahaja residents (on donation bases) and team members can handwash their clothes anytime for free. Just above the laundry station, a few dozen meters up hill, there is a small henhouse, with chickens and turkeys and then the hanging station where clothes can be safely placed to dry under a covered structure.

As it is possible to see from the map, the land is constellated by contemplative spaces (represented with a pink, cross-legged seated figure). Some of these spaces, like the Shiva Temple and the Christ Chapel (respectively on the top-left and top-right sides of the map) are, together with the MoojiMandir, the most prominent sacred spaces of the ashram. The

Temple and the Chapel, respectively situated on the top of the two main hills that delimit the contours of the valley where the ashram rises, are also actual pilgrimage places for the ashram's residents and visitors. The Temple, quite small if compared to the Mandir but comprising of a beautiful belvedere area clustered with olives tree, hosts a big black *lingam* (Shiva's *murti*, a phallic cultic representation of Shiva) and offers traditional Hindu rituals. This is possible as Sai, a young Indian ashram's resident and notable member of the kitchen team, is also a Brahmin. The Chapel, considered one of the jewels of the ashram, is a very small (it can host up to four people maximum) stone built rustic structure. On its immediate surroundings there is a big cross, again surrounded by olive trees, and a few benches dedicated to contemplation or where devotees attend their turn to enter the Chapel. Its interiors are very suggestive, as after a short and narrow corridor the main chamber of the Chapel opens up in a rather collected and suggestive space whose walls are entirely decorated by Mooji's representations of some iconic moments taken from the Bible. I remember having spent quite a bit of my free time sitting in contemplation in the Chapel, savoring the smell of incense and its sheltering from the hot sun of Southern Portugal.

The ashram hosts also two cafes: the Chai Shop, situated on top of the main hill where the Mooji Mala, the Mandir, the dining area, the central offices, and Mooji's hut are located; and Papaji Café, a fairly recent addition to the ashram as it was built only in 2018. Papaji Café is located at the bottom of the main valley of the ashram. Other notable services are gathered in the area called '*Little Jamaica*', where it is possible to find in this order, starting from the left side of the area: the Advaita Library, containing a collection of books ranging from the classics of Advaita-Vedanta to Christian literature; the Sangha Shop, selling Mooji's merchandising, devotional music, books, t-shirts, blessed malas an so on; and finally, the One Love Shop, a small minimarket that sells basic products such as shampoo, toothpaste, soaps but also chips, ice-cream, chocolate, and fuzzy drinks of different sorts. Pictures and quotes of the guru and other religious and spiritual leaders, most notably Ramana Maharishi and Papaji, are found virtually in every structure and room of the ashram.

Devotees' accommodations colonise the valleys, hills, and slopes surrounding the central part of the ashram. Here, tents, dormitories, and to a lesser degree huts (most of which are located on Ananda Hill) are engulfed in the lush and flourishing vegetation. Other important spaces in the regulation and management of the ashram's resident'

everyday life are the compost toilets and showers scattered around the land and of course the countless working sites that constitute the bulk of the activities of the ashram. Next to the offices previously discussed there are also a number of working stations where tools and materials are stored (most notably the land care and electricity material tool sheds and the construction team warehouse) and also a large garbage station where all the waste produced in the ashram are divided according to their typology (e.g., organic, plastic, paper and so on). It is common to see Amir, a hard-working and composed Swedish devotee member of the maintenance team, driving a big white track down the hilly and sandy streets of Sahaja to go and dispense the wastes in the closer rubbish dump.

Before moving to a more detailed exploration of the main activities of the ashram, that is, work, contemplation, and prayer, I would like to make a note on how devotees move around the land: most of the devotees move by foot, climbing from day to evening the steep paths and sandy roads that connects the different areas of the ashram. However, the ashram has also a number of electric buggies, some of which are specifically allocated to certain teams. For instance, the construction team has its own buggy, so does the maintenance team and so on. Usually, the buggies are used when there is the need to do something with certain promptness or to bring tools and materials from the working station to the working sites or the other way around. For the same purpose there are also a number of other vehicles, most notably two pick-ups and two trucks which are used for heavier duties. Of course, Mooji has his own private buggy. It is common to see him driving up and down the land as he moves about to plan the construction of new sites, to monitor certain ongoing projects particularly dear to him or simply to enjoy the day.

Finally, the management and regulation of devotee's time and the spaces in which they move daily (and how they move in them) are central features also of the unfolding of satsangs and during retreats. More specifically, the greatest difference between regular times and retreats is the diffuse rule of silence that falls on the whole ashram. Of course, those residents that are directly involved in seva activities instrumental to the retreat can communicate but always far from the eyes of the participants and only regarding strictly necessary practical matters. Moreover, when a retreat is held in Monte Sahaja residents are asked to leave as much as possible the enjoyment of contemplative spaces, both building and gardens, to the retreat participants and they are allowed to sit in the MoojiMandir only when there are free spots and/or as a prize for their particular demanding seva (e.g., especially dish washing and kitchen seva).

In the following sections, I will discuss in greater details how the management and regulation of devotees' time within the ashram's spaces give rise to specific dispositifs of veridiction deployed to guarantee the interiorisation of the "truth" transmitted by the guru and the revelation of devotees' "true self".

### **3. Karma, Jñāna, and Bhakti Yoga as Dispositifs of Veridiction**

As hinted at in the previous discussion of the social organisation of time and space of the ashram, devotees' everyday life is organised around three imperatives: *work*, *devotion*, and *contemplation*. These three facets represent the privileged manners in which the "truth" about the teachings of the guru as mirrored in devotees' discovery and recognition of their "true self" becomes manifest, that is, open to scrutiny and assessment by the former and experientially inhabited and thus confirmed by the latter. In what follows, I introduce some field notes extracted from my "observant participation" (Wacquant 2010, 2015) and "sensuous" involvement (e.g., Stoller 1997; Howes 2005; Wacquant 2004) in the ashram in order to unpack the manners in which devotees' bodies and selves are disciplined and transformed through the routinised and regulated engagement with *karma*, *jñāna*, and *bhakti yoga* as *dispositifs of veridiction* as practiced, lived, and transmitted in Monte Sahaja. In so doing, I also underline the simultaneously disciplining and generative potentials of these dispositifs which make of devotees' bodies the multidimensional medium for the constitution of the everyday life of the ashram and of the discovery and recognition of their sacred selves, their ultimate rationale.

#### **3.1. Karmayoga: Serving the Guru**

Work is one of the cornerstones of the everyday life of the ashram. Within this context, working activities, referred by Sahajans as *karmayoga* or *seva*, are explicitly framed in two and interrelated manners: first, work is understood as a spiritual practice whose primary function is the weakening of devotee's ego. Here, devotees engage in the performance of their duties for the sake of it, that is, they cultivate detachment from the fruits – economic or otherwise – of their actions. This is the traditional neo-Vedantic understanding of karmayoga which postulates the importance of self-less work as a tool to humble the otherwise arrogant mind of the devotees and thus facilitate the interiorisation of the truth conveyed by the guru's message; second, as poignantly pointed out by Lucia (2014b), working activities function also as devotees' attempts to pay back



the guru's bestowing of his or her grace within a particular "gift-exchange" (e.g., Mauss 2002 [1950]). As Lucia elaborates (2014b: 206, emphasis in original), "[s]ince ancient times, the guru and the disciple have operated in a social hierarchy bonded through a debt relationship in which the disciple performs unpaid labors (*seva*) in efforts to reciprocate the metaphysical gift of the guru". Here, what to outsider observes (e.g., devotees' family members, sociologists, anti-cult activists and so on) looks like "the unjust manipulation of devotees into an unlimited source of unpaid labor" (Lucia 2014b: 190), that is, the exploitation of individuals' working power, time, and skills, to the devotees feels like a privileged – and most importantly, a natural (although always partial) – restitution of the guru's "metaphysical gift". For instance, this gratitude is expressed by Sajani, a long time ashram resident and core member of the audio video team, as she states that "...my Heart rejoices in the greatest Gift...For this Moojibaba I cannot thank you enough";<sup>14</sup> or again by Anna, long time ashram resident and kitchen team member: "I can only say, thank you, thank you, thank you, endlessly thank you to Mooji and the Sangha family all over the world for saving my life. And thank you to life that brought me to where I Am now".<sup>15</sup>

It is in the light of these two particular understandings of work as a preparatory stage for self-realisation and as a perpetual attempt to reciprocate the guru's gift that is possible to appreciate the ubiquitous role of karmayoga activities across a plethora of contemporary neo-Hindu and neo-guru movements (e.g., Lucia 2014a, 2014b; Pandya 2014, 2016; Warriar 2003). Moreover, most of these movements mobilise karmayoga activities as the building blocks of their philanthropic and humanitarian agendas, such as disaster relief programs, the construction and even management of schools, hospitals, social housing and so on. The expenditure of devotees' unpaid labour for the realisation of such virtuous activities seems to legitimise the guru's mission and confirm his or her ethical standing to both insiders and outsiders. As correctly pointed out by Lucia (2014b: 203):

In contemporary times, nearly every guru with a global presence incorporates some level of humanitarian activities into the mission of his or her organization. These humanitarian activities become public declarations of the importance and influence of the guru.

Quite surprisingly, however, Mooji is one of the few internationally renowned gurus whose message and activities are completely devoid of any philanthropic and

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<sup>14</sup> <https://mooji.org/voices-from-satsang/sajani> accessed May 22, 2020.

<sup>15</sup> <https://mooji.org/voices-from-satsang/anna-s> accessed January 01, 2021.

humanitarian spin offs. Conversely, as we have seen in the previous chapter, his organisation (Mooji Foundation) and his Portuguese ashram (Monte Sahaja) are entirely dedicated to the promotion and dissemination of Mooji's teachings. Therefore, all the karmayoga activities that they promote align solely to this purpose. For many spiritual seekers this total dedication to the "truth" – unmixed with humanitarian and philanthropic purposes – functions as a proof of Mooji's authenticity and distinguishes him from the majority of other gurus.

Consequently, the work conducted in Monte Sahaja is oriented to the functioning and social reproduction of the structures of the ashram and the effective transmission of Mooji's teachings. In order to do so, the ashram is divided in several teams, organised around a pyramid like logic. Each team has one or more persons in charge of the activities (usually a long timer), obviously placed at the top of the team's hierarchy and directly responding only to Mooji. Team leaders do not only organise the activities – in both the immediate and longer run – but they also act as supervisors. This signifies that, paralleling the role of medical staff, prison police, teachers, and spiritual directors in other types of total and disciplinary institutions, they enforce a specific "gaze" (Foucault 1973, 1975) whose function is the assessment and evaluation of the level of conformity of the devotees' conduct to the norms and expectations of the ashram and to the duties performed. Leaders are then followed by other long timers with experience and skills in the specific activity of reference (e.g., cooking, constructing, gardening, managerial positions) and then by newcomers, respectively with skills and without specific qualifications. It is here that devotees' pre-existing "capitals" (e.g., Bourdieu 1986), play a crucial role in directly influencing their status within their teams. Team leaders usually already possess before their appointment the highest amount of the most valued form of capital in that specific seva. In other words, the heads of different teams are invariably experienced carpenters (construction team), musicians (music team), chefs (kitchen team), translators (translation team) and so on. Of course, this is not to say that a devotee cannot climb the ranks of one's own team but again this type of "social mobility" requires skills (either previously possessed or subsequently acquired doing seva in the ashram) or the conversion of different forms of capital in social capital, something on which I will elaborate in the following.

Other highly respected and valorised capitals, especially for the lower levels of the pyramid (newcomers) and for certain teams whose performativity is particularly marked

(e.g., construction, land care, and dishwashing teams) are dynamism, availability, and physical strength. For instance, the construction team is almost fully composed by male members and enacts and values a form of physical masculinity that is peculiar of building workers (e.g., Bourdieu 1984; Thiel 2007); while the dishwashing team, a temporary team set up only during retreats and whose seva demands high levels of physical performances recruits only among the strongest, youngest, and most willing male members of the all ashram. In the following field note, I provide an example of the discursive and social construction of physical masculinity and willingness to work as crucial within the internal representation of the construction team. More specifically, I recall a meeting between Manas (construction team leader), Dharma (human resources team leader), and myself a few weeks after my arrival my conduct was evaluated to judge the suitability and utility of a longer stay:

We are sitting in a small office. Cozy and warm. The walls are made of wood, as the floor, the desk, and the stools on which we are sitting. Dharma speaks, addressing Manas with a big smile on her face but a firm tone in her voice: “So, how is it going?” Manas takes a moment, looking towards his hands, folded as usual on the top of his thighs. Then he replies: “Matteo is a good, hard worker. He is always available. And strong. He is very useful for the construction team”.<sup>16</sup>

As this extract shows, hard work and certain physical attributes (strength, endurance, stamina) are the prerequisites for a newcomer to satisfy his team leader’s disciplinary gaze and become a core member of the community. Although the physical attributes here recalled are contingent to the type of seva performed (e.g., construction), that is, other teams require other qualities in a newcomer, the willingness to work hard characterises the general working culture of the ashram and as such it is widely praised. This is not surprising as devotees’ free labour is pivotal to the social organisation of the ashram and the willingness to work hard for the guru is equated to one’s own devotion and characterises a good devotee (e.g., Lucia 2014b).

The postulated self-less nature of karmayoga as a cleansing spiritual practice coupled with the praising of devotees’ willingness to work are used by group leaders to justify their demands for total availability. In some cases, these demands totalise devotees’ free

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<sup>16</sup> Field note, Monte Sahaja, Portugal, May 2017

time and require them to work also during satsangs or anyway beyond the regular working hours indicated by the schedule. In the following, I provide an example based on my own experience:

I am dressed all in white, excited, and ready to attend satsang this evening. Walking up hill I bump into Manas. He looks at me. I smile. He says: “I was looking for you. I need some strong, young guy. There is a truck coming and we have to unload it.” I am puzzled by his request . . . Shortly after, together with a few others we are brought in the delivery place. We are not in a good mood. Satsang is starting . . . I am on the back of the truck and lift, move on the side, and then pass the wooden planks to the guys on the ground. These planks seem to never end. I feel my body warming up, the sweat emerging in my forearms and chest and dropping from my forehead as I work rapidly. I want to finish quickly. My hands are full of splinters and as I pass the next plank, I feel we are all moving at the same rhythm, just like rowers<sup>17</sup>.

Karmayoga activities often extend beyond the prescribed times allocated for work. This happens regularly and in every team, although the construction and land care teams are the ones with the most totalising working schedules and their members can often be seen at work also when the rest of the ashram is resting. These demands for extra work are usually welcomed as devotees happily comply to any requests that may favor or confirm their establishment as core members of the ashram. However, occasionally they are also met with implicit or explicit forms of resistance. The usual approach towards these gripes is to frame them as expressions of egotistic tendencies, thus providing an auspicious opportunity for further contemplation; or as a failure to fully willing to reciprocate for the “metaphysical gift” received by the guru (Lucia 2014b), thus inducing shame and bewilderment in those devotees that decide to question the necessity of certain duties. In either case, these reproaches serve the purpose of disciplining devotees into the cultivation of a specific “ascetic ethos” characterised by “humility and devotion” (Lucia 2014b: 194). In other words, to work hard and as much as required is necessary to the successful constitution of the good devotee.

At this point of the analysis I would like to couple Lucia’s usage of the notion of “ethos” with Bourdieu’s concepts of “habitus” and “disposition” (e.g., 1977a, 1984,

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<sup>17</sup> Field note, Monte Sahaja, Portugal, June 2017.

1990).<sup>18</sup> In fact, the concept of habitus could be fruitfully deployed to identify the “elective affinities” and “symbiotic relationships” between objective and subjective structures, that is, between the ashram’s ethos and devotees’ “lasting dispositions”, defined as “the generative schemes incorporated in the body schema” (Bourdieu 1977a: 167). In other words, it is through work – and the necessary processes of disciplining and normalisation of devotees’ conduct – that the ascetic ethos of the ashram becomes “deposited” within devotees’ bodies and “schemes of perception, thought, and action” (Bourdieu 1977a: 90) in the form of a *servicing disposition* which simultaneously contributes to the constitution of devotees’ yogic habitus and the social reproduction of the ashram’s structures and its ethos.

Another way to frame the karmayoga activities through which devotees cultivate a serving disposition is to understand them as concurrently an example of an “ethic of the postponement of gratification” teleologically oriented to the accumulation of capital (Weber 2011) and of “sacralisation” (Ashforth and Vaidyanath 2002: 360 in Brown 2013 : 6), defined as a process in which “what were once means to an end may become ends in themselves...and the reverence vested in the ends may devolve to the means. This is the process of sacralisation, of rendering something sacred”. In reference to the ethic of postponement of gratification it is possible to draw some parallels between the working culture of the ashram and the widespread neoliberal working demands that characterise fields as different as higher education (e.g., Cannella and Koro-Ljungberg 2017; González-Calvo and Arias-Carballal 2018; Mahony and Weiner 2019) and front-line service work (e.g., Bélanger and Edwards 2013; Crowley and Hodson 2014; Penz and Sauer 2019), among others. In fact, whether we conceive of the individuals’ acceptance of extra working demands as a form of disciplining, an element of a certain gift-economy, the unavoidable outcome of poorly regulated and unbalanced power relations between management and employees, or finally as the individuals’ choice to freely pursue his or her own objectives – whether in economic, cultural, or symbolic terms – the ashram’s internal dynamics and the ‘outside world’ seems to share a specific work ethic based on self-sacrifice (Weber 2011) where control, docility, and utility (Foucault 1977: 137) are inextricably connected.

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<sup>18</sup> This is a necessary theoretical passage as the notion of “ethos”, in line with a Weberian and Bourdieusian reading, is adequate to address the distinctive features of a group or of a movement but it fails to account for the manners in which this ethos becomes naturalised and deposited in the guise of a “second nature” (Bourdieu 1990a: 56) in social actors’ bodies. The notions of habitus and disposition are among the most appropriate theoretical tools for this purpose.

In reference to the latter, that is, the sacralised nature of work, it is important to add that karmayoga activities besides being a disciplining spiritual practice and a due reciprocation of the guru's metaphysical gift allow also the cultivation of specific forms of physical, social, and cultural capitals that once acquired can be readily converted contributing to devotees' better positioning within their struggle for recognition in the eyes of their supervisors and of the broader community. In fact, as devotees accept and comply to the requests of working more and harder, they acquire more proficiency and skills in the activities of reference (e.g., physical and cultural capital); they have a chance to publicly display their devotions to the guru (e.g., social and symbolic capital); and as a consequence, to acquire or confirm their legitimate status as core members and good devotees (e.g., social and symbolic capital). Conversely, when they fail to do so they are judged as disregarding both the sacralised nature of their seva and the metaphysical gift received.

The primary consequence of the dedicated cultivation and acquisition of different forms of capital is devotees' increasing negotiating abilities regarding the work to be carried out: one has the power to postpone a specific job to the following day, or to negate his availability on the ground of more urgent tasks. For instance, one's physical capital (e.g., being strong and willing to work) can be converted into: social capital (e.g., more and better relationships within the team and the ashram); cultural capital (e.g., recognition of one's own value and role within the team dynamics); and symbolic capital (e.g., recognition of one's own devotion and status as a good devotee). These capitals in turn may guarantee a smoother acquisition of "spiritual capital" (e.g., Guest 2007; Verter 2003; Wortham and Wortham 2007) (e.g., more free time for contemplation), the real stake of the life at the ashram. However, the cultivation and acquisition of spiritual capital, understood as that particular declination of symbolic capital that defines one's own spiritual proficiency and closeness to the ideal of self-realisation promoted by the guru, is far from being the sole and primary reason in determining individuals' actions within the context of ashram. It is in fact very common, especially among core members who have all the resources to take more time for themselves, to instead prioritise time for work over time for contemplation, again in the attempt to reciprocate to the metaphysical gift received by the guru (Lucia 2014b).

Before closing this section, I would like to add a layer of complexity to Lucia's (2014a, 2014b, 2018a) analyses of the guru-disciple relationship as enacted within the

framework of the particular “gift-economy” that defines the duties and obligations of each part of this pedagogical pair. More specifically, following Bourdieu’s (1977a) insightful reliance on Mauss’ theorisation of the gift economy it is possible to argue that such naturalised inclination to serve the guru is the expression of a particular “symbolic violence” which prevents dominated individuals to recognise the dynamics and the sources of their domination and instead contributes to its reinforcement through the voluntary acceptance of its inevitability. In other words, at the basis of the life of the ashram there is a “collective misrecognition” of this gift-economy, that is, the “collective denial of the economic reality of exchange” (Bourdieu 1977a: 196) and “of the arbitrariness of the value[s]” (Bourdieu 1977a: 183) cultivated through karmayoga activities. “In the extreme case”, as argued by Bourdieu (1977a: 164 emphasis in original):

that is to say, when there is a quasi-perfect correspondence between the objective order [the ashram] and the subjective principles of organization [dispositions] (as in ancient societies) the natural and social world appears as self-evident. This experience we shall call *doxa*.

According to the ashram’s “doxa”, the practical-discursive universe taken for granted in a specific social group, the interiorised naturalness of the roles of the guru and of the devotees, with their respective duties and obligations, become the ground on which the entire social organisation of the ashram is symbolically and practically sustained. Disagreement or disalignment with the ashram’s doxa signifies one’s own ostracism from the community. Moreover, considering how devotees’ bodies and their disciplining and regulation are the matrix from which the institution of Monte Sahaja is built on in the first place, the misrecognition at play follows also a subtler logic: the legitimised stake of the game in Mooji’s ashram is devotees’ spiritual capital, that in its highest expression is represented by self-realisation. Nonetheless, the entire “economy” of the ashram, especially in reference to its working activities, is guaranteed by a capillary and diffuse exercise of domination through a variety of dispositifs of veridiction. In other words, although Mooji’s teachings are entirely framed as a chance to transform individuals’ selves promising enlightenment, the ashram’s karmayoga activities act primarily upon devotees’ bodies in a way that remains largely unacknowledged by the ashram’s legitimate discourses.

To conclude, it is possible to underline how in the context of the ashram’s karmayoga activities, devotees’ bodies and their disciplined deployment emerge simultaneously as

the *source of*, the *location for*, and the *means to* the multidimensional constitution of the life at the ashram (Shilling 2012; see also Di Placido 2018). Devotees' bodies are in fact the source of devotees' experience of satisfaction and/or frustration in relation to work; the location of the disciplining and spiritually aligning powers of their team leaders; and finally, the means through which the devotees negotiate their positioning in the ashram, possibly acquiring and converting different types of capitals in order to climb the ladder of their teams and of the overall social organisation of the ashram, a theme that I will expand on in the conclusion of the chapter.

### 3.2. *Jñānayoga: Contemplating the Self*

Contemplating, together with working (previous section) and praying (next one), is one of the core activities of disciplinary institutions such as monasteries, regardless of their faith or denomination. Focusing into the case of Mooji's neo-Advaita ashram, contemplating the self is pivotal to the ordained unfolding of devotees' everyday life and the circulation of Mooji's teachings. Here, it is mostly promoted in terms of *jñānayoga*, or yoga of knowledge, that is, a path to self-realisation aimed at discriminating between what is real (*brahman*) and the unreal (*maya*), if one has to attain salvation (*moksha*). More specifically, *jñānayoga* as taught and practiced by Mooji's devotees is declined in two different ways: first, as the more traditional *jñāna-vichara*, or *atma-vichara* (self-inquiry), thought to guide practitioners to self-realisation through the means of intuitive and constant effort in discovering the fallacy of the 'I' thought or self-identity (Osborne 2006); second, through '*The Invitation*', a simplified version of self-inquiry created and progressively introduced by Mooji starting from the Winter of 2017.

In the previous section, I explored the role of devotees' disciplined dedication to karmayoga. Conversely, in this one I would like to primarily stress the encouraged diffused cultivation of a *contemplative disposition* that devotees experience as a central component of the teachings prompted in the ashram. In order to do so, I employ rather personal extracts from my field notes, which I believe can help to shed light on the manners in which devotees are instructed to unceasingly inquiry into their own nature, whether they are walking, eating, working or taking a shower. More specifically, there is a drastic difference between karmayoga and *jñānayoga* as practiced in Monte Sahaja: while the former presupposes the exercise of team leaders' "disciplinary gaze" (Foucault 1975) to guarantee the desired cultivation of a serving disposition, the latter implies a



substantial shift of perspective. Here the gaze to be exercised is primarily the one of the devotee towards him or herself. What is at stake, then, is an experience of conversion “...from the outside, from others and the world etc., towards “one self”” (Foucault 2005: 11). In the following field notes, I underline the capillary and totalising exercise of devotees’ gaze on themselves as they are instructed to turn their attention within during the everyday activities of the ashram:

I am walking up hill, going towards my tent. I need a good, fresh shower after a full day of hard work. I am focused on my contemplation, asking myself “Who am I? Who is Matteo? ... and suddenly, I realise that Matteo does not exist, that is nothing but a creature of fabrication living in memory and psychological entanglements but is not here right now! And simultaneously I find myself observing my body moving by itself, as if I have nothing to do with it but observing it moving. The certitude of not being the mind or the person invades me! For a few moments I stay like this, out of time, out of the known, simply recognising that what or who I am transcends any boundary I previously thought or believed in. I feel like Grace, the Holy Spirit, is walking with me. I feel Ramana very close. I am grateful beyond words.<sup>19</sup>

I pour the water from the bucket onto my head. Dirty water, full of sand, flows to the bottom of the shower. I notice how the water is certainly touching my body but is not touching me. I burst into a mixture of tears and laughter. I am extremely grateful.<sup>20</sup>

Before proceeding with the analysis, I would like to introduce a cautionary note regarding this type of experiences. Although in line with the autoethnographic and carnal approach proposed, I heavily rely on intimate accounts to construct my argument, there is no intention to advance claims of truthfulness or ontological validity of the experiences described. On the contrary, these extracts are particularly useful in identifying the circular relation that occurs between Moojis’ teachings and devotees’ interiorisation of their postulated truthfulness,<sup>21</sup> thus accessing the elusive and highly problematic realm of

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<sup>19</sup> Field note, Monte Sahaja, Portugal, June 2017.

<sup>20</sup> Field note, Monte Sahaja, Portugal, August 2017.

<sup>21</sup> For instance, notice the overlaps between the experiences collected in the previous field notes and what Mooji states in *‘Before I am’* (2012), a book I was reading during my longer stay at the ashram: “Be empty. Be emptiness. This is the secret; try it. Read a book but stay completely empty – reading happens in perfect clarity, and the words remain on the page. Enjoy a conversation also in complete emptiness – conversation happens as a natural flow. Observe, and

spiritual experiences (e.g., Palmisano 2016; Pierini and Groisman 2016) from these first-hand, introspective accounts without accepting them at face value (e.g., Altgals 2014a; Wood and Bunn 2009). Moreover, such a situated phenomenological entry point into spiritual experiences – when coupled with the necessary methodological and theoretical tools – may further help to unpack the manners in which devotees experience the encouragement to develop a certain vision of the world through specific disciplinary devices, or dispositifs of veridiction, in this case contemplation.

Methodological remarks aside, we can notice how in both these extracts, the body, although in the background, is defined as an essential component of the introspective, or contemplative practice of self-inquiry. In fact, it is exactly on the ground of the disidentification – if not dissociation or depersonalisation – with the body and the mind, that the seeker is instructed to access a different layer of reality about him or herself: a reality which is the central postulate of the specific pedagogies of salvation and “technologies of the self” (e.g., Foucault 1978, 1988) taught, transmitted, and lived in the ashram. Following Foucault (1988: 18), we can define contemplation as an instance of “specific techniques that human beings use to understand themselves”. More precisely, these techniques:

...permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality (ibidem).

In the case of Mooji’s teachings the stake of this type of spiritual exercises is devotees’ careful discrimination between personal identity and their “true self”. In other words, it is possible to theorise about the constitution and cultivation of a contemplative disposition as the outcome of the processes of interiorisation and reproduction of specific discourses about the self, god, and the nature of reality at a dispositional level, that is, into devotees’ “schemes of perception, conception, and action” (Bourdieu 1977a: 86) through reiterated practice.

In the following extract, I provide an example of how devotees may be socialised to the specific world view prompted in the ashram through the guidance of more established members of the community who embody a form of “pastoral power” temporarily delegated

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gradually you will come to see that all existence is occurring in empty awareness. Like this you realise that perception, activity, dreaming, everything happens as natural expression of the beingness in manifestation. In fact, life functions and is perceived with greater clarity, harmony and spontaneity without the assumed management and subjectivity of the person – a revolutionary discovery!” (Mooji 2012: 175).

to them and usually enforced by the guru himself (e.g., Foucault 1983; Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982). As I will expand in more details in the section entitled '*The Satsang Dispositif*', pastoral power should be understood as a specific declination of disciplinary power whose aim is the production of specific types of subjects, in this case individuals aligned and dedicated to the truth promoted by the guru. The context of this talk is the disclosure by the author of the "awakening experience" recalled in the previous field note dated June 2017, when speaking with one of the gurus' trusted followers under the veranda of the main office. Kali is a member of the support team, a group of particularly well-established devotees whose role is to listen and support other devotees in case they stumble upon difficulties or psychological bewilderment as they progress in their spiritual search. Making a parallel with the "Christian practices of the examination of conscience" (Foucault 2011, 2014, 2018) we can say that the members of the support team have first and foremost a confessional role. In fact, during retreats it is common to see them approaching those retreat participants that look visibly upset (e.g., crying, shaking, laughing immoderately and so on) both during and after satsangs, as they attempt to offer them a sort of "spiritual first aid", that is, a chance for a preliminary elaboration of these unusual experiences:

"Don't think it is done! Never think it is done! Keep checking your real position, moment after moment. What happened is something very beautiful. Very beautiful. Now you have to honour it." As I listen to Kali I am still puzzled by the experience of a few days ago. Confused. Kali seems to perceive my unsettlement and adds "For a while it may be like a roller coaster. In and out of personhood. You simply have to honour your seeing".<sup>22</sup>

This extract shows how the capillary circulation of specific discourses and their "truth", most notably regarding the falsity of personal identity and the truthfulness of one's own "god-self", signifies the interiorisation of the ashram's central values and encouraged dispositions (e.g., "honour your seeing"), alongside a change in the devotees' epistemological relationship with him or herself in the light of the gained spiritual capital that derives from unceasing contemplation. This point closely resonates with what recently underlined by Jack Sidnell (2017) in relation to Asthanga yoga practitioners' adherence to their practice and to the teaching of the guru where asana are not merely

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<sup>22</sup> Field note, Monte Sahaja, Portugal, July 2017.

framed in terms of physical exercises but as an ascetic practice which substantially redefines the relationship of the practitioners' self with him or herself. Following a classical Bourdieusian insight, we can claim that through the pedagogical encounter between Kali and myself, the defining ascetic ethos of the ashram and its interiorisation at the subjective level in the guise of a contemplative disposition are simultaneously strengthened and reinforced. Nevertheless, to reiterate how this process of "affinity" or "homology" between objective (the ashram and its ethos) and subjective (devotees' dispositions and habitus) structures is reified through the mediation of specific dispositifs of veridiction (in this particular case framed in contemplative terms), I provide a further field note referring to a formalised moment of collective meditation. More precisely, the following note is derived from my participation to an afternoon projection of a video recording of *'The Invitation'* during a contemplative Friday, a measure that as briefly discussed previously, was introduced by Mooji during the Spring of 2018 to counteract the totalising working culture of the ashram and refocus devotees' efforts towards their processes of self-transcendence:

The Mandir is quite packed this afternoon. I am sitting on a chair on the right side of the hall, my favorite spot. I let the breath go as I close my eyes...people continue coming in the Mandir as I almost drift into a sort of sleep. I have a whole week of hard labour on my shoulders! A few moments pass by and the same music that announces Mooji's video catches my attention. Then is Mooji's voice, as he introduces the invitation: "Can I take it for granted that all of you here...that you have come open and with the purpose of discovering your true self?". The crowd in the video recording answers with a vehement group "Yes!" as I join them in my mind too. I keep focused and relaxed as Mooji's voice continues: "...and that this search for truth is not merely as an idea to have in your head as something to believe in but it must be experiential also, is it true?"...Again, I confirm my agreement to Mooji's words in my mind as the crowd recorded in the video says "Yes!". Mooji continues talking, softly and clearly, his voice is both reassuring and relaxing: "I am in this certain space, a room of my own being, this being where we all are. Just like when you came into this room, into this hall, this mandir, you left your shoes outside. I say, please leave your shoes outside but also I want you to leave your mind outside...and you say, "But how can I

leave my mind outside?”. So don’t worry is very simple what I mean by that, is, as you come in or before you come in as you leave your shoes outside I want you to just suspend your thoughts about the past, leave everything about the past outside for a moment...And also any thought you might have about the future...we don’t need to engage with that, we won’t talk about that because nobody knows what the future will be...so past and future also leave and the present, the present moment, doesn’t need any interpretation, leave it alone...so we are gonna suspend that for the duration of our invitation, afterwards you can take them back, all those things. Also, your idea of yourself, who you are, your identity and all this type of thing we can suspend that, I don’t want to know about that. Just be very empty, empty empty”<sup>23</sup>...I feel happily undressed of my past, of any idea about the future, and most importantly about who I take myself to be. I feel I am pure presence, ever expanding across the whole satsang hall and even beyond its boundaries...I have a clear sense of my body and mind but I observe them with a degree of detachment as I fully perceive the presence of something else, something greater and all-pervasive, something that cannot be named...I am that!<sup>24</sup>

Again, the cautionary methodological notes raised above should be kept in mind also in the context of this note, where I describe how a particular contemplative exercise led to the consolidation of my own experience of self-transcendence. What is important to notice here, is how this type of experiences of self-transcendence are discursively and socially constructed as the outcome of devotees’ interiorisation of the “truth” taught by the guru, that is, they are an experiential confirmation – pursued through specific practical exercises – of the “truth” of the guru’s teachings. As I will discuss in more details in the section entitled ‘*The Satsang Dispositif*’, these types of guided contemplations – whether pursued through ‘*The Invitation*’ or through Mooji’s close dialogues with his devotees – are primarily cultivated during satsang, the main dispositif of veridiction of the whole apparatus of disciplining and knowledge transmission of this neo-guru movement.

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<sup>23</sup> The exact wording of Mooji’s phrasing has been reconstructed from the following video recording, the one played during the contemplative Friday recalled above.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=74&v=G5\\_sbzSXs0E&feature=emb\\_title](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=74&v=G5_sbzSXs0E&feature=emb_title) accessed May 23, 2020.

<sup>24</sup> Field Note, Monte Sahaja, Portugal, September 2018.

Concluding, although it is the self that is the privileged object of devotees' contemplation as they attempt to confirm their identification with their "god-self", the body is at the center of the cultivation of this contemplative disposition in three simultaneous and interrelated manners: first, it is the *source* that allows the contemplative experience to take form and to be experienced by the devotees; second, it is the *location* where specific practices, or technologies of self, are employed as pedagogical tools to establish a new epistemological ground for one's relationship with oneself; third, the fruits of this contemplative disposition play out as a *means* through which the individual relates with others and the ashram at large. In other words, the fruits of one's own introspection can be framed as a specific form of spiritual capital within the ashram, perhaps the one held in the highest regard. In fact, according to the ideological representation of the world sustained, transmitted, and cultivated in the ashram, everything ranging from the ashram's relatively secluded location and its organisation, to its main pedagogical tools, seems to revolve around seekers' self-transcendence of their personal identity.

### **3.3. *Bhaktiyoga: Praying to God***

Praying – together with work and contemplation – dictates the pace of the life at ashram, as it is typical in total institutions with a religious leaning. Devotional activities are of two types in Sahaja: first, there are the institutionalised moments of collective prayer, epitomised in activities such as the morning mantra chanting, the aarti and bahajans. Invariably, at the center of these activities there is the divinised figure of the guru, Mooji; second, prayers and devotional acts are also individually performed and interpreted in a less formalised manner, as a result of devotees' successful socialisation into the ritualistic dimensions of the everyday life of the ashram (e.g., bow before entering a sacred space, thanks for everything that happens, spend one's own free time praising the lord and so on) and in accordance with their specific religious sensitivities (e.g., Hindu, Christian, Muslim and so on). In both cases, the philosophical and discursive matrix of these practices is the framing of bhaktiyoga, or the yoga of devotion, as advocated in the '*Bhagavadgita*'. This type of yoga implies devotees' total commitment and surrender to the love and devotion of a specific deity, or the guru, which is in fact considered no other from god. Bhaktiyoga largely contributes to the social organisation of contemporary neo-Hindu and neo-guru religious movements, whose leaders are usually not only considered

representatives of god on earth, namely mediators of his salvific power, but god in embodied form (*avatars*) (e.g., Copeman and Ikegame 2012a, 2012b; Lucia 2018a; Singleton and Goldberg 2014).

In the context of Mooji's ashram, praying to god (in whatever form), to the self (understood as the "god-self" of Advaita-Vedanta, or better of neo-Vedanta) or to Mooji himself, equates to direct one's own devotion to the very same divine source. Mooji is in fact simultaneously considered by his devotees as "god moving"<sup>25</sup> and as the "mirror" of their divine nature.<sup>26</sup> To give him thanks and praises is then framed by the legitimate discourses constituting his pedagogies of salvation as a simple outer manifestation towards one's own divine nature. I will come back to this important point towards the end of the section. For the moment, I would like to engage with a closer scrutiny and sensuous rendition of the practices of bhaktiyoga promoted in the ashram relying on my own "observant participation" (Wacquant 2010, 2015).

As we have seen discussing the schedule of "a typical ashram day" every day starts and ends with moments of collective prayer and contemplation. In the morning, at 6 a.m., devotees meet in the main contemplative space for the recitation of a mantra dedicated to the guru. The mantra in question is '*Om Sat Guru Sri Mooji Baba Namaha*', which translates from Sanskrit as salutations and reverences to the true guru Sri Mooji Baba. Its repetitive and syncopated recitation lasts for approximately half an hour, after which the aarti begins. In the following field notes, I provide two different extracts recounting respectively a moment of direct participation dating back to my first few weeks in the ashram and a later moment of deliberate resistance to such an early wake-up and devotional call. Of course, in line with "moderate autoethnography" (Wall 2016), a form of autoethnography that keeps together evocative thick descriptions, a sensitivity towards overcoming solipsistic narratives, and a close engagement with serious sociocultural theorising, I use my own experiences and intimate accounts simply as a starting point to provide an informed ethnographic description and analysis of devotees' immersion within devotional practices during the everyday life of the ashram.

The eyes still stained by sleep; the head still partly impressed by the suggestions of dreams. Outside everything is silent and dark, covered in early morning dew. I sit cross legged in one of the cushions at the center of the hall.

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<sup>25</sup> <https://soundcloud.com/billfree/lacksmi-south-africa> accessed April 29, 2020.

<sup>26</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mBl4BMv1q\\_Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mBl4BMv1q_Q) accessed April 27, 2020.

I put the beige blanket that I picked up at the door around my back in a way that also covers my legs, cold in the short trousers I use for work. There is a slight turmoil of people entering the Mandir while finally the bell rings and the recording with the mantra starts uttering the mantra ‘Om Sat Guru Sri Mooji Baba Namaha’. Eyes closed, hands folded on each other and focused on the vibrations that the mantra generates in my body I begin to recite: “Om Sat Guru Sri Mooji Baba Namaha. Om Sat Guru Sri Mooji Baba Namaha. Om Sat Guru Sri Mooji Baba Namaha”. Before I know it, my head space, until short ago still clouded by the impressions of a short and rather disturbed sleep, is cleared up. I especially enjoy the feeling that the pronunciation of the last letter of each word generates, followed by a fragment of silence before the utterance of the first letter of the next word. This is my trick to remain focused, letter after letter, space of silence after space of silence, word after word, repetition after repetition. The feeling of expanse generated by the vibrations feels like a warm embrace, the metaphysical correspondence of the blanket that surrounds my body. As we cease chanting, after countless recitations, I realise how transformational this practice is. Now I sit there, vibrating but motionless, grounded and uplifted at the same time.<sup>27</sup>

It must be 6 a.m. Or is it 6.30? I am lying in my tent, cocooned in my sleeping bag as I slowly woke up to the sound of other devotees’ chants. I am far and asleep so I cannot quite guess if what is going on is the mantra chanting or already the aarti. I think it is the mantra. That gives me another hour and a half to stay in bed before getting up for breakfast. I turn on the other side, and I keep resting with the distant litany of Mooji’s name as a morning lullaby.<sup>28</sup>

As the first fragment recounts, the life in the ashram is organised around collective prayers and rituals, one of the manners in which the ashram’s “collective consciousness” (Durkheim 1984, 2001, 2013) is continuously reactualised. The earliest of these rituals implicitly sustaining different forms of solidarity among Sahajans, is the recitation of Mooji’s mantra, an invocation to the divine power of the guru. Its rationale is to prepare the mind for the following aarti and contemplation but is also perceived by devotees as

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<sup>27</sup> Field note, Monte Sahaja, Portugal, May 2017.

<sup>28</sup> Field note, Monte Sahaja, Portugal, September 2018.



highly transformative. In the words of Shankari, long time Mooji's devotee and head of the music team, mantra chanting "makes the all difference". More specifically, the participation to the early mantra chanting has two types of benefits: on the one hand, a cluster of psychophysical benefits related to the vibrations generated in the body by the recitation of the mantra (e.g., soothing contracted body parts, emptying the mind, developing focus and concentration and so on); and on the other hand – perhaps most importantly for the present analysis – the social benefit that derives from one's own compliance to the normalising and disciplining practices that constitute a "good devotee" (see also Lucia 2014c). This social benefit is further enhanced by the fact that not all the ashram's residents participate in these early moments of collective prayer and so those who do share a certain feeling of entitlement as better or more legitimate devotees. Finally, the early mantra chanting, together with the subsequent aarti and the more occasional bhajans, represent the main institutionalised manners in which collective prayer and devotion are organised into specific pedagogical devices that instruct devotees to the cultivation of a *devotional disposition* defined as an ensemble of "schemes of perception and appreciation" organised around surrender, veneration, and faith in the guru, god, and the self, which are "deposited, in their incorporated state, in every member of the group" (Bourdieu 1977a: 18).

The second field note, on the contrary, is a depiction of my later attitude towards the disciplining and normalising devotional activities prompted in the ashram. Besides being a useful measure of my own "shifting positionality" (Barnard, Cruise and Jones 2018) in the field, that is, my progressive distancing from the "illusio" (Bourdieu 2010) of Mooji's teachings and a questioning of their truthfulness, it also offers a fruitful entry point into the types of privileges that long timers self-appoint to themselves. In other words, to decide to skip the early mantra chanting (and the subsequent aarti and silent sitting) and wake up only for breakfast should be read as the deliberate exercise and deployment of some of the social and symbolic capitals that long-lasting and dedicated engagement with Mooji's teachings and his community give to long timers. In fact, once devotees have already gained a certain position in the ashram due to their dedicated seva and the acquisition of a certain spiritual capital (on which Mooji's approval is always pending), then they are less bound to a strict adherence to all the activities organised by the ashram, although they surely cannot dispense from their seva and the participation to satsangs. Nevertheless, this self-appointed privilege has also its negative implications, for

instance when Mooji decides – usually by surprise – to participate to the morning silent sitting and guide it personally. When this happens “missing” devotees are exposed to their guru’s reproach, which again is shame inducing and status diminishing, especially when publicly performed. However, to be fair Mooji seldomly joins his devotees for the morning silent sitting (it happened twice during my stays in the ashram) thus making this choice a viable opportunity to rest a little more, something that is especially important for long timers as the life at the ashram can be draining.

Moments of ritualised collective prayer are a pervasive dimension of the life of the ashram and extend beyond their formalisation in scheduled events. They are integrally waded into the fabric of the ashram’s everyday life, and most notably of its working activities. In the following I provide a field note extract describing how they nest within the social organisation of the ashram’s teams:

We hold each other hands and close our eyes. There is a moment of suspension in the silence of our breaths, gathered deep within the lungs. Somebody starts and the others follow. The sound and the vibration of the Óm pervades the small pagoda and our bodies. A few moments of silence pass by after the third Óm. Then Manas speaks, softly but in a way that everybody can hear [we are around 20 people]: “Master, that you may guide us and our work and bless the flow of the day.” A few moments of suspension, again and then we slowly leave the hands of the persons next to us and bring them in the prayer position at the center of the chest. Somebody says Amen, others stay silent. We slowly open the eyes.<sup>29</sup>

This extract shows how the working life of the ashram cannot be fully set apart from its devotional and ritualistic components as every single team meeting in the whole ashram starts with three Óm followed by an intention or a prayer, usually performed by the group leader and oriented to grant Mooji’s blessing and guidance for the day. In this guise, the cultivation of a *devotional disposition* is reinforced and placed at the center of the ashram’s culture. At these meetings team leaders assign to each team member their daily duties which are then further sacralised by their framing as “blessed” and “guided” by Mooji himself. In the case of the construction team, the group splits in different units after the meeting so as to move on with the assigned tasks. The team is ready to serve.

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<sup>29</sup> Field note, Monte Sahaja, Portugal, September 2017.

The mutual reinforcement that occurs between the cultivation of devotional and working dispositions is further testified by what expressed by Adyant, one of the ashram's residents with whom I bound the most during my stays in the ashram and also the new head of the construction team, as he described to me the honour he felt in serving Mooji through his seva. The context of this encounter is our chat before my departure from Sahaja at the end of September 2018, as we were sipping some chai tea in the shades of the newly build Papaji Café, paying homage to our comradeship:

“I feel so honored to guide the construction team”, says Adyant, with a mixture of humility and pride in his face. He is a good team leader, resolute but soft, demanding but understanding as he knows for himself the hardship of the construction trade. I tell him that I am very happy he is the new team leader and also about the introduction of contemplative Fridays. “Thanks Bro. Thanks you. But you know what? It is such a privilege to serve Mooji in this way. I do not even feel I am doing anything but that he is taking care of the projects, of the team, of each one of us. I am only an instrument”. As I listen, I cannot avoid but admire his devotion and realise, once again, how far apart we are growing in our views.<sup>30</sup>

As we have seen in the case of the mantra chanting and the construction team morning meetings, the life in the ashram is characterised by the unfolding of continuous rituals. Next to these two levels of daily worship, namely the collective level and the team level, we have to consider both the individual moments of prayer, that seekers may experience in the silence of their contemplation, for example when visiting the Chapel or the Temple and the more exceptional bhajans, of which I provide an ethnographic rendition in the following. Bhajans are traditional devotional songs, that within the ashram are usually played for the celebrations of specific occasions (e.g., the guru's birthday) and at least once or twice in each retreat. In what follows, I provide an extract from my field notes addressing one bhajan session performed during a retreat that took place in April 2018 in the ecovillage Zmar:

The hall is full. On the stage, the musicians play and chant, smiling and sweeping energy all around the room. A consistent amount of people is dancing, and more and more are getting up from their seats to join the others.

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<sup>30</sup> Field note, Monte Sahaja, Portugal, September 2018.

I look around and I see a lot of people smiling, some with their eyes closed. While we chant the name of Krishna the drums accompany the pace of the dancers. The harmonium sounds irresistibly emotional. I begin to cry. My tears start to drop on the wooden floor, drawing darker spots. The legs are increasingly heavy, but my heart is lighter. The music becomes faster. The hall is filled with electricity.<sup>31</sup>

This field note seems to describe a perfect empirical example of what Durkheim (2001) names as “collective effervescence”, namely “the perceived energy field around a crowd of people that causes other people to act in a way that is not normal for them alone or in other groups” (Brown and Jennings 2011: 69). Moreover, the ritualised, collective, and ecstatic experience of the sacred that bhajans induce in the audience of devotees is akin to Mellor’s and Shilling’s (1997: 173) previously introduced notion of “sensual solidarities”, which is in fact based on Durkheim’s collective effervescence and Simmel’s analysis of sociability (1949, 1971). Although Mellor and Shilling, in line with Maffesoli’s (1996) account of “neo-tribes” underline that “...the characteristics of kinship, neighbourhood and friendship these solidarities are built on can soon disappear from their specific contexts” (1997: 174), in the case here recounted a specification is due: when it comes to those more peripheral devotees or curious spiritual seekers that participate to the retreat without having a strong guru-disciple relationship with Mooji, Mellor’s and Shilling’s analysis appears to be correct. In fact, as these participants leave the retreat’s premises and go back to their “normal” life they may keep dear to them the memories, the feelings, and the emotions generated by these moments of collective worship but they are bound to largely fail to consistently integrate them into the long-lasting cultivation of relationship of “kinship, neighbourhood and friendship”. However, in some cases retreat participants may be successful in maintaining more durable forms of sensuous engagement with these collective devotional practices and as consequence with Mooji and his community of devotees. Of course, this is facilitated by Mooji’s ubiquitous presence on the internet next to devotees’ possible involvement in their local Mooji’s sangha. If this happens, devotees are then more likely to participate in a further retreat and even to apply for a guest or an extended stay at the ashram. On the contrary, in reference to those devotees that resides in Mooji’s ashram, the aesthetic and ecstatic

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<sup>31</sup> Field note, Zmar, Portugal, April 2018.

experience provided by the bhajans and the cultivation of the devotional disposition that they encourage seem to constitute the roots of somehow more stable social, cultural, moral, and spiritual relationships. Here, following the Durkheimian insight that religion is “an eminently social thing” (2001: 9) may be particularly useful to ascertain how Mooji’s devotees and his ashram, respectively, draw their identities and ethos exactly from the reiterated performance of ritual religious activities. More specifically, as further argued by Durkheim (2001: 9):

Religious representations are collective representations that express collective realities; rites are ways of acting that are born only in the midst of assembled groups and whose purpose is to evoke, maintain, or recreate mental states of those groups.

In other words, devotional activities such as bhajans function as “collective representations” that constitute “collective realities” that guarantee the social reproduction of the “mental states” of the community, or of its “collective consciousness” (Durkheim 1984, 2001, 2013). Moreover, these devotional activities, emotionally overwhelming and fast to fade, engender much more than mere temporary social formations of mutual solidarity. On the contrary, they have a pivotal role in guaranteeing the emergence and internal articulation of the ashram as a total or disciplinary institution where prayer and devotion are central: collective devotional activities, in fact, function as the metaphysical – although inherently social – bricks that shape Monte Sahaja.

I would like to conclude this section with a few reflections on the activity of praying, broadly conceived, as it takes place within the ashram and on the notion of “yogic habitus” (Di Placido 2018). Regarding the former, it may be fruitful to draw again from Durkheim’s (2001) *‘Elementary forms of religious life,’* as read through the lenses of Shilling’s theoretical framework, where the embodied subject, conceptualised in relation to its intentional, sensory, and mobile character points to the relationship that ties together basic human capacities and bodily constitution to the creation of social structures (Shilling 2005: 10). In other words, the very constitution of the human body, which allows us to dance, sing, and feel emotions, is the ground on which collective forms of spiritual experience, such the one described above, can take place. It is in this light that we can appreciate Durkheim’s (2001) understanding of religious collective gatherings as the foundational acts of specific social formations. In fact, religious collective gatherings and more specifically the active role of the body in devotional dances, chants, and prayers is seen: first, as the constitutive element, or the *source*, of the social, cultural, and spiritual

life of the ashram; second, devotees' bodies are the *location* where the collective effervescence, or sensual solidarities, generated by these sacred gatherings are instilled into the devotees, modifying their dispositions and understanding of themselves, as well as opening further their involvement to the lifestyle promoted in the ashram; third, devotees' bodily engagement within these collective ritual gatherings is itself a *means* through which devotees relate with the ashram, its norms and culture, and finally become members. It is important to underline that the passage into membership is always taking place through the incorporation of specific dispositions that guarantee devotees' initiation into the culture of the ashram and its teleological orientation towards self-transcendence. In other words, through the cultivation and the embodiment of specific dispositions, devotees actively participate in the constitution of a yogic habitus and the direct or indirect acquisition of a specific form of spiritual capital. In so doing, whether through work, contemplation, or prayer, devotees also contribute to the social reproduction of the objective structures of the ashram guarantying their successful transmission via the interiorisation of the habitus they cultivate.

More specifically, to trace devotees' cultivation of a specific yogic habitus as constituted by the interplay between serving, contemplative, and devotional dispositions have theoretical implications that exceeds the study of the processes of apprenticeship within Mooji's ashram. In fact, if we frame these disposition as "core dispositions" that "tend to have some significant congruence" (Brown and Jennings 2013: 34) across denominational yoga groups while simultaneously being also the expression of the localised ethos of each specific group, the flexibility and fertile theoretical potential of this approach may appear more evident. More specifically, different declinations of the serving, contemplative, and devotional dispositions are found across virtually all denominational yoga groups (read also neo-Hindu and neo-guru movements), although each group seems to place a different emphasis on one or more of these dispositions, thus contributing to its unique version of yogic habitus. In fact, each group promotes a variation of this general yogic habitus which in turn reflects the group's own ethos and positioning within the yoga field, which again may be more or less aligned with those of groups occupying neighboring positions. For instance, scholars such as Lucia (2014a, 2014b, 2018) and Warriar (2003, 2014) have noted how both serving activities and devotion towards the guru are at the center of Amma's neo-guru movement, thus testifying to the widespread nature of serving and devotional dispositions across this type

of organisations. Similarly, Williamson's (2010) research on Hindu-Inspired meditation movements such as the Self-Realization Fellowship, Transcendental Meditation, and Siddha Yoga, can be read as emphasising the centrality of a contemplative disposition in a number of contemporary groups. Of course, this is not to say that the yogic habitus promoted by denominational yoga groups is necessarily and only articulated around serving, contemplative, and devotional dispositions. In fact, to deny the importance of other peculiar dispositions through which the ethos of a specific group is pre-consciously embodied and interiorised by the cultivation of a particular declination of yogic habitus would be misleading. For instance, just to provide an example, Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh's (Osho) religious movement (e.g., Goldman 2005; Urban 2005, 2012) could be fruitfully theorised as providing a declination of yogic habitus where the cultivation of an *expressive* or *self-actualising disposition* is paramount to the successful transmission of the provocative and tantric centered ethos of the group. In other words, the theoretical schemata here provided is considered, yes, a useful tool but one amenable of changes and further specifications tailored on the empirical reality that scholars face case by case.

Finally, although work, contemplation, and devotion are the main activities through which devotees' bodies and selves are disciplined and normalised during the everyday life of the ashram and are instrumental to its social organisation and reproduction, it is satsang that functions as the primary dispositif of devotees' self-transcendence. It is in fact during satsangs that the "truth" of Mooji's teachings is dispensed and that the "truth" of his devotees' self is dialogically disclosed, tested, and in certain cases also confirmed. It is in this light that the next section is dedicated to an exploration of the "satsang dispositif".

#### **4. The "Satsang Dispositif"**

The crowd of devotees and spiritual seekers is already sitting in the large hall. The speakers playing devotional music are suddenly muted while a devotee begins entertaining the silent and disciplined crowd with his flute. A few minutes later somebody stands up and everybody else in the hall follows his or her example. Mooji is here. He smiles for a long minute, or so, looking through the hundreds of people that have gathered here, while his personal assistants stand, serious and motionless, around him. With the help of a devotee he walks up the stairs of the small stage. He looks around and through

the crowd once again before sitting in his armchair. Next to him a small portrait of his teachers and a vase of colourful flowers. Orchids. A few moments pass as he puts his microphone on. As soon as he is done, with a secure voice and joining his hands together in prayer position, he says: “Óm. Namasté. Welcome everybody to Satsang”.<sup>32</sup>

The main pedagogy of salvation advocated by Mooji is *satsang*, a congregational meeting where he shares his divinely inspired knowledge and guides his devotees to the recognition and direct experience of their “true” or “god-self”. On the homepage of his official website, *satsang* is described as “the invitation to step into the fire of Self-discovery”. The description continues, specifying: “[t]his fire will not burn you, it will only burn what you are not, and set your heart free”.<sup>33</sup> While during the everyday life of his ashram *satsangs* are usually improvised and do not take place on a regular basis, they constitute the main activity of Mooji’s retreats. Here, they are scheduled twice a day, one in the morning and one in the evening. An average *satsang* lasts from a minimum of one hour, to three or even four in certain cases, although lately Mooji’s closest devotees press him to keep *satsangs* a bit shorter as Mooji is aging and suffers from a number of ailments. A *satsang* is set up as a dialogical encounter between Mooji and his devotees. In a silent retreat it is the only moment in which devotees are allowed to break their silence, usually implemented wide across the facilities of the retreat, starting from the morning of the first full day of the retreat, to the last morning, where the closing ceremony takes place.

Typically, devotees ask questions to their teacher, preferably questions strictly related to their self-realisation and the obstacles they encounter on “their way to enlightenment”.<sup>34</sup> However, they also frequently and explicitly manifest “their gratitude”,<sup>35</sup> either orally or with requests of hugs or prostrations at the guru’s feet, for what they perceive to be the “metaphysical gift” (Lucia 2014b: 206) imparted to them by their teacher. Mooji’s role, in each and every case, is “to dispel their doubts”<sup>36</sup> and “merge

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<sup>32</sup> Field note, Zmar, Portugal, April 2018.

<sup>33</sup> <https://mooji.org/> accessed July 13, 2020.

<sup>34</sup> See for instance Mooji’s videos: ‘A *MUST SEE!!! A Most Important Video on Enlightenment – for anyone and everyone!*’ (2015) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ui3vIvymDE>; ‘*The Lazy Man’s Way to Enlightenment*’ (2017) <https://mooji.tv/freemedia/the-lazy-mans-way-to-enlightenment/>; and finally, ‘*What is Enlightenment? Just You as Your True Self*’ (2019) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dYboBSveY1E> accessed May 27, 2020.

<sup>35</sup> For a list of video and written testimonials that invariably express gratitude see <https://mooji.org/voices-from-satsang> accessed May 27, 2020.

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vKsIuC7y5HI> accessed May 29, 2020.



their minds into their hearts”.<sup>37</sup> As the website of the ‘*International Yoga Festival*’ 2020 edition puts it:

Sri Mooji’s presence and love have the power to lift one effortlessly into the experience of the higher Self even from a single encounter. He lovingly guides many seekers who come to him from all parts of the world in search of the direct experience of Truth. In these spontaneous interactions, the directness, wisdom and humour of his pointings easily dispel delusion and thus quicken the recognition of the infinite Self we all are.<sup>38</sup>

Mooji’s pedagogical style is characterised by the persistent repetition of a very few points: the all-pervasive nature of non-dual awareness, or divine consciousness (*brahman*); the illusory nature of personal identity (*jiva*) and sensory reality (*maya*); and the devotee’s “real nature” as “unbound” and “eternal” non-dual awareness, namely the neo-Advaita interpretation of Advaita Vedanta’s “god-self” (*brahmajnana*). Additionally, he amply relies on metaphors and parables, most of which are directly taken from Poonja’s repertoire (e.g., Jaxon-Bear 1992; Sri Poonja 2000). These narratives are invariably organised around the vilification of the devotee’s personal identity, and the desirability of enlightenment. Apart from telling stories and entertaining his audience with charisma and wit, during *satsangs* Mooji inquires together with those who pose him a question, in the attempt to correct what he considers to be a misleading understanding of “who they are”, chiefly relying on self-inquiry and ‘*The invitation*’.<sup>39</sup> In the following excerpts, I provide two examples of a typical interaction between Mooji and his devotees. The former is an extract transcribed from a video-recording of a *satsang* that took place in Rishikesh February 14, 2017, entitled ‘*Look Into This Mirror and Recongise Yourself Without an Image*’;<sup>40</sup> while the latter is taken directly from my field notes, more specifically from a spontaneous *satsang* delivered in Monte Sahaja and whose online participation was reserved only to a few “out of land” devotees, myself included:

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<sup>37</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KSHjJmXve\\_Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KSHjJmXve_Y) accessed May 29, 2020.

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.internationalyogafestival.org/presenters/mooji/> accessed May 27, 2020.

<sup>39</sup> ‘*An Invitation to Freedom*’ August 28, 2017; [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G5\\_sbzSXs0E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G5_sbzSXs0E); ‘*The invitation – Our Listening Mirror*’ February 18, 2020; [https://mooji.tv/freedia/the-invitation-our-listening-mirror/?\\_fm\\_s=invitation&\\_fm\\_video\\_subtitle=0&\\_fm\\_media\\_type=7&\\_fm\\_media\\_topic=0&\\_fm\\_length=0&action=Search&\\_fm\\_media\\_source=0](https://mooji.tv/freedia/the-invitation-our-listening-mirror/?_fm_s=invitation&_fm_video_subtitle=0&_fm_media_type=7&_fm_media_topic=0&_fm_length=0&action=Search&_fm_media_source=0); ‘*The Invitation – The One Who Follows Will Find*’ January 26, 2020; [https://mooji.tv/freedia/tiruvannamalai-the-invitation-the-one-who-follows-will-find/?\\_fm\\_s=invitation&\\_fm\\_video\\_subtitle=0&\\_fm\\_media\\_type=7&\\_fm\\_media\\_topic=0&\\_fm\\_length=0&action=Search&\\_fm\\_media\\_source=0](https://mooji.tv/freedia/tiruvannamalai-the-invitation-the-one-who-follows-will-find/?_fm_s=invitation&_fm_video_subtitle=0&_fm_media_type=7&_fm_media_topic=0&_fm_length=0&action=Search&_fm_media_source=0) accessed May 27, 2020.

<sup>40</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mBl4BMv1q\\_Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mBl4BMv1q_Q) accessed May 27, 2020.

“Namasté Mooji” says a young Indian woman as she approaches the microphone. She is dressed all in white but an orange shawl and a red bindu on her forehead. “Namasté” utters calmly Mooji. She begins to speak: “Mooji, I am in a constant looking process...Everything is being watched but there is no state of being empty. I am always, always observing, always perceiving the perceiver but there is no state where I am empty”. She ceases to talk appearing visibly tense. A few seconds pass by before Mooji replies to her: “...as soon as the waking state happens you are...always in gear, first gear, second gear, fourth, fifth” says Mooji, as he mimics the driving of a car. The crowd starts to laugh. “Stop, reverse”, he continues, and here the crowd explodes as he even turns his neck back to simulate the reverse. “Yes, same thing is happening to me. Always, always, always” confirms the devotee, before adding quickly and with a note of embarrassment: “And another question...”. “How many troubles you have?” mocks her Mooji with his contagious laughter, before adding “Ok, ok”, to clarify his availability to take a second question, something he does not normally do. The devotee elaborates: “Sometimes I am so joyful, I have so much gratitude for the life, I am so happy and another day just the opposite...I don’t know for how long it will continue”. Mooji utters a “Yes”. He is listening carefully. Then he turns silent for what feels like an eternity, before adding: “You observe both happiness and sadness isn’t it?”, “Yes”, confirms the devotee...Mooji continues: “You observe the activities of the mind...And everything has a colour, has a reading. Everything has some qualities and you observe these qualities, but incessantly”...“That which is noting that everything is moving, that which is just noticing, is that itself moving?” asks Mooji, quickly adding “Slow down” as he tries to direct her disciple’ self-inquiry without rush...Then Mooji tries with other wording, as he usually does when his devotees seem not to grasp what he is pointing to: “You are able to report about the restlessness of the mind because there is an awareness of the mind”. “Yes” says this time the young devotee. “The mind seems to be watching but the mind watching is also watched. That which watches the mind, can you say anything about it?” asks Mooji. “That is stable, that is stable” replies the devotee looking more secure. “Ok. The one reporting about that is what?”

presses Mooji. There is an interminable silence, ten seconds that feels hours. Finally, she replies echoing her previous statements: “That is again stable. That’s not shaky”. “Yes. And you are what?” asks Mooji, trying to bring the inquiry to its conclusion. “I am that but...” tries to say the devotee but Mooji interrupts her abruptly: “No! But no but!”. The crowd explodes into a collective laughter. Then Mooji reproaches her: “Are you answering from your head or from your heart? I am asking only for the answer from the heart, what is true, not what your head have to say about it”.

The young girl poses a question to Mooji. She is visibly excited and fails to express herself with clarity. Mooji seems unsatisfied by what he considers to be a trivial question. He then replies to the young girl: “You are not here for flowers, you are not here for nice friendship, you are not here for holiday. You are here for freedom”. As the conversation continues, the young devotee seems to have a hard time following or confirming experientially the teacher’s pointing about her “divine nature”. She comments: “I seem to be running away from you”. At this point Mooji replies: “There is a force inside that is against higher understanding. If you follow the pointing it is not difficult. It is easy. Only mind and resistance make it difficult”. There is a moment of silence, and then again Mooji continues: “What is your feeling now? Can this be described? What remains now? Are you a container? Do you have a specific form?”. The young devotee is in silence, puzzled. The atmosphere is surreal. Then Mooji adds: “Something perfect is there already. No human being can perfect it. He can only discover it. Satsang is only for that...the more you love your Self the more you find your Self...we have to be cured by that delusion, that we are only our body-mind and conditioning...our role is to cooperate with Grace, welcome it, being it”.<sup>41</sup>

Before proceeding with the analysis of these interactions between Mooji and his devotees, it is important to underline the peculiar “affective atmosphere” (Brennan 2004) that characterises them as it dramatically influences the emotional tone of these dialogical encounters. As previously recalled, the concept of affective atmosphere refers to the

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<sup>41</sup> Field note, Monte Sahaja, Portugal, Online Satsang, May 2018. For a collection of extracts from Mooji’s satsangs gathered for pedagogical purposes see Mooji (2012).

affective/emotional features of a given space and its generative potentials to arouse affects and emotions. In the case of Mooji's *satsangs*, his devotees are exposed to a very particular affective atmosphere, not only informed by spacious architectural structures (e.g., the MoojiMandir, concert halls, retreat centers and so on), devotional music (e.g., usually playing both before and after each *satsang*), and sacred symbols (e.g., the largely Hindu iconography reproduced in these spaces) but also by their spatial layout. Most notably, Mooji invariably sits on his armchair, placed on a raised platform facing the audience, while the devotees stand in front of a microphone, usually placed dozens of meters away from him. Occasionally, this distance is shortened, as devotees are invited by Mooji or explicitly ask to come closer and perhaps even exchange a hug with him. Here, devotees' "proxemic desire" (Srinivas 2010: 167), that is, the desire to be physically close to their teacher, informs the staging of those "haptic logics of physicality", defined as "disciplinary logics that govern physical relations between guru and disciple" (Lucia 2018a: 962), and is usually satisfied only when the inquiry bears its fruits. In other words, devotees manage to come closer to their guru, exchange prolonged looks in each other eyes, touch him, hug him, and even prostrate at his feet, largely as a prize for their earnest listening and application of their guru's teachings, that as we have seen is the *conditio sine qua non* to be considered a good devotee. Additionally, the continuous recording, filming, and photographing of each *satsang* contribute to the constitution of a particular affective atmosphere characterised by a plurality of focal points that take as their primary interest the teacher-devotee interaction, and more specifically devotees' bodies, tones of voice, postures, emotional reactions and so on, thus strengthening that "disciplinary gaze" (Foucault 1975) already cultivated during the everyday life of the ashram. In other words, *satsangs* can be intimidating, especially for those devotees that decide to pose a question to Mooji and thus face his possible reproach and the scrutinising gaze of the hundreds of devotees in the hall, not to mention those following online. Here, Mooji's irony and sense of humour seem to have the important function to sooth the tension that accompanies, naturally, these moments of publicly performed personal introspection, engendering collective laughter that merge and unite devotees in a single moral and affective community.

In the first extract here introduced, as in countless other occasions, Mooji attempts to guide his devotee into a delicate self-inquiry whose purpose is to clarify his devotee's positioning as "[t]hat which watches the mind", namely non-dual consciousness. After a

series of tries to help his devotee to discern her “true identity”, and probably frustrated by the devotee’s inability to follow this complex and subtle introspection, Mooji disqualifies his devotee’s “cognitive effort” to follow his pointing, stating that “I am asking only for the answer from the heart, what is true, not what your head have to say about it”. Similarly, in the second extract, Mooji tries to guide a young devotee towards the recognition of her “divine nature”. Nevertheless, the devotee struggles to grasp Mooji’s guidance and “seem[s] to be running away from” him, as herself comments. This triggers Mooji’s response, which is oriented to re-establish the truthfulness and accessibility of his message of salvation, whose precondition is “to follow the pointing”. Moreover, Mooji also clarifies that the devotee’s failure to grasp the “truth” of his discourse is due to “a force inside that is against higher understanding”, that is, “mind and resistance”. A series of introspective questions follow, to which the devotee has no satisfactory answer. Mooji is then forced to conclude the interaction restating the validity of his message, the importance of *satsang* and the need to transcend one’s own personal identity.

Following Foucault’s analysis of the Greek, Roman and Christian practices of “examination of conscience” (1986, 2005, 2010, 2011, 2013, 2014, 2018), I contend that what takes place in *satsang* is an “examination of conscience whose function would be the exploration of the secrets of the heart, the mysteries of the heart in which the roots of sin are to be found” (Foucault 2014: 245). More specifically, what is at stake during these interactions is a particular cluster of relations between a number of foundational elements: first, the *teacher* that is supposed to guide his disciples; second, the *disciple*, that is supposed to open up, confess, and welcome the teacher’s instructions; third, a specific *truth*, that is, both the truth of the teacher’s discourse and the truth of the disciple’s confession; and finally the truth about the disciple’s true identity, that is, the type of desired subjectivity produced during *satsangs* and that grants devotees’ access to their “true life” (Foucault 2011: 157). Consequently, *satsang* should be read as a complex disciplining, confessional, and self-transformative “dispositif” (Foucault 1978, 1995, 2007, 2008, 2014) for the examination of the devotee’s conscience where the teacher’s “true discourse” (*parrhesia*) (e.g., Foucault 2005, 2010, 2011) functions as the matrix from which the devotee’s attempts to conquer self-realisation spring from, are assessed, and then turned down or confirmed.

The concept of “dispositif” is variably translated in English as “apparatus”, “deployment”, “dispositive” or “device” (Callewaert 2017: 29). These terms share the regulatory and productive instances implicit in Foucault’s formulation of *dispositif*, a concept introduced in the first volume of the ‘*History of Sexuality*’ (1978: 105-106) as:

a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power.

However, in more general terms, *dispositif* can be understood as “...a certain physical, non-discursive or intellectual, discursive way of ordering, having ordered things in a certain domain, which makes a certain action/understanding in that domain possible” (Callewaert 2017: 30). Most succinctly, the *satsang dispositif* grants to the disciplined and confessed devotee, the yearned chance to reach self-realisation.

In the light of Foucault’s formulation of *dispositif* and the “power/knowledge” (e.g., Foucault 1977, 1978, 1980) nexus, the *dispositif* also allows for the concept of *parrhesia* to clarify the role of Mooji’s “true discourse” as the organising principle of *satsang*. In this sense, *satsang* is the primary pedagogical environment where Mooji’s “truth” is asserted and mobilised to guide the devotees’ practices of self-constitution as enlightened individuals, linking together: first, “the question of the government of self and others”; second, “truth-telling (*dire-vrai*), the obligation and possibility of telling the truth in procedures of government”; and finally, “how the individual is constituted as subject in the relationship to self and the relationship to others” (Foucault 2010: 42, emphasis in original). I therefore theorise the concept of *satsang dispositif*, to not only account for the disciplining, confessional, and self-transformative features of the main pedagogical apparatus mobilised by Mooji, but also for the privileged manner in which his devotees become legitimate members of his community by participating in the *satsang* and partaking in Mooji’s “true discourse”.

This understanding of *satsang* as a quite specific instance of a disciplining, confessional, and self-transformational *dispositif*, structured around the teacher’s *parrhesia* and the encouragement of the disciple’s full disclosure of his or her interior life, is enacted by both parts of the pedagogical pair. On the one hand, it is common to hear disciples walking up to the microphone as if following a script to confess to the guru their own weaknesses and limitations:

“I’ve come up because I feel I need to expose something to your light”; “I need to expose my arrogance and leave it at your feet”; or again “The invitation is such a gift. I really feel this space, I really feel this wideness but every time I feel also like this body”.<sup>42</sup>

On the other hand, the teacher himself plays an active role in shaping these disciplining, confessional, and self-transformative dynamics, correcting, and encouraging his disciples when necessary and confirming their spiritual achievements when he deems them authentic. In some cases, when his devotees fail to grasp the “truth” he speaks even after repetitive attempts, they face the risk of being exposed to a sort of public shaming. When this happens, the devotee does not only have to accept her guru’s comments over her ‘non-realisation’, but she also has to stand the public humiliation of being judged as ‘non-realised’, not only in the context of those present in the *satsang*, but also by the thousands-devotees following the video recording live or otherwise. Nevertheless, Mooji’s rejections, loss of patience, and/or reproaches, have to be understood as stemming from the grammar of the *satsang dispositif*, through which the devotee’s introspection and “true life” can be accessed, organised, and managed in the service of Mooji’s message of salvation. In other words, the *satsang dispositif* is the main dispositif of veridiction of Mooji’s pedagogical arsenal. When its efficacy – for whatever reason – is threatened, the truthfulness and accessibility of Mooji’s message of salvation is also put into jeopardy. His assertive interventions are thus aimed at re-establishing his “truth” as superior to the ignorance of his devotees.

Contrariwise to the above scenario, the following extract provides an instance of a successful “conversion” (Foucault 2005: 11) where the devotee is finally able to leave aside his personal identity and turn inward, embracing his “god-self” and therefore gaining Mooji’s approval:

“I am not myself anymore” says the young man in tears as he reports his experience to the teacher (and the hundreds of people sitting in the large hall). “I was walking back to my tent yesterday evening after satsang when I just vanished”. He bursts into a laughter mixed up with tears as he continues: “I am so grateful! Thank you Mooji”. The teacher smiles, pleased. He then asks, addressing the audience: “Who is going to be the next?”. Most people raise

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<sup>42</sup> Field note, Monte Sahaja, Portugal, September 2018.

their hands, some screaming “Me!”. Mooji comments with a dispassionate “Will see”. There is a moment of loud silence and then the young man, still standing at the microphone, speaks again, and says quickly: “Mooji can I get a hug?”. The crowd laughs. The teacher responds “Come, come my dear”.<sup>43</sup>

Accounting for the classical socio-anthropological distinction between the “sacred” and the “profane” (Durkheim 2001), it is possible to note how the “true life” granted by self-realisation is so valued exactly because of its radical distinction from ordinary personal identity. Certainly, the “supernatural” and “superhuman” qualities of the charismatic leader (Weber 1968: 241), together with the devotees’ careful listening and interiorisation of their teacher’s “true discourse”, are what allow for the efficacy of these processes of spiritual transformation to take place. However, what should be noted here is that the devotees’ spiritual transformation, namely their embodiment of the truth spoken by their teacher, is always and unavoidably rooted in the teacher’s “legitimate domination” and “charismatic authority” (Weber 1968: 215-54) over his disciples. In this context, domination is legitimate because the devotee accepts, obeys, and embraces this domination as the primary means through which the “truth” of her “true self” can be accessed, discovered, and possibly exercised.

Finally, I will now briefly discuss the merit of this Foucauldian conceptual schemata in counteracting some of the major shortcomings of the contemporary sociology of religion. Self-realisation, understood in neo-Advaita terms as the substantial transfiguration and transcendence of one’s own individual sense of self in its embodied form and temporality, and implying one’s own identification with pure non-dual awareness, is perhaps one of the most paradoxical and extreme forms of self-transformation that humanity has managed to imagine for itself. As Altglas (2014a: 254) rightly underlines, its seductive power derives from a very specific social discourse that defines enlightenment – and in contemporary neo-liberal societies, also the individual’s responsibility for his or her own enlightenment – as the normative principle guiding the conduct of specific communities. More specifically, and in line with a critical approach to the study of religion (e.g., Altglas 2014a; Altglas and Wood 2018; Bourdieu 1971a; Guizzardi 1979; Wood and Altglas 2010; Wood and Bunn 2009), I contend that the devotees’ claims of self-determination and self-actualisation as enlightened or self-

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<sup>43</sup> Field note, Monte Sahaja, Portugal, September 2018.



realised, should be problematised and understood as a discursive mode arising from specific confessional and disciplining apparatuses of socialisation, of which the *satsang dispositif* is only an example. In other words, I posit that spiritual experience and self-realisation, as a case in point, are not an ahistorical, cross-cultural, and cross-temporal category of experience, as Mooji's teachings and neo-Advaita would want it, but the product of a specific *satsang dispositif* that makes of the devotee's identity – and its tension between the sacred and ordinary self – its main regulatory aim (see also the notion of *contested self* introduced in Chapter Six). In this light, the devotees' claims of self-realisation, are not merely the expression of "truth", the fruit of one's own experience of conversion from the profane world of personal identity to the sacred world of non-dual awareness. Conversely, these claims are one among several surfaces – others being the devotees' bodies, the type of clothing and adornments worn, their everyday conducts and so on – where the *satsang dispositif* is active in inscribing specific socialising, confessional, and disciplining instances. This is not to argue that self-realisation or spiritual experiences do not exist or are not an important aspect of one's own life, but that from a sociological perspective, they simply emerge from specific clusters of practices, power relations, and discourses, they are, in other words, socially constructed. In conclusion, the inevitability or naturalness of self-realisation as the final truth of the devotee's soul, is here problematised as the product of particular dispositifs of veridiction whose primary purpose is the constitution of specific types of subjectivities and their government.

## 5. Conclusive Remarks

In this chapter, I provided an account of Monte Sahaja as a total and disciplinary institution where devotees' time and the ashram's spatial organisation are simultaneously deployed to favor the three imperatives that dominate its everyday life: *work*, *contemplation*, and *prayer*. These three imperatives, or activities, are the ashram's transposition of the traditional tripartite model of yoga advocated in the '*Bhagavadgītā*' (*karma*, *jñāna*, and *bhakti* yoga). More specifically, devotees' engagement with each one of these three types of yoga fosters their cultivation of particular dispositions, which I have labelled following a previous contribution as *servicing*, *contemplative*, and *praying* dispositions (Di Placido 2018). In turn, these dispositions, understood as "core dispositions" (Brown and Jennings 2013) function as the constituting elements of the

“yogic habitus” promoted in ashram and whose theorising potential, I believe, could be fruitfully tested also in studying a variety of other neo-Hindu and neo-guru movements whose social organisation, discursive references, and practical repertoires closely resemble with those unpacked in these pages. In sketching this analysis, I have also relied on some of Shilling’s (2005) reflections noting how devotees’ bodies – as disciplined and organised within the ashram’s premises – are the multidimensional medium for the constitution of the everyday life of the ashram. This signifies that devotees’ bodies – and more specifically their free labour, their constant contemplation and devotion to the guru, god and the “true self” – are the *source* from which the ashram is materially brought into existence and run day after day; devotees’ bodies are also the primary *location* where the disciplining and normalising effects of the pedagogical devices mobilised during the everyday life of the ashram imprint themselves and through which they are able to exercise influence and power (Shilling 2005: 68); and finally, devotees’ bodies are also “a *means* through which individuals are attached to, or ruptured from, society [read the ashram]” (ibidem). Such an emphasis on devotees’ bodies is paradoxical if we consider that the legitimate discourses and philosophical foundations inhabiting Mooji’s pedagogies of salvation posit devotees’ self as their main object of interest and are substantially devoid of any interest in manipulating practitioners’ bodies, contrary to postural forms of yoga. Once again, Bourdieu’s (1977a) notion of “misrecognition” can be useful in unveiling how behind a particular “doxing relation to the social world”, that is, “the absolute form of recognition of legitimacy through misrecognition or arbitrariness” (Bourdieu 1977a: 168), Mooji’s teachings – and more specifically the social organisation of his ashram – makes of the body and its minute and diffuse management its privileged object of regulation.

Nonetheless, the centrality of devotees’ self emerges more prominently in the examination of the main practice of veridiction of Mooji’s teachings, *satsang*, whose deployment is particularly prominent during retreats. Here, through an analysis of the *satsang dispositif* as a *disciplining, confessional, and self-transformative apparatus* organised around the teachers’ “truth” and tailored to guide spiritual seekers to the direct recognition of their divine nature, I have shown the inextricable links that connect: particular “modes of veridiction”, “techniques of governmentality” and “practices of the self” (Foucault 2011: 8) as the matrix from which devotees’ “true life”, that is, self-realisation, can be finally accessed. In so doing, I have also reiterated the important point

that contemporary sociology of religion tends to dismiss the role of authority and spiritual directors in its analyses privileging a naïve and face-value rendition of social actors' claims of self-actualisation. Conversely, through an exploration of the satsang dispositif I provide a compelling case to inquiry into how specific claims of self-actualisation emerge from and are produced by particular disciplining and confessional apparatuses of socialisation.

In the remaining of this conclusion I would like to add a layer of complexity to the analyses of the previous pages, tracing certain lines of continuity between devotees' previously cultivated dispositions and those cultivated in the ashram. Framing the serving, contemplative, and devotional dispositions that constitute the yogic habitus through which the ethos of the ashram is subjectively interiorised and socially reproduced by devotees as "transposable" (Bourdieu 1977a: 72, 82, 1984: 170), helps to clarify this important point. In so doing, it is possible to theorise about the relationship that occurs between devotees' previous interiorisation and cultivation of certain dispositions and then their later strengthening or modification through the dispositifs of veridiction provided by the ashram. As Bourdieu (1984: 170) comments in introducing the concept of habitus in *'La Distinction'*:

The habitus is necessarily internalized and converted into a disposition that generates meaningful practices and meaning-giving perceptions; it is a general, transposable disposition which carries out a systematic, universal application-beyond the limits of what has been directly learnt-of the necessity inherent in the learning conditions. That is why an agent's whole set of practices (or those of a whole set of agents produced by similar conditions) are both systematic, inasmuch as they are the product of the application of identical (or interchangeable) schemes, and systematically distinct from the practices constituting another life-style.

This signifies that the dispositions and the habitus cultivated in the ashram and thus "produced by similar conditions" (the specific dispositifs of veridictions previously discussed) exacerbate the constitution and internalisation "of identical (or interchangeable) schemes" among Mooji's devotees. This homogeneous set of dispositions, however, encounter, dialogue, and integrate with devotees' previously existing dispositions that may or may not align to the working, contemplative, and devotional dispositions cultivated in the ashram. Of course, devotees' (previous) social positioning in the broader social field (e.g., Bourdieu 1971, 1983, 1996), is the strongest predictor of this postulated alignment. When the alignment between previously interiorised dispositions and newly cultivated ones is substantial, then we can speak of

transposable dispositions proper. Here, the continuity and the overlaps between devotees' "primary habitus" (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977: 42-46) and their newly acquired yogic habitus is manifested in a play of correspondences that grants devotees a relatively easy fit into the life of the ashram. Examples of this type of correspondences are epitomised by devotees' previous involvement in demanding and totalising working environments (serving disposition), which – as we have seen in Chapter Five in discussing yoga practitioners' voices and experiences – are the norm in the context of post-Fordist, neoliberal economies; by their previous and widespread engagement with contemplative practices of various kinds (contemplative disposition); and finally, by devotees' religious backgrounds or perhaps even by their previous involvement with other spiritual communities and/or gurus. Of course, this is not to say that the totality of Mooji's devotees shares similar biographical trajectories where work, contemplation, and prayer are pivotal to their subjective interiorisation of the social structures of the ashram but that a general tendency in this direction could be fruitfully mapped through a close reading of devotees' narratives. Unfortunately, considering the already mentioned fact that I was not granted the possibility to interview Mooji's devotees, these claims are bound to remain largely tentative at this stage although some preliminary information can be accessed through Bill Free's (2016) interview series '*A Journey with Mooji*',<sup>44</sup> devotees' testimonials,<sup>45</sup> and of course countless video-recordings of satsang where devotees disclose bits and pieces of their backgrounds and life situation. For instance, the example of Shree, Mooji's close devotee and General Manager of the Mooji Foundation is a poignant case in question. Through her high paced work as a successful programmer and her volunteering activities in Philadelphia,<sup>46</sup> her previous dedicated yoga practice and early following of the satsang teacher Pamela Wilson,<sup>47</sup> and finally, her early "mystical experiences" and "yearning for god",<sup>48</sup> the case of Shree testifies to the fact that Mooji's devotees often times begin to cultivate particular declinations of those dispositions that constitute the yogic habitus fostered in Monte Sahaja already before their direct involvement in the ashram or their discipleship with the guru more in general.

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<sup>44</sup> <https://soundcloud.com/billfree/sets/a-journey-with-mooji> accessed May 30, 2020.

<sup>45</sup> <https://mooji.org/voices-from-satsang> accessed May 30, 2020.

<sup>46</sup> [https://www.elconfidencial.com/mundo/europa/2019-09-02/ganaba-120-000-euros-en-endesa-pero-soy-mucho-mas-feliz-en-esta-comuna-espiritual\\_2204499/](https://www.elconfidencial.com/mundo/europa/2019-09-02/ganaba-120-000-euros-en-endesa-pero-soy-mucho-mas-feliz-en-esta-comuna-espiritual_2204499/) accessed May 30, 2020.

<sup>47</sup> <https://soundcloud.com/billfree/shree> accessed May 30, 2020.

<sup>48</sup> <https://soundcloud.com/billfree/shree> accessed May 30, 2020.

On the contrary, in those cases where there is a certain discrepancy between devotees' primary habitus and the yogic habitus fostered in the ashram, previously interiorised dispositions are required to dramatically change in order to adapt to and adopt the "schemes of perception, conception, and action" (Bourdieu 1977a: 86) promoted in the ashram. In fact, contrary to a deterministic reading, "the habitus is not something natural, inborn: being a product of history, that is of social experience and education, it may be *changed by history*, that is by new experiences, education or training" (Bourdieu 2006: 45 emphasis in original). Here, even those devotees that for their particular positioning in the larger social field have not extensively experienced the demanding and totalising requests of contemporary post-Fordist, neoliberal economies or practiced voluntary activities; the seductive and introspective powers of contemplative practices; or the comforting embrace of faith and religious socialisation, are quickly sensitised to develop a "taste" (Bourdieu 1984) for hard work, dedicated contemplation, and constant devotion to the guru through their involvement in the everyday life of the ashram. If this does not happen, that is, if devotees fail to fully embrace the ethos of the community, they are bound to remain peripheral members in the best-case scenario or even be ostracised by the community itself, to which, *de facto*, they do not belong.

Finally, I would like to make more explicit the links that occur between devotees' previously held capitals and their roles within the social organisation of the ashram. As I have argued in this chapter, devotees' previously held capitals are a necessary prerequisite for them to be able to enter the ashram premises, trading their own expertise, skills, and of course labour force and time to be in close proximity with the guru. However, what is particularly interesting is the permeability between devotees' social positioning in the broader social field – of course primarily defined on the ground of their available capitals (e.g., economic, cultural, social, physical and so on) – and their positioning in the ashram's hierarchy. This permeability is primarily guaranteed by the social reproduction of traditional forms of division of labour in the internal articulation of the ashram: here, those devotees that hold specific forms of capital due to their social positioning and involvement in construction work, for instance, are more luckily to occupy a similar position also within the ashram' social organisation. Conversely, somebody with different forms of capital such as Shree, who studied in one of the best private universities of the United States and worked as programmer, is at the top of the ashram's hierarchy, being the General Manager of the Mooji Foundation. In the light of this analysis, Shree's claim

that “[t]here is no hierarchy here. Everybody just falls in the exact place they need to be to get the person squeezed out of them”<sup>49</sup> can be framed as a further pivotal example of the misrecognition that inhabits transversally the practical-discursive repertoire of the ashram.

Nevertheless, devotees’ ability to convert previously existing capitals or newly acquired ones into the most valued form of capital within the ashram premises, that is, spiritual capital, is the primary strategy at devotees’ disposal to subvert the naturalised social transposition of the general social field into the internal organisation of the ashram and conquer a higher positioning within the ashram’s hierarchy. This signifies that, no matter what skills one holds, one’s spiritual proficiency is pivotal in determining one’s role in the ashram and proximity to the guru. However, whether this happens or not is always bound to Mooji’s approval, whose public deployment during the confessional, disciplining, and self-transformative satsang dispositif, confirms or rejects the genuine nature of his devotees’ spiritual experiences and their ultimate worth as legitimate devotees.

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<sup>49</sup> <https://soundcloud.com/billfree/shree> accessed May 30, 2020.

# Conclusion

## 1. Introduction

This thesis, with the adoption of ethnographic, interview-based, and discursive methods, focused on the *pedagogies of salvation* and the *apprenticeship processes* of the modern yogi, with particular attention on one postural yoga school, *Odaka Yoga*, and one neo-guru movement, *Mooji's teachings* and his Portuguese ashram, *Monte Sahaja*. I choose these two radically different case studies in order to begin to build the preliminary premises of a theory of the pedagogies of salvation of modern forms of yoga and not with the intention to compare them. In so doing, I showed that despite different organisational frameworks, traditions of reference, pedagogical devices, and naturally, also different models of authority and knowledge transmission, modern forms of yoga and their communities are largely organised around the imperative of the teacher's guidance. In other words, this thesis ascertained that nobody is born as a competent yogi but that practitioners become one through their exposition to specific philosophical and discursive references, reiterated practices, the mediation of one or more teachers, and their immersion within specific communities, of which they slowly come to embody the ethos. In simpler terms, we are what we do, and as the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk (2013: 350) argues in the context of his analysis of "anthropotechnics" (e.g., religious asceticism, sports, arts, and education), "[w]e are inhabitants of a creation in which everything revolves around instruction". Therefore, if this thesis ought to have one main conclusion it regards the nature of humans as first and foremost *training subjects* or *subjects in training*. Whether we train to eradicate bad habits and cultivate good ones or not, and towards which goal we train (e.g., spiritual realisation, a more flexible body, a professional accomplishment and so on) is another matter altogether.

This conclusion may seem predictable and even superficial to some, especially considering that this thesis started from a preliminary understanding of modern forms of yoga as *disciplines* and *practices* shaped by specific *discourses* and from the assumption that our sociological understanding of modern forms of yoga would benefit from the ethnographic, micro-sociological, and micro-political investigations of the ways in which yoga is thought about, transmitted, and interiorised through specific *pedagogies of salvation* and *relationships of apprenticeship*. Nevertheless, this overall theoretical and methodological approach – as much as its conclusive remarks on the training subject – are useful in questioning and attempting to overcome the dominant tendencies of the contemporary sociology of religion which, as we have seen, is largely based on the face value acceptance of social actors’ narratives and claims of self-determination and on an understanding of contemporary spirituality as substantially self-centered and devoid of authoritarian and disciplinary influences. This approach also offers an alternative to the mainstream sociological study of yoga, which primarily – and simplistically – regards it as a highly commodified tool, or consumer product, in the hands of corporate and political elites and in the service of capitalism. Though sympathetic to such analyses, I take issue with them when they fail to satisfactorily discuss the ways in which yoga practices and discourses assume such centrality in the current neoliberal order and are, in turn, socially reproduced within a plethora of sociocultural and pedagogical contexts and interiorised at a dispositional level by practitioners. As a consequence, the pedagogical level and the teacher-student relationships emerge as a privileged sociological domain of study able to encapsulate and form a bridge between analyses on the macro- (e.g., discourses, large-scale processes, and changes in society), meso- (e.g., specific fields, organisational, social and pedagogical contexts), and micro-levels (e.g., practitioners’ experiences, biographies, and dispositional schemata), thereby helping to overcome the shortcomings of earlier research while delving deeper into long-established research agendas. In fact, as I argued throughout the thesis, the implications of a careful sociological scrutiny of the pedagogies of salvation of modern forms of yoga extend beyond a parochial interest in Odaka Yoga and Mooji’s teachings. More specifically, it tells us something about humans as training subjects whose continuous struggles for constant improvement or “ethical distinction” (Sloterdijk 2013: 217), from oneself, others, and the world, dictate human’ quests for self-affirmation, whether through self-denial and renunciation as in most pre-modern ascetic traditions, or through contemporary – although often de-spiritualised and trivialized, that



is commodified – processes of self-actualisation. In either case, the training subject promptly responds to the best of his/her ability to the voice that whispers to him/her: “You must change your life!”<sup>1</sup> Teachers, in this framework, are those who guard the process and guarantee the success of these impelling transformations.

In the following, I briefly review and elaborate on a number of foundational concepts introduced in the thesis, such as *pedagogies of salvation*, *yoga field*, *yogic habitus*, *guru habitus*, *contested self*, and *satsang dispositif*. In so doing, I also introduce the concept of *biopedagogies*, as it emerged at the end of three years of sociological theorising with and against Bourdieu and Foucault. Finally, I conclude by suggesting a few possible areas for future research, with particular attention on the study of the professionalisation, institutionalisation, and legitimation of yoga through national regulations and a variety of competing certification systems; the ethnographic, participatory study of yoga teacher training and retreats; and a discussion of the hybrid concepts of subjectivity and health, which modern forms of yoga contribute to shaping, disseminating, and inhabiting, as socially and discursively negotiated at the intersection of Western and Asian systems of knowledge.

## **2. Ethnography and Conceptual Development**

In this thesis, I have adopted a form of ethnographic inquiry aimed at a minute scrutiny of the objects of analysis (e.g., pedagogies of salvation, teacher-student relationships, processes of apprenticeship) as they unfold naturally (e.g., during yoga classes, TT, the everyday life of the ashram, festivals, and retreats), as much as to sociological debates, theories, and theorising (on authority, discipline, and self-transformation in the landscape of contemporary spiritualities and so on). This way of interpreting and applying the ethnographic trade promised the advantage of a fully participatory (e.g., Halloy 2016; Wacquant 2004) and immersive (e.g., Palmisano 2016; Throsby 2016) fieldwork, that is, the sensuous, direct, and experiential understanding of what I studied, along with the

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<sup>1</sup> This is the title of Sloterdijk’s (2013) book *You Must Change your Life: on Anthropotechnics*’ and the last sentence of Rilke’s poem *Archaic Torso of Apollo*. Here the artist is exposed to the fragmented beauty of a beheaded and mutilated torso whose suggestive power bridges aesthetic and ethical concerns to the point of urging him to change his life. According to Sloterdijk (2013: 25), in contemplating the torso Rilke “discovered a stone that embodies the torso of ‘religion’, ethics and asceticism as such: a construct that exudes a call from above, reduced to the pure command, the unconditional instruction, the illuminated utterance of being that can be understood - and which only speaks in the imperative. According to Sloterdijk, this same imperative dictates the “verticality” of any process of “ethical distinction” to which he devotes his book.

reflexivity, detachment, and even generalisation inherent in theoretical engagements. While ethnographies are often criticised for being merely descriptive (e.g., Hammersley 1990, 1992), or only relevant in relation to the case studies selected (e.g., O'Reilly 2005: 39), my hope is that it has been demonstrated that they can be a hub for new ideas and theoretical innovations. Such ideas and theoretical innovations emerge from the scrutiny of specific parts of the social world but extend well beyond their boundaries (e.g., Burawoy 1998; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Goodman and Silverstein 2009; Lofland 1995; Snow, Morill and Anderson 2003). Seen in this light, this thesis was an exercise in “analytic ethnography” (Lofland 1995; Snow, Morill and Anderson 2003), that is, an ethnography oriented to theoretical developments and the production of “systematic and generic propositions about social processes and organization” (Snow, Morill and Anderson 2003: 182). The fieldwork and interviews conducted offered an invaluable opportunity to witness, apply, and recognise a number of sociological categories at work in the everyday life and pedagogical environments of the communities under study. Consequently, “theorising”, meaning the process of devising and constructing concepts and theoretical propositions (e.g., Swedberg 2012, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019) was encouraged and emerged naturally from the overall interpretative, open-ended, and iterative-inductive nature of the research.

The first conceptual innovation proposed by the thesis is the concept of *pedagogies of salvation*. As argued in Chapter One, the expression pedagogies of salvation is intended to draw attention to those discourses, practices, and relationships deployed in a pedagogical environment in which the teacher – or “expert” – is invested with the power to open the way for the salvation of practitioners. While this concept has obvious Weberian echoes, especially in relation to his notion of “salvation goods” (Weber 1965, 1978; see also Stolz 2006, 2008), pedagogies of salvation are not merely concerned with salvation in a strictly religious sense. On the contrary, they adopt a praxeological reading of Weber’s notion of salvation goods only to apply it to the broader sociocultural field. Accounting for this perspective means recognising that there are pedagogies of salvation at work in a number of partly overlapping and partly autonomous sociocultural domains, such as the landscape of contemporary spirituality, the fitness and wellness industry, the therapeutic field, and popular consumer culture, among others. A Bourdieusian reading (e.g., 1977a, 1984, 1990) would suggest that each and every pedagogy of salvation that can be mapped is related to a specific field, the ethos, internal articulation, and habitus of

which are then socially reproduced – in practice – through the processes of socialisation inherent in these pedagogies. Here, salvation refers to the successful attainment of whatever end-goal a given pedagogy – and a given field – is thought to bestow, be it spiritual, health-enhancing, leisure, therapeutic and so on. Therefore, through the concept of pedagogies of salvation I address those pedagogies that are inherently purposive or teleologically oriented to the realisation, acquisition, and mastery of specific salvation goods, which, however, are not the monopoly of religious institutions. Consequently, this concept could also be profitably applied to the study of other modern yoga groups or, more widely, to the study of a variety of teleologically oriented pedagogical environments, such as NRMs, schools, sporting institutions, youth sub-cultures, criminal, artistic or religious milieus and so on. In other words, salvation is here understood as first and foremost the successful response to the imperative “You must change your life!”. Towards which goal and direction remains to be ascertain case by case.

The second conceptual innovation proposed in this thesis in the concept of *yoga field*, a “hybrid field” (Pedrini, Brown and Aimini 2020) constituted by *spiritual/religious*, *fitness/leisure* and *therapeutic/medical* practical-discursive logics of what counts as yoga and of its purposes. This concept, I believe, can account for the diversity of interpretations of “what yoga is”, emphasising that the yoga field and its contours are continuously being redefined, depending on the particular position inhabited in the field or the vantage point adopted in its study, thus furthering our appreciation of yoga as a polysemic practice whose sociological understanding necessarily passes through an exploration of its symbolic power, contested status, and multiple deployments. For instance, from the perspective of a postural yoga school like Odaka Yoga, the yoga field is a hybrid field made up of fitness/leisure, therapeutic/medical, and spiritual/religious aspects while from the perspective of a denominational, or neo-Hindu yoga group such as Mooji’s community, fitness/leisure concerns are completely dominated and substituted by spiritual/religious ones, most importantly the acquisition of spiritual capital. The heuristic potential of this concept could also be tested by exploring the practical-discursive references of the yoga field from the perspective of nationalist Hindu fanatics, or from the perspective of medical doctors using yoga as an adjunct treatment for a number of ailments, to name some of its others possible empirical applications. In other words, the yoga field as a hybrid field could be a useful strategic device in navigating the complexity and internal articulation of the social organisation of modern forms of yoga in

contemporary societies, avoiding the dangers, on one hand, of postulating essentialist interpretations (yoga is a religion, yoga is a spiritual practice, yoga is a fitness regime and so on); and, on the other, of providing a loosely theoretical reading (e.g., based on the relativistic explanatory variables “context” and “culture”).

The third conceptual development presented in this thesis is the concept of *yogic habitus*, defined as the type of habitus cultivated, internalised, and socially reproduced in specific yoga environments. I attempted to reconstruct the schemes of disposition that constitute the yogic habitus of various modern yoga groups, starting from the two main empirical cases investigated by this thesis. I have demonstrated that the scheme of dispositions that make up the yogic habitus cultivated by Odaka Yoga’s practitioners consists of *focusing/listening*, *flowing/fluid*, and *practical/ascetic dispositions*. These dispositions, regarded as “core dispositions” that “tend to have some significant congruence” (Brown and Jennings 2013: 34) across schools and styles, can also be profitably explored with regard to a range of other modern postural yoga schools (perhaps nearly all of them) and, to a certain degree, other forms of movements such as martial arts (e.g., capoeira, Qi Gong, Thai chi, Aikido etc.), dance and fitness.<sup>2</sup> More specifically, I argued that these dispositions are common to all styles and schools of postural yoga. Of course, each style or school is based on a specific balance between these three dispositions, which can be supplemented by others belonging to different styles or schools that favour the cultivation of other aspects of yoga’s principles and practices, and the embodiment of these other elements by practitioners. I am thinking, in particular, about schools that put a lot of emphasis on mantra chanting, thereby providing a pedagogical repertoire in which the cultivation of a *chanting disposition* is central, or schools that emphasise breathing work (*prāṇāyāma*), thereby contributing to a very specific form of the practical/ascetic disposition that could be labelled the *breathing disposition*.

On the other hand, I have also reconstructed the scheme of dispositions that constitute the yogic habitus fostered by Mooji’s teachings, as composed of *servicing*, *contemplative*, and *devotional dispositions*. Similarly, framing these as core dispositions underlines the flexibility and fertile theoretical potential of this approach. Different forms of the servicing, contemplative, and devotional dispositions are found across nearly all denominational yoga groups (and neo-Hindu and neo-guru movements), but each group seems to place a

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<sup>2</sup> For a similar theoretical approach to the study of a variety of martial arts see Brown and Jennings (2013), Kohn (2003), and Tan (2014).

different emphasis on one or more of these dispositions, thereby contributing to its unique version of yogic habitus. This is not, of course, to say that the yogic habitus promoted by denominational yoga groups is only, and of necessity, about work, contemplation, and prayer. Indeed, to deny the importance of other particular dispositions through which the ethos of a specific group is pre-consciously embodied and interiorised by the cultivation of a particular form of yogic habitus, would be misleading. As an example, the religious movement of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (Osho) (e.g., Goldman 2005; Urban 2005, 2012) could be fruitfully theorised as providing a particular declination of yogic habitus in which the cultivation of an *expressive* or *self-actualising disposition* is paramount in the successful transmission of the provocative and tantric-centered ethos of the group. In other words, the theoretical schemata provided here is a useful tool in itself but one amenable to changes and further specifications tailored to the empirical reality that scholars face in each case.

The fourth concept introduced in this thesis is the concept of *guru habitus*. The theoretical premises underpinning this concept are identical to those of the concept of yogic habitus. The main difference is that the yogic habitus is designed to explore the scheme of dispositions that form the habitus promoted by specific modern yoga organisations, while the concept of guru habitus captures the scheme of dispositions constituting the habitus of those who occupy positions of leadership in these organisations. In Chapter Six, I introduced the concept of the guru habitus with the aim of investigating the scheme of dispositions at the heart of Mooji's role as a guru. I argued that the guru habitus is composed of *religious*, *teaching*, and *popular dispositions*, again seen as core dispositions and potentially at the center of the habitus of several past and present gurus. I believe it would be most interesting to further explore whether and how this scheme of dispositions (religious, teaching, and popular dispositions), combined in the *guru habitus* inhabited by Mooji, could also be traced to other gurus and even other spiritual teachers, regardless of their specific title and tradition of reference. This type of analysis could profitably be combined with other theoretical tools<sup>3</sup> to investigate the process of becoming a spiritual teacher or, more specifically, a guru. As well as being interesting on a case-by-case basis, this concept offers a promising avenue of research into a preliminary taxonomy of those "core dispositions" (Brown and Jennings 2013) that

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<sup>3</sup> Here I am chiefly thinking about Jennings' (2019) "theory of martial creation" discussed in Chapter Three and on which I will briefly expand in the final section of the thesis.

constitute the habitus of charismatic leaders more generally. I initially identified these core traits as a kind of mystical knowledge (religious disposition), the pedagogical means to transmit it with authority (teaching disposition) and, finally, the readiness to stand in the spotlight of celebrity (popular disposition). In addition to these three core dispositions, others are likely to emerge.

The fifth conceptual innovation introduced in this thesis is the *contested self*, a concept dedicated to capture the hybrid and torn nature of the conception of subjectivity promoted by Mooji's teachings and other "Hindu-inspired meditation movements" (Williamson 2010). To be more precise, the contested self reflects contemporary guru's preoccupations with practitioners' self-realisation, or enlightenment, as intrinsically connected with their processes of self-actualisation, that is, personal growth and self-cultivation. In other words, the contested self largely expresses a hybrid conception of subjectivity influenced by the spiritual/religious and the therapeutic/psychological practical-discursive registers. As I argued in Chapter Six, the contested self is in fact simultaneously human and divine, ego-centered and ego-less, illusory and real (in neo-Advaita terms). It is a project oriented toward a future horizon of self-actualisation while it is already accomplished in its godly nature. The contested self is paradoxical, as within it, *self-discovery*, *self-denial*, and *self-improvement* dialogue, reject one another, and overlap. The heuristic potential of this concept is that it allows to avoid essentialist readings of contemporary guru's conceptions of subjectivity as merely derived from the spiritual/religious field, or conversely, from the therapeutic/psychological field. In doing so, this concept is also useful in revealing the inconsistencies, hybrid roots, and discursive references of what gurus often present as the final truth of their teachings and as the goal of their specific pedagogies of salvation. Moreover, it may be fruitfully used to explore practitioners' narratives of self-transformation, their processes of self-transcendence, and their histories of de-conversion and ex-communication from specific communities.

The sixth conceptual innovation advanced in this thesis is the concept of *satsang dispositif*, that is, a *disciplining, confessional, and self-transformative apparatus* organised around the teacher's "truth" (*parrhesia*) and the seekers' direct recognition of their divine nature. By means of this Foucauldian inspired concept, I demonstrated the inextricable links between particular "modes of veridiction", "techniques of governmentality" and "practices of the self" (Foucault 2011: 8) as a matrix from which the devotee's "true life", that is, self-realisation, can be finally attained. This concept also

has the merit of counteracting and partly correcting the tendency of the contemporary sociology of religion to frame spiritual/religious life in self-centered terms and dismiss the dimension of authority. Moreover, I contend that the central pedagogical dynamics of the satsang dispositif are not unique to this specific case study. On the contrary, following Foucault's (2011: 338, see also Foucault 2018) analysis of the Christian examination of conscience and its ubiquitous role in the processes of constitution of Western subjectivity:

knowledge of self (knowledge regarding self, about oneself) will be one of the fundamental conditions, and even the prior condition of the soul's purification, and consequently for the moment when one will finally be able to arrive at the relationship of confidence with God. One will attain the true life only on the prior condition of having practiced on oneself this decipherment of the truth.

This "knowledge of self" and the "decipherment of the truth" on which it rests, are at the heart of the disciplining, confessional, and self-transformative processes that characterise spiritual seekers' socialisation across spiritual communities and traditions of reference, even in the context of the relatively non-institutionalised and self-centered landscape of contemporary spiritualities. I therefore argue that, to fully appreciate the practical-discursive logic of contemporary spirituality and the variety of confessional apparatuses of discipline and self-transformation of which it is composed, the role of spiritual directors, adherence to the specific "truth" they speak, and the substantial submission to their charismatic authority must be given more attention by scholars.

At this point, it is important to identify the obvious links between these concepts as part of "broader systematic and generic propositions about social processes and organization" (Snow, Morill and Anderson 2003: 182). The pedagogies of salvation studied in this thesis delineate the pedagogical means to achieve specific end-goals corresponding to specific positioning within the yoga field as a hybrid field. As a consequence, these pedagogies tend to embody the ethos of the yoga field and, at the same time, facilitate the transmission, interiorisation, and social reproduction of the yogic habitus fostered by it. The types of habitus cultivated within specific pedagogical environments and relationships of apprenticeships – which in certain cases may lead also to the cultivation of a contested self – of course, are also derived from the type of guru habitus embodied by the teachers/guru and the wide range of disciplining, confessional, and self-transformative dispositifs deployed by modern yoga groups and organisations. Here, the role of practitioners as first and foremost *training subjects* and that of teachers

as unsurpassable mediators seems to problematise any enthusiasm for the supposedly self-centered and increasing horizontal nature of modern forms of yoga.

### ***2.1. Theorising Biopedagogies: A Dispositional Reading***

In this section, I would like to introduce the concept of *biopedagogies* as it emerged from three years' of sociological theorising with and against Foucault and Bourdieu in an attempt to bridge the former's focus on discourse and the latter's focus on practice, forming a unified and coherent analytical proposition.

The concept of biopedagogies is not a new theoretical contribution of itself. Scholars like Wright and Harwood (2009), Rail and Lafrance (2009) and Drake and Radford (2019) applied this notion in order to describe the normalising and regulating practices of political discourses and interventions regarding the so-called "obesity epidemic", the discursive construction of obesity on popular shows such as '*Nip/Tuck*', and advertising that "teaches consumers how a suitable body appears and functions" (Drake and Radford 2019: 1). The understanding of biopedagogies proposed by this literature is mainly derived from Foucault's (e.g., 1978, 2007, 2008) concept of "biopower", defined as the governance and regulation of individuals and populations through practices associated with the body. As rightly underlined by Drake and Radford (2019: 4):

the term biopedagogy characterizes how governments aim to control individuals and populations not through overt force but through imparting values and knowledge that teach people how to assess, monitor, and manage their bodies in a manner that fits with state interests.

In other words, according to this type of analyses, biopedagogies are simply the pedagogical derivate of what Foucault (e.g., 2003, 2007, 2008) famously labelled "biopolitics", defined as the control of the welfare, wealth, longevity, and health of the population through the pervasive government of individuals' conduct. It can be rightly said that this literature understands biopedagogies as the merging of Foucault's notions of biopower and biopolitics with pedagogical work, although the latter largely remains in the background of their analyses.

My own theorisation of biopedagogies holds on to the promising understanding of how life (*bios*) and pedagogical work (e.g., disciplines, practices, discourses) are brought together (with a focus on modern forms of yoga and their pedagogies of salvation) and emphasises how pedagogies ought to exert their transformative and salvific effects on the



life of individuals. However, I would like to modify this canonical theorisation of biopedagogies adding some insights from Bourdieu's dispositional approach and shifting the analytical focus from biopolitical power as the final explanatory rationale for these pedagogies to a more micro-sociological focus on localised apprenticeship processes and pedagogical environments. After accounting for these caveats, it is then possible to re-define biopedagogies as those pedagogies of self-cultivation effective at the dispositional level – which may or may not align with the imperatives of biopolitical governmentality of individual's self-care, self-responsibility, and self-control – and aimed at the control, manipulation, and mastering of a person's life. According to this preliminary theorisation, biopedagogies are at the same time disciplinary, in a Foucaultian sense, since they restrain, control, and normalise; and they are also symbolically violent, in that they reify their domination through its naturalisation as legitimate, thereby misrepresenting the conflicts and power imbalances implicit in these biopedagogies. I contend, for example, that that the concept of biopedagogies can aptly capture some of the central features of the pedagogies of salvation delineated in this thesis. Here, Odaka Yoga's practitioners and Mooji's followers commit to their apprenticeships within their respective communities in the attempt to reach specific salvific goals (mainly self-actualisation and self-realisation), which are achieved through dedicated teacher-student relationships and practitioners' immersion within the practical-discursive universe of their communities, that is, their philosophical foundations and practical repertoires. These regimes of reiterated practice, in turn, foster the cultivation of specific dispositions, and therefore, impact on and contribute to the transformation of practitioners' life (their body, self and mind, relationships with others and the world) at times also substantially reshaping their habitus. Accepting their role as training subjects, practitioners also implicitly accept the disciplining aspects and the legitimate domination that invest these relationships of apprenticeship and the pedagogical environments in which they take place. Their life (bios) is then fully submitted to pedagogical work.

The concept of biopedagogies differs from a number of partly overlapping and well-established conceptual devices such as “body pedagogics” (Shilling and Mellor 2007; Shilling 2007, 2010, 2016, 2018) and “reflexive body techniques” (Crossley 2004, 2005), not to mention Foucault's (e.g., 1986, 1988, 2005) “practices” or “technologies of the self” and Mauss' (1968) “techniques of the body”. As previously discussed in Chapter Four, body pedagogics:

refers to the central *means* through which a culture seeks to transmit its main corporeal techniques, skills, dispositions and beliefs, the *experiences* typically associated with acquiring these attributes, and the actual *embodied changes* resulting from this process (Shilling and Mellor 2007: 533, emphasis in original).

As further argued by Shilling (2018: 76, emphasis in original), this conceptual device facilitates the study “...of those institutionalized social, technological and material *means* through which cultural practices are transmitted, the varied *experiences* of those involved in this learning, and the embodied *outcomes* of these processes”. Reflexive body techniques, in turn, are “those body techniques which act back upon the agent, modifying him or her, and which are employed specifically for this purpose” (Crossley 2004: 38). There are obvious similarities between these concepts and the concept of biopedagogies, although the latter differs from body pedagogics and reflexive body techniques since its scope lies also outside of the domain of bodily-focused, pedagogical environments and self-transformative processes. Biopedagogies, in fact, include of all those practices and activities in which practitioners’ bodies are not the primary object through which knowledge is gathered, transmitted, and reproduced socially. Moreover, while the concept of biopedagogies shares a certain attention to the processes of disciplining, knowledge transmission, and social reproduction that also the concept of body pedagogics attempts to capture, the device of reflexive body techniques is substantially concerned with the description of phenomenological, reflexive accounts of bodily experiences of self-fashioning. As a consequence, I contend that the latter’s theoretical potential is partial – to say the least – since it risks obscuring all those social and discursive elements that guide and partly determine practitioners’ attempts to act in a self-reflexive way on themselves and their own bodies (e.g., specific philosophies, world views and moral universes, teachers and mentors, other practitioners, the general ethos of a social group and so on). The concept of biopedagogies also differs substantially from body pedagogics and reflexive body techniques in its dispositional focus on the ways in which specific durable and transposable “schemes of perception, conception, and action” (Bourdieu 1977a: 86) are cultivated, in practice, within specific relationships of apprenticeships. In other words, body pedagogics seek to identify the means, experiences, and embodied outcomes of specific body cultures; and reflexive body techniques the self-reflexive and embodied elements of self-transformative body project. The concept of biopedagogies, on the contrary, seeks to identify those pedagogies of self-cultivation effective at the dispositional level and aimed at the control, manipulation and mastering of one’s life. The

analytical focus goes beyond a mere interest in physical practices or self-reflexivity and, instead, emphasises the inextricable links between specific discourses and practical repertoires as interiorised by social actors at a dispositional level.

In conclusion, I would like to provide a preliminary categorisation of biopedagogies, arguing that they could be fruitfully theorised following a number of different continua such as: *secular – religious* oriented; *bodily – mind* focused; *collectively – individually* performed; and *tightly – loosely* organised. First, biopedagogies can be found in many contexts and pedagogical environments, ranging from secular institutions like schools and sporting organisations to religious institutions, such as monasteries, ashrams, and other religious and spiritual environments. Second, biopedagogies can be focused on the body (echoing the concept of body pedagogics), operating primarily at a praxeological level, as is the case with a variety of sports, physical cultures, and forms of movement, or they can also be focused on the mind, favouring cognitive or discursive learning, as in most mainstream educational institutions like schools and universities. Third, biopedagogies can be performed collectively, like a soccer team’s training regime or an ashram’s daily periods of communal prayer and contemplation, or they can be performed individually, like a runner in training, or a solitary meditator. Fourth, biopedagogies can be found in different organisational structures. Certain organisations are much more rigidly organised, have inflexible boundaries, are governed by stricter rules, and require a total commitment, like religious institutions such as monasteries or other secular organisations like private clubs or elite sporting teams. Alternatively, organisations can also be loosely structured and have fast-changing organisational structures, if any, as is the case in self-managed yoga classes or other bottom-up gatherings and activities that still eschew reification in stable organisational structures.

The theoretical implications and potential applications of the concept of biopedagogies and this preliminary schematisation could, of course, be applied to a number of other areas, such as sporting, educational and religious pedagogies, to mention but a few. Finally, I suggest that a possible way to theorise this concept further would be to inquire into the specific relationships that occur – case by case – between the discourses and the practices informing specific biopedagogies. I contend that an investigation could be conducted into how practices *affect* discourses and vice versa, in an attempt to go beyond boundaries and dualities. In this regard, affect theories (e.g., Anderson 2009; Barnwell 2018; Blackman 2008, 2010, 2012; Brennan 2004; Clough 2008, 2009; Massumi

2002, 2008; Seyfert 2012), and their praxeological interpretations (e.g., Reckwitz 2002, 2012, 2017) could be used to bridge the reciprocal relationships between practices and discourses and their respective effects on practitioners' processes of disciplining and self-transformation, also exploring the ways in which they affect each other. This type of analysis might start from an emergent understanding of affect – defined as the force to act on specific objects (bodies etc.) – as it is generated at the intersection between localised teacher-student's interactions, the implicit and/or explicit exposure to certain philosophical and discursive references and the performance of certain pedagogical repertoires.

### **3. Future Research**

I have already put forward a number of ideas for future research throughout the thesis. In this concluding section, I simply emphasise a few lines of inquiry which naturally emerge from the thesis and that I deem particularly timely.

First, considering the paucity of research on the pedagogies of modern yoga in the light of yoga's exponential growth and increasing popularisation, I contend that a sociological study of the professionalisation of yoga teaching is due. Postural forms of yoga are today at the center of a number of sociocultural milieus, ranging from the landscape of contemporary spirituality to popular, consumer culture, and the wellness and fitness industry. In a multi-billion dollar market like the yoga market,<sup>4</sup> it is no surprise that attempts to make the teaching of yoga more professional and regulate its certification systems are now proliferating, from Narendra Modi's effective nationalisation of yoga to Yoga Alliance's extreme outsourcing certification system. It would be rewarding to conduct an investigation into the professionalisation of yoga teaching "as a vocation", in a Weberian sense (1948), exploring the ways in which yoga teachers frame their own professional choices within specific "elective affinities" (Weber 2011) with yoga. Another possible study, perhaps adopting the notion of yoga field introduced here, could provide a detailed picture of the struggles for domination of the yoga industry and its certification system, placing the focus on the different certification systems now available, their historical developments, and their respective strategies of legitimation (e.g., based on science, tradition, marketability and so on). This type of analysis could

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.soas.ac.uk/blogs/study/yoga-industry-reform/> accessed October 20, 2020.

also map the changing trajectories of the yoga field and its practical-discursive logics, exploring, for instance, how different certification systems operate at a national or international level and how they represent specific positioning within the yoga field and its homology within the broader field of power.

Second, it would also be possible to study, through ethnographic methods, the processes of apprenticeship of the modern yogi during yoga TTs and retreats. Focusing on the privileged moment of knowledge transmission and professional training could offer valuable insights into the processes of the social and discursive construction of modern forms of yoga, going on to delve deeper into some of the dynamics studied in this thesis. More specifically, this type of analysis would allow to delve deeper into the study of the “politics of touch” and the institutionalisation of “emotional labour” (Hochschild 1983) within TTs curricula. The former, is in fact at the center of animated debates between traditional framings of the teacher-student relationships in South Asian religions and their transpositions into Western milieus (e.g., Lucia 2018a; Wujastyk, Birch and Hargreaves 2019), contemporary scandals investing a multitude of well-known yoga teachers (e.g., Remski 2019), and feminist social movements such as #Me Too (Remski 2019; Wildcroft 2020). The latter, in turn, as partly explored in Chapter Four, is a fundamental – although understudied – feature of modern yoga teaching and is also pivotal to the increasing commodification of individuals’ “emotional capital” (e.g., Cottingham 2016; Reay 2004; Zembylas 2007), a central asset in pedagogical work.

Third, Jennings’ (2019) “theory of martial creation”, designed to study the birth of specific martial arts and previously discussed in Chapter Three, could be adapted to the study of the birth and development of different modern yoga styles or schools. This theory, developed at the intersection of C. Wright Mills’ (1959) “sociological imagination” and Chris Shilling’s (2008) call for a more pragmatist orientation to the study of the body, could be employed with the concepts of yoga field and guru habitus to establish the linkages between the birth and development of a specific modern yoga group, the internal articulation and composition of the yoga field in which it acts, and the scheme of disposition that constitute the founders’ habitus. This promising theoretical framework could be applied to the study of classical styles of postural yoga, such as Iyengar and Ashtanga or more innovative styles such as Odaka Yoga. It could also be applied to the study of neo-Hindu and neo-guru movements founded by a charismatic leader, as in the case of the organisations of Osho, Amma or Mooji. In doing so, it would

grant access to an integrated understanding of how founders' biographies and specific historical processes (Jennings' theory of martial creation) could be contextualised within the processes of development and internal articulation of a number of fields and their corresponding habitus (Bourdieu's theories of field and habitus and their conceptual innovations here proposed). In other words, such a framework would allow to consider simultaneously – and in their reciprocal interactions – macro (e.g., large scale changes in society), meso (specific fields, organisational, and social contexts), and micro (practitioners' experiences, biographies, and dispositional models) levels of society while studying the birth and development of specific yoga groups.

Fourth, another promising line of investigation would be to focus, again relying on discursive, ethnographic, and biographical methods, on the inclusion of modern forms of yoga in therapeutic and medical settings, so as to be able to capture the processes of adaptation, translation, and adoption of yoga discourses and practices to medical and therapeutic goals. To what extent and in what fashion, for instance, is yoga used in the rehabilitation of patients and how do they and medical staff relate to it? Does yoga and its multifarious nature flatten to become a simple therapeutic among others or conversely does it contribute to the changing landscape of contemporary medicine?

Finally, and connected with the previous point, I contend that to study hybrid conceptions of health and subjectivity where Western, indigenous, and New Age systems of knowledge and their epistemologies intersect, could be a promising avenue for future research and may contribute to shed further insights into the psychologisation of the religious and spiritual fields as much as the spiritualisation of medicine. Again, this type of analysis could be brought forward expanding on the role of the yoga teachers as health experts or further exploring the manners in which Asian conceptions of health and subjectivity are reinterpreted, adapted, and reinvented within contemporary yoga milieus and therapeutic settings.

*Excursus*

*The Discursive Construction of Modern Yoga*

# “Modern Yoga Research” and the Birth and Development of a Discipline

## 1. Introduction

Concepts, typologies, and definitions are the building blocks of sociocultural analyses across disciplines, epistemological perspectives, and research areas. As already underlined by Max Weber (2012a: 134–35) in 1904 in his ‘*The “Objectivity” of Knowledge in Social Science and Social Policy*’, “the basic idea of modern epistemology, which goes back to Kant, is that concepts are, and can only be, theoretical means for the purpose of intellectual mastery of the empirically given”. According to this position, concepts, and consequently typologies, definitions, and theories that we build starting from these very concepts are primarily *a means* to inquire and possibly better understand the specific fragments of the social world that we are investigating. Weber’s understanding of concepts as heuristic devices is hardly debatable, as it is exactly on the grounds of fine-tuned and fuzzy concepts that sociocultural analyses develop in the first place. However, I caution against a reading of concepts as simply “giving name” to “something” that “already exists” “out there”. More precisely, and in line with a long-standing critical tradition to the construction of scientific knowledge (e.g., Bourdieu 1988; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Butler 1990, 1993; Foucault 1965, 1972, 1973, 2002; Latour 1979; McCutcheon 2015), I contend that concepts also actively contribute to the discursive and social construction of that of which they speak. This signifies that the heuristic potential of a concept should not distract us from the study of its processes of construction, that is, to say it in the manner of Pierre Bourdieu’s (1988: 7) reflexive sociology, it should not distract us from the possibility of “objectifying [the] objectification” of the concept. As Bourdieu further clarifies:



...the principal virtue of the scientific work of objectification ...consists in its allowing us to objectify objectification [that is, self-reflexivity from Bourdieu's perspective]. Indeed, for the research anxious to know what he is doing, the code [or the concept] changes from an instrument of analysis to an object of analysis; the objectified product of the work of codification [concepts, typologies, and definitions] becomes, under his self-reflexive gaze, the immediately readable trace of the operation of construction of the object, the grid which has been mapped out to construct the datum, the more or less coherent system of categories of perception which have produced the object of scientific analysis.

Following these preliminary considerations, in this Excursus I intend to shift the focus of attention from concepts as “instruments of analysis” and “objectified products” representing empirical reality, to concepts as “objects of analysis” and “the operation of construction of the object”. Else said, I will take as my primary objects of analysis the concept of “modern yoga” and the field of study from which it emerges, that is, “modern yoga research” or “modern yoga studies”. Modern yoga, defined by Elizabeth De Michelis (2004: 2) as “a technical term to refer to certain types of yoga that evolved mainly through the interaction of Western individuals interested in Indian religions and a number of more or less Westernized Indians over the last 150 years”, will function as a case study to show how concepts and typologies are the foundational building blocks of specific theories, research agendas, and even entire disciplines (e.g., Goerz 2006; Weber 1978, 2012a, 2012b), with a specific focus on conceptual and disciplinary development within the sociology of religion. Modern yoga research, on the other hand, will offer the possibility to discuss how the field of the sociology of religion, defined as that fragment of the broader academic field organised around shared representations and agonistic conflicts over “what religion is” and “how to study it”, is constantly developing, adjusting, and re-asserting its boundaries in relation to the birth and development of new disciplines and sub-disciplines. More specifically, I contend that the field of the sociology of religion, understood “as a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 97) which compete for the legitimacy over the nature, purpose, and study of religion, is directly affected by the birth and development of modern yoga research (more on this in the following).

Modern yoga research has arguably established itself as an autonomous field of study since the publication of De Michelis' (2004) *'A History of Modern Yoga'* and Alter's (2004) *'Yoga in Modern India'*. Following these two foundational texts other contributions such Singleton's and Byrne's (2008) *'Yoga in the Modern World'*, Singleton's (2010) *'Yoga Body'*, Mallinson's and Singleton's (2017) *'Roots of Yoga'*,

Baier's, Maas' and Preisendanz's (2018) edited volume '*Yoga in Transformation*', and Newcombe's (2019) '*Yoga in Britain*', among others, have been further contributing to the processes of discursive construction, specialization, and disciplinary definition of modern yoga research. In fact, although the rising number of publications on the transnational development, diffusion, and transformation of modern forms of yoga interests disciplines as diverse as South Asian Studies, anthropology, religious studies, and the sociology of religion – today we are confidently speaking of modern yoga research as a new, self-standing field of study characterised by its own professional networks, publishing bodies, and educational structures. Moreover, the latest publication of Lucia's (2020) '*White Utopias*', Jain's (2020) '*Peace Love Yoga*', Foxen's (2020) '*Inhaling Spirit*', Wildcroft's (2020) '*Post-lineage Yoga*', and Newcombe's and O'Brien-Kop (2021) '*Routledge Handbook of Yoga and Meditation Studies*', are simultaneously strengthening and challenging the boundaries of this newly born field, pushing it in new directions including within its scope, although still quite marginally, issues of ethnicity and cultural appropriation (Lucia 2020), politics and social change (Jain 2020), the Western roots of modern postural yoga (Foxen 2020), the democratization of the practice (Wildcroft 2020), and a growing focus on new religious/theological, historical, geographical, and disciplinary settings (Newcombe and Brien-Kop 2021).

This Excursus is not concerned with modern forms of yoga *per se*, whether lived by their practitioners (the dominant phenomenological paradigm in the sociology of religion and religious studies) or as socially, and discursively constructed transnational sociocultural phenomena and practices (the dominant paradigm in modern yoga research). On the contrary, this Excursus is exclusively concerned with the manners in which modern yoga is currently theorised within the field of modern yoga research, a field that, I argue, simultaneously *makes* it, and *makes of* it, its privileged objects of inquiry. More specifically, this analytical focus is tailored to grant access to the broader processes of conceptual and disciplinary construction that continuously animate the field of the sociology of religion every time that a new category gives rise to a redefinition of some of the dynamics of the field (e.g., secularisation theories and the postulated end of religion; spirituality and its self-centered character; everyday religion and its contrasts with the study of institutionalised religious organisations, and now modern yoga in all its variants). Therefore, I contend that this Excursus may be a useful resource for those scholars interested in the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the sociology

of religion and its internal articulation and in the study of the relationships that occur between specific concepts and the birth and development of autonomous fields of study or sub-disciplines. Moreover, it may also offer interesting insights to those scholars that are actively shaping, or conversely, only now beginning their inquiries, into the nascent field of modern yoga research.

The Excursus is structured as follows: first, I briefly recall Foucault's "archaeology" (e.g., 1965, 1972, 1973, 2002) enriching it with a number of reflections on the importance of concepts and typologies in the processes of construction of autonomous fields of study, with a particular attention to Weber's (1978, 2012a, 2012b) construct of "ideal type"; second, I provide some preliminary observations on modern yoga typologies and definitions; third, I provide a Bourdieusian analysis of modern yoga research and the sociology of religion as specific "fields", focusing on the relationships between the concept of religion and the birth of the field of the sociology of religion and its current developments and internal articulation. In this section, I also discuss how modern yoga research constitutes itself as an autonomous field through a specific kind of "boundary-work" (Gieryn 1983, 1999) operating on disciplines and sub-disciplines, that is, how modern yoga scholars succeed in distancing themselves from other neighboring disciplines, formulating modern yoga as their legitimate object of study; and how the concept of modern yoga, understood as a "boundary object" (Star and Griesemer 1989) that distinguishes itself from a number of parallel and partially overlapping phenomena, dialogues – or not – with other central concepts of the fields of the sociology of religion and religious studies; fourth, I conclude summarising the main findings of this chapter and developing further my analysis on the relation between the category of modern yoga and other established categories of analysis of the fields of the sociology of religion and religious studies, such as NRMs, neo-Hinduism, New Age and so on.

## **2. Foucault's Archaeology and Weber's Ideal Type**

Archaeology, together with genealogy and the analysis of discourses, is a crucial component of Foucault's methodology and specific understanding of history, discourse, and language. Foucault (e.g., 1965, 1972, 1973, 2002) developed this approach in the attempt to discuss the processes of constitution, establishment, and change of sciences such as medicine and psychiatry, grammar and philology, natural history and biology, and the study of wealth and political economy, with a particular focus on how their

respective epistemological scenarios and discursive references informed their classifications, taxonomies, and categorising practices. As he poignantly stated in the preface of *'The Order of Things'*, archaeology is (Foucault 2002: xxiii emphasis in original):

an inquiry whose aim is to rediscover on what basis knowledge and theory became possible; within what space of order knowledge was constituted; on the basis of what historical *a priori*, and in the element of what positivity, ideas could appear, sciences be established, experience be reflected in philosophies, rationalities be formed, only, perhaps, to dissolve and vanish soon afterwards (ibidem).

As Foucault (2002: 83) further clarifies in *'The Order of Things'*, “[i]f one wishes to undertake an archaeological analysis of knowledge itself”, or as in the case of this Excursus, of that specific fragment of scholarly production labeled as modern yoga research:

One must reconstitute the general system of thought whose network, in its positivity, renders an interplay of simultaneous and apparently contradictory opinions possible. It is this network that defines the conditions that make a controversy or problem possible, and that bears the historicity of knowledge.

In other words, archaeology implies an inquiry into “the conditions of possibility” (e.g., Foucault 2002: 183, 265, 340) for the emergence of a certain field of knowledge and an investigation into the manners in which these conditions of possibility translate into the constitution of “the form of positivity proper” (Foucault 2002: 388) of this field. More specifically, the conditions of possibility of modern yoga research are constituted by the academic literature that prepared the ground for modern yoga research to flourish,<sup>1</sup> and the discourses that characterise the fields of study modern yoga research originated from.<sup>2</sup> The form of positivity proper of modern yoga research are, in turn, its concepts, typologies, and definitions, and consequently the theoretical and methodological models that characterise this field of study. In this part of the Excursus, I focus on an archaeological excavation of the form of positivity proper of modern yoga research leaving a detailed scrutiny of its conditions of possibly – in the guise of its discursive references – for the following part entitled *'Modern Yoga Research as a Discursive Formation'*.

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance the works of Fuchs (1995), De Michelis (1995, 2002), Sjoman (1999), Alter (1997, 2000) and Ceccomori (2001). Of course, see also the Orientalist works of Max Müller (1899) and Sir John Woodroffe (1927, 1931) before them, not to mention Mircea Eliade (1948, 1962, 1969).

<sup>2</sup> Most importantly religious studies, anthropology, South Asian studies, and sociology.

The overall archaeological approach here discussed starts from one foundational premise which posits modern yoga as an *analytical category*, or a concept, defined by Goertz (2006: 1) as the main building block for constructing theoretical propositions. Accounting for this perspective, modern yoga research is then that specific field of study that simultaneously contributes to the discursive construction of this concept and that depends on it for its scholarly legitimisation. In this sense, I do not understand modern yoga as a taken for granted analytical category that faithfully identifies an existing empirical reality that awaits to be deciphered through scholarly conceptual and methodological devices, but rather, through the archaeological method, understand it as the result of a lengthy process of *discursive constitution* and *objectification*, which culminates in the creation of modern yoga as the privileged object of analysis of the field of modern yoga research itself.

According to Weber (2012a: 137) social scientists can formulate “concepts and judgements that are neither empirical reality, nor reproductions of empirical reality, but that allow empirical reality to be ordered intellectually in a valid manner”. These concepts are “ideal types”, defined by Weber (2012a: 127, emphasis in original) as “purely ideal *limiting* concept against which reality is measured - with which it is *compared* - in order to bring out certain significant component parts of the empirical substance of [that reality]”. More specifically, Weber (2012a: 127, emphasis in original) discusses the process of construction of ideal types as:

obtained by means of a one-sided *accentuation* of *one* or a *number* of viewpoints and through the synthesis of a great many diffuse and discrete *individual* phenomena (more present in one place, fewer in another, and occasionally completely absent), which are in conformity with those one-sided, accentuated viewpoints, into an internally consistent *mental* image. In its conceptual purity, this mental image cannot be found empirically anywhere in reality. It is a *utopia*.

In other words, as rightly argued by Rosenberg (2016: 88):

all ideal types are logical thought constructs formulated in the imagination of the social scientist through accentuation and synthesis but guided by data and experience. Since nothing in empirical reality can ever be found corresponding perfectly to the ideal type, Weber described it as a 'utopia'.

Weber's (1978, 2012a, 2012b) pioneering reflections on conceptual construction, are, nonetheless, more articulated than this reading allows us to grasp. In fact, while in his '*Objectivity Essay*' he was exclusively concerned with the horizon of historical analyses and he stressed the role of both meaning and value in the social construction of heuristic devices, such as the ideal type, in his later re-elaboration of the ideal type in '*Economy and Society*' he dismissed the question of value, giving full attention instead to the question of meaning, and moved from historical to sociological analyses proper. As correctly underlined by Richard Swedberg's (2018: 182, emphasis in original) discussion on how to practically use Weber's ideal type in sociological analyses:

the ideal type that we find in *Economy and Society* is the result of a "thorough change" in relation to the 1904 version (Schutz, 1967: 244, n. 26). This later version, to repeat, was fashioned exclusively with sociology in mind. What is nonetheless problematic with the sociological version, according to Schutz, is that it was never fully explicated by Weber, only "hinted at." This makes it difficult to state with full assurance how Weber viewed the kind of ideal type that sociologists should use.

While, in the '*Objectivity Essay*' Weber focused on the heuristic potential of the ideal type, that is, on its explanatory power, in '*Economy and Society*' he articulated his position further, arguing that "the ideal type can be of general help to the sociologist in primarily three ways" (Swedberg 2018: 189): for "terminological", "heuristic", and "classificatory" purposes (Weber 1978: 21). According to Swedberg, "the most important of these is...the use of the ideal type to come up with new ideas", that is, for heuristic purposes. As he adds: "[c]larity is always important, and classifications are useful, but the heart of a good sociological analysis consists of coming up with new ideas in analyzing social reality, verified by the facts" (Swedberg 2018: 189-190).

These reflections on Weber's ideal type, its processes of construction at the intersection of "the imagination of the social scientist" and "data and experience" (Rosenberg 2016: 88), as well as its utopian character and heuristic purposes, underline the centrality of this construct but also the confusion that still surrounds it in

contemporary sociology. Here, I agree with Swedberg (2018: 190) that “[to] bring Weber’s concept up to date is therefore something that needs to be done and should be on the agenda of today’s sociology”. One way to do so is to explore, in practice, the processes of construction of specific ideal types, as I set myself to do in the next section in reference to a number of modern yoga typologies. Another way is to merge Foucault’s archaeological interest in the “form of positivity” of a given field of knowledge with its ideal typical constructions. In fact, the latter constitute the conceptual skeleton of the former. Taken together, these reflections on archaeology and the ideal type approximate an exercise in what Björn Hammarfelt (2018: 197) calls “conceptual reflexivity”, that is, a reflexive account of the processes of construction and application of concepts and of how they relate to broader theoretical formulations and disciplinary areas.

### **3. Modern Yoga: Typologies and Definition**

As previously argued, De Michelis’ (2004) ‘*A History of Modern Yoga*’ can be rightly considered one of, if not *the*, foundational texts of modern yoga research, for it is in this work that the first definition of modern yoga is provided. Moreover, beside its groundbreaking genealogical efforts, this work is foundation for it granted the study of modern forms of yoga as legitimate objects of scholarly analysis, thus consecrating a new stream of research. In this section, however, I momentarily set aside De Michelis’ definition and instead focus a detailed reading of her typologies.

De Michelis’ (2004) typology is an example of *progressive typology*. It is progressive in at least two ways. First, each one of the ideal types described (Modern Psychosomatic Yoga, Modern Postural Yoga, Modern Meditational Yoga, and Modern Denominational Yoga), increases in complexity if compared with the ideal type it originates from. Second, it is progressive in the sense that this complexity – according to De Michelis – increased over time, as modern yoga progressively developed, adapted, and accommodated to the Western sociocultural contexts where it was being popularised, consolidated, and acculturated. Her typology, in fact, is thought to specifically address modern yoga “as found in English-speaking milieus worldwide” (De Michelis 2004: 187), and in this sense avoids a categorisation of, for example, premodern forms of yoga and those contemporary forms that are mainly transmitted in languages other than English and in the South Asian context.

De Michelis (2004: 187, emphasis added) states that “[a]fter Vivekananda’s 1896 formulation, Modern Yoga developed into various schools dedicated to body-mind-spirit ‘training’, which we shall call *Modern Psychosomatic Yoga* (MPsY)”. In other words, De Michelis considers Vivekananda’s (1863-1902) publication of ‘*Raja Yoga*’ (1896), a text where the yoga tradition was innovated, and partially re-casted in the light of the Judeo-Christian influences on Indian thought operated by the Orientalism of British colonisers, as the foundation of modern yoga itself. Examples of psychosomatic yoga are thus Vivekananda’s Rāja Yoga, extensively studied by De Michelis; Sivananda’s (1887-1963) Divine Life Society, studied in some details by Strauss (2005) and Altglas (2007, 2014a); and the yoga popularised in the United States by Paramhansa Yogananda (1893-1952) (Foxen 2017a, 2017b).

De Michelis’ progressive approach, however, further clarifies that in the following decades Vivekananda’s teachings went through a process of expansion and reformulation that eventually led to a further specialisation of modern yoga and its sub types. On the one hand, “*Modern Postural Yoga* (MPY) developed a stronger focus on the performance of āsana (yogic postures) and prāṇāyāma (yogic breathing), while [on the other hand] *Modern Meditational Yoga* (MMY) mainly relied on techniques of concentration and meditation” (De Michelis 2004: 187, emphasis added). Both types are primarily concerned with the “orthoperformative side of participation”, namely the orthodox performance, usually unfolding “within a limited ‘classroom’ or ‘session’ type framework”, of specific practices with little room for individual adaptation (De Michelis 2004: 187). In this respect, as De Michelis underlines, “from a doctrinal point of view both modern postural yoga and modern meditational yoga tend to limit themselves to very basic and polyvalent suggestions concerning the religio-philosophical underpinnings of their practices” and discourage “intellectual reflection” and “evaluation of their history and teachings” (De Michelis 2004: 187). Unsurprisingly then, in both modern postural and meditational types of yoga (De Michelis 2004: 188, emphasis in original):

the doctrinal aspects of the teachings are mostly rudimentary, the general underlying assumption being that understanding will come through first-hand experience rather than from intellectual deliberation. As in Vivekananda’s *Raja Yoga*, the key epistemological presuppositions of modern postural and meditational yoga schools are experiential, and practitioners are mostly left to make sense of the received theories and practices, and of how these should be fitted into their lives, on the basis of their own rationalizations.



Examples of postural yoga – next to the countless approaches and styles that developed in the last few decades at the intersection of the wellness and fitness industry and the “spiritual marketplace” – are the styles that developed from the work and experimentation of Krishnamacharya (1888-1989) at the Maysore Palace (e.g., Sjoman 1999; Singleton 2010), such as Iyengar and Asthanga Yoga. Examples of meditational yoga include the early Maharishi Mahesh Yogi’s (1918-2008) Transcendental Meditation movement and a variety of other “Hindu-inspired meditation movements” (Williamson 2010).

De Michelis adds, on the ground of her fieldwork data gathered in the context of the UK Iyengar yoga community, that these types of yoga “are generally shaped by the religio-philosophical assumptions characteristic of New Age religion” (2004: 189), namely, a focus on practitioners’ self and the celebration of a largely experiential epistemology (e.g., Heelas 1996, 2008). I find the link between modern forms of yoga and New Age religion extremely important and will develop this line of thought at some length in the following of the paper. For the moment, it is sufficient to underline how modern psychosomatic and postural yoga groups present an associative form, or social organisation, which substantially fit with what sociologists of religion define as “cultic”, that is:

...they tend to be individualistic and loosely structured (especially as far as sources of authority are concerned), they place few demands on members, they are tolerant, inclusivist, transient, and have relatively undefined social boundaries, fluctuating belief systems and relatively simple social organizations (De Michelis 2004: 189).

*Modern Denominational Yoga* (MDY), on the contrary, tend to develop stronger organisational ties, as well as moral and ideological stances that move progressively toward a sectarian character, and are discussed by De Michelis as “...a later development that seems to have got fully underway only during the 1960s with the appearance of more ideologically engaged Neo-Hindu gurus and groups that incorporated elements of Modern Yoga teachings” (De Michelis 2004: 189). Again, according to De Michelis, modern denominational yoga groups present a less fluid social organisation compared to the other types of yoga discussed. They are “collectivist and more tightly structured, they make more demands on members, and have more stable belief and organizational systems which often result in more intolerant and/or exclusivist attitudes” (De Michelis 2004: 189) than is the case with the other types of yoga that De Michelis discusses. Although these denominational groups “...draw from the whole range of Modern Psychosomatic,

Postural and Meditational forms of yoga in whichever way suits them...have not been instrumental in shaping, defining, and elaborating more “mainstream forms of Modern Yoga theory and practice, and yoga is not their primary concern” (De Michelis 2004: 189). Examples of this type of yoga are for instance ISKCON (more commonly known as Hare Krishna) (e.g., Rochford 2000, 2007; Squarcini 2000; Squarcini and Fizzotti 2004), the neo-guru movement originated by Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, also known as Osho (1931-1990), Mata Amritanandamayi’s (1953- ), or Amma’s religious movement (Lucia 2014a; Warriar 2005, 2014) and countless other neo-guru and neo-Hindu religious movements (e.g., Lucas 2011, 2014; Srinivas S. 2008; Srinivas T. 2010).

According to De Michelis’ analysis, modern denominational yoga groups are not primarily concerned with yoga and are therefore a superfluous – or at least problematic – type within her broader typology of modern yoga. However, some insights emerge if the paradoxical scenario of having a sub type of modern yoga that has little to do with modern yoga itself is considered as a “sortal term”. Sortal terms, according to Paul Griffiths (2006: 67) “are words (usually nouns) intended to sort things into kinds”, and “sorting things into kinds is unavoidable”. Following, Griffiths’ (2006: 67) argument:

sorting or classifying is itself a complex act, and one of the facts that provides this complexity is that kinds themselves come in kinds, and sortals must be analyzed differently depending upon which kind of kind they sort things into.

In other words, I wonder whether the general sortal compound “modern yoga”, and its sub divisions, namely modern “psychosomatic”, “postural”, “meditational”, and “denominational” yoga, all refer to the same “kind”, that is, “modern yoga”, or if on the contrary, it could be argued that the sub types constituting the internal articulation of the compound “modern yoga” closely refer to different types altogether, such as NRMs, New Age religion, neo-Hinduism and so on. This is not a trivial point, as scholars studying modern yoga invariably use the label – or some variation thereof – to study quite different phenomena, ranging from the history of Western esotericism (Foxen 2020), the practical repertoires of largely white transformational festivals (Lucia 2020), the politics of “neoliberal spirituality” (Jain 2020) and so on. I will come back to a closer analysis of the partial overlaps of the concept of modern yoga with other foundational concepts of the sociology of religion and religious studies in the next section.

This second typology, rather than being organised around a progressive logic, follows a *praxeological approach*, that is, modern yoga types are here “...analysed on

the basis of specific practices emphasised, and how these are used both within the schools and in terms of wider social dynamics” (De Michelis 2007: 5-6). Differently from her first typology where she discusses four types of yoga, this typology results in five types of yoga. Interestingly, the first type of yoga discussed in the latter typology is the *early modern psychosomatic yoga* of Vivekananda, and compared to her 2004 typology, De Michelis here conflates Vivekananda’s Rāja Yoga into what she previously defined as modern psychosomatic yoga. The result of this mutation weakens one of the main narrative threads of her ‘*A History of Modern Yoga*’ (2004) that wanted Vivekananda as the initiator of modern yoga but leaves more room for recognising the influence of other central actors in the early phases of modern yoga’s development, diffusion, and adaptation.<sup>3</sup> As argued by Karl Baier’s (2011: 13) critique of De Michelis’ typologies:

This classification system is problematic for a number of reasons. In the first place it is linked to assuming solid historical dependencies. It remains to be seen whether this was De Michelis’s intention, but her presentation in any case gives the impression that Modern Yoga is a project that was essentially launched by Vivekananda and then became differentiated in various ways, without the individual branches entirely losing their connection to their historical source.

De Michelis revised her original categorisation “... [and] abandoned the tendency to derive all of Modern Yoga from Vivekananda’s Rāja-Yoga” (Baier *ibidem*), and although this looks like a small shift it is an important methodological move.

In her 2007 typology, De Michelis theorises that psychosomatic schools were sharing an emphasis of Patañjali’s *aṣṭāṅgayoga* coupled with other elements from (neo)-Hindu or Western esoteric traditions (De Michelis 2007: 6). This new reconfiguration of modern psychosomatic yoga repositions Vivekananda from being the creator of modern yoga to only being one among other actors. Also, it reframes the psychosomatic interpretation of yoga philosophy in the light of neo-Hindu and Western esotericism, two practical-discursive universes that were instrumental in the re-definition of yoga during the Bengali renaissance (first three quarters of the nineteenth century) (De Michelis 2004; King 1999). Examples of this type of yoga are substantially akin to those of her first typology,

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<sup>3</sup> For example, see the work of Anya Foxen (2017a, 2017b) on the central role of Yogananda in the development of American yoga; the work of Andrea Jain (2014a) and Catherine Albanese (2007) in relation to early American yogis such as Ida C. Craddock (1857-1902) and Pierre Bernard (1875-1955); or again, Suzanne Newcombe (2019) regarding the later reception and institutionalisation of postural yoga in Britain focusing on the figures of B.K.S Iyengar (1918-2014) and Bernadette Cabral (1932-1970) (also known as Yogini Sunita) and their impact on the local educational authorities (LEA) and the British Wheel of Yoga.

that is, those styles of yoga promoted by teachers such as Vivekananda, Yogananda, and Sivananda, among others.

The second type of yoga is the *neo-Hindu* style of modern yoga, a type that did not figure in De Michelis' (2004) earlier categorisation. According to her analysis, the "key ideological themes" of the neo-Hindu style "...were already present in South Asian culture towards the end of the nineteenth century, and which came to full flower from the 1920s onwards" (De Michelis 2007: 6). As the name suggests, this type of yoga "often encompasses irenic or more confrontational notions of Hindu revivalism, nationalism and/or supremacy" (De Michelis 2007: 6) and it "...was especially receptive to influences from the martial and gymnastic traditions of both indigenous and western origins" (ibidem). A perfect example of a contemporary interpretation of this type of yoga is represented by Narendra Modi's nationalist politics and its Hindu supremacist ideology (e.g., Mazumdar 2018; McCartney 2018, 2019a), where Indianness, Hinduism, and yoga are re-constructed as three elements of a unique and righteous national, ethnic, and religious identity.

The third and fourth types, again discussed together, are *postural* and *meditational* forms of modern yoga. These, in line with her 2004 progressive typology developed from the two previous types, especially from 1920s onwards. In this respect, to the exception of two important remarks, De Michelis' analysis of modern postural yoga is substantially unchanged. First, in her 2007 typology De Michelis underlines that modern forms of postural yoga "have contributed the most to developing and codifying relatively advanced and sophisticated canons of postural theory and practice" (2007: 6). Second, she states that "[b]y and large, when people talk about 'yoga' in everyday English, this is the type of practice that is intended" (De Michelis 2007: 6). From this, De Michelis provides an account of meditational yoga that seems to depart from the modern postural yoga type and instead come closer to *denominational* forms of yoga, making the two hard to distinguish. On this point, as underlined by Beatrix Hauser's (2013a: 8) critique of De Michelis' typologies, and in line with my view, the distinction between postural and meditational practices "is more schematic than real". In fact, as argued by Joseph Alter (1992: 92, quoted in Hauser 2013a: 8), "[i]n yoga it is pointless to try to define where physical exercise ends and mental meditation begins", "due to the Hindu notion that mind and body are intrinsically linked". In the words of Hauser (2013a: 8):

De Michelis' ideal-typical categories thus have a weakness since they imply a vital difference in approaching yoga as belief system [meditational, denominational, and partially neo-Hindu yoga types] or as a set of physical exercises [psychosomatic, postural, and partially neo-Hindu yoga types]. Although this distinction does indeed reflect a particular modern discourse on yoga, to oppose these categories altogether is problematic, both in the Indian context and in the allegedly secularized, late modern, post-industrial settings where the boundaries between health behavior, self-cultivation, and religious aspirations are increasingly blurred, where there is often no clear line between spiritual practice and psychosomatic self-help.

Having said this, it is important to credit the fact that De Michelis' 2007 typology identifies a number of differences between meditational and denominational forms of yoga. A first distinction is that the latter are somehow targeted as propagating "very distinctive and sometimes controversial worldviews, belief systems and lifestyles" (De Michelis 2007: 7) even though at the level of practices they are mainly concerned with their own forms of meditational yoga. A second distinction is that:

in contrast to the others, denominational schools of modern yoga only started to appear from the 1950s onwards, and became really noticeable on the religious scene from the 1960s, as many Indian charismatic teachers were enthusiastically adopted (and materially supported) by the then emerging counterculture" (De Michelis 2007: 7).

Therefore, it is not totally clear whether meditational and denominational forms of yoga – if we momentarily overlook their respective developments from the 1920s and the 1950 onwards, and the former's openness to the broader religious field contrary to the latter's extreme sectarianism – are different expressions of modern yoga entirely or simply different shades of the same type. The examples of postural, meditational, and denominational forms of yoga provided in the context of De Michelis' first typology apply also in the case of her 2007 categorisation.

Concluding this detailed account of De Michelis' two typologies it is necessary to underline how their discussion is pivotal for: first, an appreciation of the diversity of empirical realities that can be studied employing the label of modern yoga, ranging from physical cultures of various kind to full-fledged NRMs; second, this analysis is also instrumental to our broader understanding of the processes of construction of ideal types in the sociology of religion more in general. More precisely, in emphasising the blurred boundaries between different sub types belonging to the same concept, or sortal term, this analysis sheds light on the relationships occurring between scholarly categories – and their interpretative power – and empirical reality, that is, what social actors do, what types

of discursive references they inhabit and sustain, and so on. Also, it pinpoints to the arbitrariness of ideal typical construction, that is, what Weber (2012a) meant with his attention to the dimension of value in the construction of his historical ideal type. In fact, we can assert that De Michelis constructed her conceptualisation of modern yoga following Weber's (2012a) suggestion to confront her "mental image" of modern yoga with empirical reality, thus having to face the challenging fact that "[i]n its conceptual purity, this mental image cannot be found empirically anywhere in reality. It is a *utopia*" (Weber 2012a: 127, emphasis in original). Therefore, the risk implicit in her ideal types and schematisations of modern yoga is that they may lend themselves to obfuscating the complexity of empirical reality and becoming a source of reification of what they attempt to categorise. If this is the case, we may be left with a poor heuristic device for the understanding of the social organisation of modern forms of yoga, and instead, a strong discursive apparatus able to bring into existence the object of its own study. Again, as we will see in more details in the following sections, this remains true also for a number of other concepts and categories central to the history and internal articulation of the sociology of religion, such as the concept of religion itself. However, it is also important to recognise that De Michelis' two typologies are explicitly framed as heuristic devices rather than accurate descriptions of reality. In this regard, any critique against the limitations of her theorisations has to be understood in the light of the intrinsic limitations of the schemata that ideal types imply by definition (e.g., Weber 1949; Schütz 1967, 1970; Swedberg 2018), and, to be more fruitful, should be read and related to in terms of the kind of phenomena they encourage to include – or conversely exclude – from their portraits of modern yoga and its forms. In this light, it seems reasonable to ask ourselves if these ideal typical categorisations are discussing modern forms of yoga, or if what is at stake is a substantial reframing of contemporary phenomena and pre-existing scholarly categories – such as Western esoterism, Hinduism, New Age religion, neo-guru movements and so on, around the newly emerged category of "modern yoga" – I will expand on this important point in section 4.1 and in the conclusion of this Excursus.

### **3.2. *Modern Yoga: Definitions***

De Michelis (2004: 2), in her classic '*A History of Modern Yoga*', defines modern yoga as:

a technical term to refer to certain types of yoga that evolved mainly through the interaction of Western individuals interested in Indian religions and a number of more or less Westernized Indians over the last 150 years... The definition 'Modern' seems precise enough to describe its age (it emerged in modern times) and geographico/cultural spread (it is preeminently found in developed countries and urban milieus worldwide).

During my "survey of the field", I personally encountered a variety of re-elaborations of this definition, or in some cases some alternative definitions, some of which will be discussed here.<sup>4</sup>

First, De Michelis (2008: 19-20) further elaborates on her definition of modern yoga in her contribution to the anthology '*Yoga in the Modern World*' (Singleton and Byrne 2008), where she argues that:

the expression Modern Yoga is used here to signify those disciplines and schools that are, to a greater or lesser extent, rooted in South Asian cultural contexts and more specifically draw inspiration from certain philosophies, teachings, and practices of Hinduism. These teachings and practices, by virtue of export, syncretic assimilation, and subsequent acculturation processes, have by now become an integral part of (primarily) urban cultures worldwide and are usually represented, disseminated, and discussed primarily (though not exclusively) by way of the English language.

Overall, modern yoga is here substantially depicted in line with her 2004 definition, especially in relation to the transnational nature of modern yoga and its reliance on the English language. However, differently from her previous definition, this one emphasises the Hindu roots of modern forms of yoga and downplays its "modern" features.

Second, Sarah Strauss, in her '*Positioning Yoga*' (2005), a multi-sited ethnographic project on Sivananda's Divine Life Society, frames "[m]odern yoga, as represented in the writings of Swami Vivekananda at the end of the nineteenth century... [as] a transnational cultural product" (Strauss 2005: 9). Strauss' (2005: 96 emphasis in original), theorising on modern yoga comes across more explicitly, as she further comments that:

In its global manifestations, we can view yoga in a variety of ways: as ideology, practice, lifestyle, metaphor, commodity, and generator of a Turnerian emotive *communitas* which has come to substitute for the sort of physically grounded communal co-presence now available only sporadically, filling in the interstices of modern cosmopolitan lives.

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<sup>4</sup> I personally part-take for the expression "modern forms of yoga", largely employed throughout the thesis, as it allows to account for the historical process of development traced by modern yoga scholars' genealogical efforts accounting also for the plurality, malleability, and variety of histories, styles, and approaches that characterise this complex sociocultural phenomenon.

In comparison to De Michelis' (2004, 2008) definitions, this one seems to move away from a strict historical approach and instead accounts for a more emic conceptualisation of modern, globalised forms of yoga. Here, Strauss seems to suggest – perhaps naively – that the communitarian dimension of modern yoga could function as a substitute for the sociocultural disaggregation of the moral ties of “modern cosmopolitan lives”.

Third, Karl Baier (2011: 12) proposes a definition of modern yoga in his essay ‘*Modern Yoga Research*’, where he argues that “Modern Yoga can generally be defined as a system of exercises with a holistic intent, which has arisen and continues to arise from the interaction of Indian culture and Euro-American modernity since the nineteenth century”. He continues stating that “[t]he schools and tendencies covered by this definition can be classified in different ways” (Baier 2011:12), thus preparing the ground for his critique of De Michelis' typologies and the presentation of his own categorisation, however largely ignored by the broader scholarship on modern yoga. Baier's definition reproduces the classical topos of transnational yoga as developed at the intersection of Western and Eastern discourses and practices (e.g., Alter 2004; De Michelis 2004; Singleton 2010, 2013), and its specificity lies in emphasising modern yoga – perhaps privileging postural variants – as “a system of exercises with a holistic intent”.

Fourth, Mark Singleton (2013) proposes what is perhaps the most well-argued and articulated alternative to De Michelis' (2004) first definition of modern yoga. Singleton (2013: 38) states:

I will be using the term “transnational anglophone yoga” to indicate certain systems of yoga that began to appear in India, Europe, and the United States from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. There are many varieties, but they are all characterized by the fact that they cross cultural and national bounds, and are transmitted through the medium of English.

Again, this definition reproduces the theme of modern yoga's transnational and transcultural roots, although it seems to dismiss the expression “modern”. Indeed, as Singleton (2013: 38, emphasis in original) continues:

I prefer this phrase [transnational anglophone yoga] over the more commonly used “Modern Yoga,” insofar as it simply describes the phenomenon and avoids the suggestion that we are talking about a unified and categorical body of discourses and practices. It also obviates the question as to whether practices are inherently “modern” (beyond mere contemporaneity), and may help to move the inquiry beyond a simple cataloguing of the modern versus the “traditional” aspects of practice. This can have the important methodological advantage of preventing history from sliding into typography. Finally, it serves to make a distinction between English language, export forms of yoga, and “grass roots” Indian traditions (whose



medium is Sanskrit or an Indian vernacular, and which are not for the most part involved in the global flows that are the defining feature of transnational anglophone yoga) without offering any *a priori* judgments as to the superiority, or greater authenticity, of the one over the other.

Understood in this way, transnational anglophone yoga presents itself as an alternative to the descriptive, historical, and typographical tendencies of De Michelis' (2004, 2008) definitions of modern yoga. It also shows that the field of modern yoga studies is itself less monolithic in its orientations and internal debates than it might appear at first glance from this Excursus. Having said this, though perhaps more accurate in terms of analytical clarity and increasingly more popular among scholars, the expression "transnational anglophone yoga" is however less immediate than the concise and catchy expression "modern yoga", and is, in my opinion, a serious limitation to its ability to "contend" with De Michelis' (2004) classical definition.

Fifth, in her entry for the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, Andrea Jain (2016: 1) defines modern yoga as follows:

Modern yoga refers to a variety of systems that developed as early as the 19th century as a consequence of capitalist production, colonial and industrial endeavors, global developments in areas ranging from metaphysics to fitness, and modern ideas and values.

Jain's definition is substantially in line with those discussed so far, especially in its historical sensitivity to transnational developments. Nevertheless, contrary to them it concretely repositions modern yoga's development and evolution, within the material frameworks of "capitalist production, colonial and industrial endeavors", and "global developments" in a variety of fields, such as metaphysics and fitness. Advantageously, this definition paves the way for those interested in the study of modern yoga with a more explicit focus on its commodification, marketisation, and fetishisation, something that Jain (2020) pursues further in her latest book.

Finally, I would like to recall Patrick McCartney's (2019a) concept of "global yoga", Anne Koch's (2018) interchangeable use of "global yoga" and "modern positional yoga", and Hauser's (2018) critique of modern yoga research. The first two authors, in line with Jain's definition, use "global yoga" and "modern positional yoga" to signal the economic, consumptive, and affective dimensions of the transnational development and evolution of modern forms of yoga within the framework of capitalist societies. Hauser's (2018: 508) critique, on the other hand, underlines scholars' "...tendency to reduce the complex interplay of behaviour, perception and categories of experience, silencing the contingency

of the body”. This is an important criticism that points, with notable exceptions (e.g., Newcombe 2007), to the substantial lack of inquiries into the meanings and experiences of modern yoga by its practitioners. Hauser’s second criticism, in turn, postulates that the “model of linear diffusion of yoga which essentializes East and West as entirely distinct cultures...fails to acknowledge their intrinsic interrelationships” (2018: 508). In fact, despite the constant reminder coming from modern yoga scholars about the transnational nature of modern yoga, this scholarship is based on the reasoning that it is not only possible to draw clear cut lines between premodern and modern forms of yoga (e.g., Baier 2011; De Michelis 2008; Strauss 2005), but it is even desirable to do so. In more succinct terms, the linear model of historical development, alongside an essentialised understanding of the geographies and cultural landscapes explored, function as the organising principles of this type of scholarship.

Before I move on, it is important to underline how this review of modern yoga definitions is not merely instrumental in showing the internal articulation of the field of modern yoga research, but also useful in demonstrating how, from a single concept such as religion, spirituality, or, like in this case, modern yoga, there is often a plurality of definitions, alternative categorisations, and competing views, which taken together contribute to the constitution of a specific field or sub-field of studies. In fact, as I will argue in more details in the next section, a clear-cut definition of religion, spirituality, or secularisation, as much as they represent a struggle over competing definitions, theoretical frameworks, and methodologies of inquiry, is also instrumental to the birth and development of entire disciplines and fields of studies.

#### **4. Modern Yoga Research and the Sociology of Religion: The Birth and Development of a Sub-Discipline**

After a close scrutiny of modern yoga typologies and definitions, in this section I explore the birth and development of sub-disciplines within the sociology of religion starting from the case study of modern yoga research. As previously argued, I understand the sociology of religion as that fragment of the academic field organised around shared representations and agonistic conflicts over “what religion is” and “how to study it”. In this context, modern yoga research could be accounted for as a sub-discipline developed at the intersection of disciplines such as South Asian studies, religious studies, anthropology, and sociology, and organised around shared representations and agonistic conflicts over

“what modern yoga is” and “how to study it”. Following a Bourdieusian perspective, scholars’ roles (e.g., head of departments, editors, leading figures in the field and so on) are seen as mirroring the broader field of power and are determined by the possession, acquisition, and conversion of specific types and amounts of capital (e.g., cultural, economic, social), as well as their use in the agonistic conflict over the definition and study of religion or modern yoga. Paraphrasing Bourdieu, I recognise that although each field (e.g., religious, cultural, academic, literary, sporting and so on) is first and foremost an autonomous and independent field from the broader social field, there are also relationships, or “effects of homology” (Bourdieu 1983: 325), connecting specific fields to the broader field of power, in a manner that contributes to reproduce – at least partially – the same schemata of positions, dispositions, and relationships of domination and submission that characterise the general field of power in other autonomous fields. Therefore, social actors’ types and amounts of capitals in the fields of the sociology of religion and modern yoga research, where capital “is defined as a form of accumulated labour composed of both material and symbolic resources” (Di Placido 2018: 7), are themselves an indicator of social actors’ broader position of domination and/or submission, and its effects of homology. This is important because, naturally, the relationships of homology between the broader field of power and the fields of the sociology of religion and modern yoga research, as well as scholars’ types and amounts of capital, influence the repertoire of shared representations and agonistic conflicts over “what religion” or “modern yoga is” and “how to study it” and, as a consequence, determine the development, adjustment, and internal articulation of these very fields. Focusing on the case study of modern yoga research, these effects of homology are easily discernable. Many modern yoga scholars, in fact, work – or previously trained – in top ranking institutions, are capable of attracting substantial funding, guide research projects and research centers primarily focused on the study of yoga, and are either founders or editors of a variety of Journals. Naturally, all of them are based on Euro-American institutions and most of them are Caucasian.

Next to the effects of homology, to testify to modern yoga research’s progressive constitution as an independent field or sub-field of study we can inquire into its own institutionalised professional networks, publishing bodies and educational opportunities. Examples of professional networks are the online platform ‘*Modern Yoga Research*’ and the ‘*Yoga in Theory and Practice Unit*’ of the American Academy of Religion (AAR).

The former gathers a number of resources on the study of both premodern and modern forms of yoga and it:

...aims to help you find out more about established and current research into modern yoga and, more generally, about some of the most informative research on earlier forms of yoga. These are different but overlapping fields, and we believe that it is when they come together that a deeper understanding of modern yoga can happen.<sup>5</sup>

The latter, in turn:

seeks to elucidate the religious and sectarian representations of yoga in South Asian history and the profoundly fascinating contemporary yoga culture that has emerged in the past century...Our goal is to provide a venue in which the body of scholars working in this area can collectively evaluate this extremely timely material. We actively pursue scholars from Europe, Asia, and other areas that have worked at length on these issues, so as to bring an important international component to the Unit".<sup>6</sup>

Regarding modern yoga research's publication bodies, it is important to mention the newly launched '*Journal of Modern Yoga Studies*' (JoYS), described by the editors as:

a peer-reviewed, open access e-journal committed to publishing the highest quality academic research and critical discussions on all topics related to the study of all forms of yoga, from ancient to contemporary, across multiple humanities and social sciences disciplines.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, in relation to the educational structures that contribute to the transmission and social reproduction of modern yoga research, I refer to the four existing masters in Yoga Studies, offered respectively at the University Ca' Foscari of Venice, Italy; the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) of the University of London, UK; Layola Marymount University, Los Angeles; and finally, Naropa University, Boulder, Colorado, United States.

Since a body of accumulated specialist knowledge (e.g., 'Modern Yoga Research' and 'Yoga in Theory and Practice Unit'), control over specific channels of dissemination (e.g., 'JoYS', 'SOAS Center of Yoga Studies'), and some institutional manifestations in the form of subjects taught at universities, academic departments and so on (e.g., the four masters in Yoga Studies), are some among the central elements of what distinguish a discipline from a simpler research agenda (e.g., Becher and Trowler 2001; Hammarfelt 2018; Krishnan 2009), I contend that with the growing interest in, and

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.modernyogaresearch.org/> accessed September 01, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> <https://papers.aarweb.org/pu/yoga-theory-and-practice-unit> accessed September 09, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> <https://journalofyogastudies.org/index.php/JoYS> accessed September 09, 2020.

popularisation of, modern forms of yoga, modern yoga research's professional networks, publications bodies, and educational opportunities, are destined to grow. Moreover, and more specifically, I also argue that modern yoga research is not only an independent field of study, but an actual "discursive community" (e.g., Asad 1993; Guhin 2014; MacIntyre 1988) constructed around a shared interest for "modern yoga" and characterised by a plurality of perspectives over its study, definition, and dissemination. Most importantly, these processes of reification of specific objects of knowledge in the form of professional groups, dedicated journals, and specific institutional formalisation, characterise the academic field more at large, and could be traced to a number of important sub-fields of the sociology of religion.

In the remaining of this section, I briefly show how different definitions of religion represent different perspectives and epitomise specific positions in the sociology of religions. In so doing, I show, in the manner I have already done with modern yoga, how these constitute a Bourdieusan field. In other words, just as with modern yoga, I argue that the birth and development of specific sub-disciplines within the sociology of religion is connected with the formulation of specific concepts and definitions, which in turn mirror social actors' positionings in the field of the sociology of religion and in the broader field of power. Unfortunately, due to space constraints, my analysis is first and foremost concerned with the conceptual dimensions, that is, the formulation and definition of specific concepts, leaving an appreciation of broader power dynamics – although crucial for a fuller account – backstage.

One of the foundational concepts of the entire field of the sociology of religion is arguably the definition of *religion* itself. However, since its inception at the outset of the twentieth century, the field continues to operate with a variety of definitions, and there seems to be no general consensus over the meaning and definition of religion (e.g., McCutcheon 2015). Of course, one of the reasons for this is because, as previously argued, each definition represents and reproduces the interests, dispositions, and positions of specific social actors, with unavoidable clashes or alliances. For instance, according to the functionalist sociology of Emile Durkheim (Thompson 1982: 129):

A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.

Starting from an understanding of religion as a “social fact” (Durkheim 2013), the power of this definition is that it prepares the ground for asserting that religion, and as a consequences religious beliefs, religious gatherings, and so on, constitute the building blocks of sociality, social life, and societies. Here religion becomes the means through which societies are born in the first place.

On the contrary, according to Max Weber (1965: 1, emphasis in original), as he eloquently argues at the outset of his ‘*The Sociology of Religion*’ :

To define “religion,” to say what it *is*, is not possible at the start of a presentation such as this. Definition can be attempted, if at all, only at the conclusion of the study. The essence of religion is not even our concern, as we make it our task to study the conditions and effects of a particular type of social behavior.

With this formulation, Weber postulates that religion is not so much of our interests as sociologists for its features or social functions (e.g., the distinction between the sacred and the profane stressed by Durkheim or religion being the basic unit of social life), but for its potentials to determine, as his ‘*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*’ (2011) masterfully shows, specific types of conduct and social behaviors. Naturally, Durkheim’s and Weber’s respective definitions do not only stem from their particular sensitivities towards religion, but they represent two radically different views of the social world, with Durkheim postulating the superiority of structural constraints over individuals’ freedom and Weber individuals’ social action over societal influences (e.g., Stones 2005, 2007, 2017). Moreover, these definitions have been embraced - or rejected - by other scholars, which in turn have contributed to reify them to the point of creating actual sub-disciplinary streams surrounded by the

necessary professional networks for their social reproduction, publishing bodies for their dissemination, and educational opportunities for their transmission to new generations of scholars.

Durkheim's and Weber's definitions of religion are only two among some of the most influential conceptualisations of religion, next to, for instance, Clifford Geertz's (1966) analysis of '*Religion as a Cultural System*', Peter Berger's (1974) "second thoughts" on substantive versus functionalist definitions of religion or Thomas Luckmann's (1967) conceptualisation in his '*The Invisible Religion*' and a plethora of less critical and more sympathetic accounts (for a critique of the latter see McCutcheon 1997; Wiebe 2008, 2009; Wiebe and Palma 2018). Nonetheless, it is not necessary to discuss each and every definition of religion to pinpoint the processes of conceptual construction that directly connect a certain concept, with the discipline it contributes to create. It may be more important, instead, to signal how the discipline, constructed around the definition and study of religion, is continuously evolving, as it is witnessed by a plethora of new developments in the theorisation of religion. For example, it suffices to mention the birth and development of the "lived religion" (e.g., Ammerman 2007; Hall 1997; Knibbe and Kupari 2020; McGuire 2008; Orsi 2003, 2010), "material religion" (e.g., Meyer 2019; Meyer, Morgan, Paine and Plate 2010, 2011; Promey 2014; Plate 2014; Morgan 2007, 2010, 2012), and "digital religion" (e.g., Campbell 2010; Dawson and Cowan 2004; Helland 2016) approaches, each one characterised by its own understanding of what counts as religion, how to study it, and most importantly, influenced by scholars' positions in the broader field of the sociology of religion and the effects of homology within the broader field of power. Here, lived religion is characterised by a focus on "how religion and spirituality are practiced, experienced, and expressed by ordinary people (rather than official spokespersons) in the context of their everyday lives" (McGuire 2008: 12), putting the accent on common sense, experiential understanding of religious and spiritual life for "ordinary people". Material religion, in turn, seeks to uncover the interactions between religion and material culture, such as objects, adornments, images, architectures and so on, emphasising how religion is not disjointed from the network of material relationships, practices, objects and events that characterise cultural life more at large. Finally, digital religion, as Helland (2016: 177) argues "is not just about having "religion" on digital media, rather it is a blending of all of the societal and cultural

components we associate with religion with all of the elements we associate with a digital society”.

Each one of these relatively recent and still ongoing developments within the broader field of the sociology of religion, can be traced as originating from specific definitions of religion (or of its variants such as lived, material, and digital) that represent specific positions in the broader field of power, giving rise to actual sub-disciplinary streams with their own institutionalised professional networks, publishing bodies, and educational trajectories. A good example of this is the case of *Material Religion. The Journal of Objects, Art and Beliefs*, “which seeks to explore how religion happens in material culture - images, devotional and liturgical objects, architecture and sacred space, works of arts and mass-produced artifacts”. Or again, Robert Orsi’s (2003: 169) special presidential plenary address to the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, where he argued for the importance of a lived religion approach in serving our understanding of religion and “responding to urgent global, political situations of great consequence”. A final example is the growing number of courses and conferences on topics of digital religion,<sup>8</sup> but similar arguments could be fruitfully raised in relation to the concepts of spirituality, secularisation, or rational choice theories to the study of religion and their internal articulation and reciprocal stances, just to mention three other examples. For the time being, I would like to devote the remaining of this Excursus to an exploration of modern yoga research as constituted through a specific kind of “boundary-work” (Gieryn 1983, 1999) that distinguishes it from other disciplines and streams of research, and of modern yoga as a “boundary object” (Star and Griesemer 1989), arguing that similar processes are at work also in the processes of construction and definition of other fields of study such as the sociology of religion and its sub-fields.

#### ***4.1. Modern Yoga Research as “Boundary-Work”***

In the context of science studies, and its attempts to frame scientific knowledge within broader social, historical, and philosophical co-ordinates and power-knowledge devices (e.g., Lyotard 1979; Latour and Woolgar 1986), the concept of boundary-work refers to the processes of demarcation between different fields of knowledge or disciplinary areas. More specifically, boundary-work delineates how these processes of demarcation

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.uio.no/studier/emner/teologi/tf/RESA3500/index.html> and <http://www.eurac.edu/en/research/center-for-advanced-studies/Conferences/pages/digitalreligion.aspx> accessed September 08, 2020.



happens in the first place, how they are questioned, problematised, legitimised and/or re-negotiated. Akin to Bourdieu's (e.g., 1971a, 1983, 1996) notion of field, the concept of boundary work presupposes that these processes of demarcation are organised around a specific "stake", that is, the competition for specific resources, and the shared representation of a specific object of analysis, being it science in its entirety, high culture, or, as in the case of the analyses of this paper, the sociological study of religion and of modern yoga. Moreover, similarly to Bourdieu's relational notion of field, the concept of boundary-work emphasises the ever-changing and socially constructed nature of specific boundaries.

The concept of boundary-work was first introduced by the sociologist Thomas Gieryn in his essay '*Boundary-Work and the Demarcation from Science to Non-Science*' (1983) and subsequently elaborated in his book '*Cultural Boundaries of Science*' (1999). The specificity of Gieryn's contribution is to underline the demarcation of science from other intellectual activities, an object of analysis in itself for philosophers and sociologists but a practical problem for natural scientists. This signifies that, according to Gieryn (1983: 781):

Construction of a boundary between science and varieties of non-science is useful for scientists' pursuit of professional goals: acquisition of intellectual authority and career opportunities; denial of these resources to "pseudoscientists"; and protection of the autonomy of scientific research from political interference.

Following this perspective, "science" is not a single thing" (Gyerin 1983: 781), but its boundaries are continuously re-drawn and challenged, sometimes blurred, and always historically contingent. What remains relatively stable in Gieryn's understanding of science framed through the concept of boundary-work, is that it is the outcome of specific processes of demarcation "that justifies scientists' claims to authority or resources" (Gieryn 1983: 781). As he poignantly argues, "[b]oundary-work describes an ideological style found in scientists' attempts to create a public image for science by contrasting it favorably to non-scientific intellectual or technical activities" (Gieryn 1983: 781).

In this Excursus, like in Mario Small's (1999) eloquently defined analysis of the departmental conditions and emergence of African-American Studies as a new, legitimate discipline, I mobilise Gieryn's analysis to focus on the processes of demarcation of a discipline with other partially overlapping fields of study (e.g., Lamont and Molnár 2002; Small 1999; Trompette and Vinck 2009). Embracing a similar understanding, Small (1999: 694) argues that:

The notion of “boundary-work” serves as a general rubric to conceive one of the most significant ways the practitioners define an emerging intellectual enterprise. Boundary-work implies the differentiation of one set of practitioners, theoretical perspective, or body of work, from another; it may also imply the elimination of existing demarcations, if this helps a set of practitioners appear legitimate.

Accordingly, I contend that modern yoga research has constituted itself as an autonomous field of study through a specific type of boundary-work, where its practitioners successfully manage to distance themselves from other neighboring disciplines, formulating modern yoga as that specific object of study whose theorisations and analyses are primarily a legitimate concern of the field of modern yoga research. Said this, as further emphasised by Small (1999: 668), “boundary-work should not be seen in this case as the only strategy for obtaining resources. It is, however, an important one, for it establishes the relationship between the new enterprise and existing disciplines or fields”. This signifies that, although other factors such as yoga’s exponential popularisation, diffusion, and commodification may have also played a role in justifying its academic scrutiny, the legitimacy of modern yoga research as an autonomous field of study framed as that fragment of the academic field primarily concerned with the study of modern yoga – and with partial alliances and overlaps with other disciplines – is largely due to the type of boundary-work performed by its practitioners. Thus, at this point of the analysis, it is necessary to specify the type of boundary-work that characterises modern yoga research in relation to the disciplines from which it attempts to distinguish.

As previously hinted at, modern yoga research emerges at the intersection of different disciplines such as South Asian studies, anthropology, religious studies, and sociology, with whom it largely shares methodologies, theoretical references, and partly also their objects of analysis. Therefore, to assert its legitimacy to function as an independent field of study, modern yoga scholars have carved modern yoga research as that specific fragment of the academic field that is entirely dedicated to the study of modern forms of yoga. In practical terms, modern yoga research relates with other neighboring and/or partially overlapping fields of study, and their privileged objects of analysis, through three main strategies of boundary-work, namely “exclusion”, “expansion”, and “protection” (Gieryn 1983). The first strategy, that is exclusion, implies the demarcation of modern yoga research excluding all those disciplines, methodologies, theoretical frameworks, and approaches that do not conform to the “doxa” (Bourdieu 1977a) of this field. According to Bourdieu, doxa is the practical-discursive universe taken for granted in a specific social

group, and in the case of modern yoga research it refers to a specific understanding of modern yoga, as a transcultural phenomenon, and the correct manners to study it, that is, through socio-historical or historical analyses concerned with the demystification of an essentialised reading of modern yoga, and the dissection of his socially and discursively constructed character. However, this doxa is currently challenged by a number of recent contributions that turn away from a strictly socio-historical perspective and instead explores modern forms of yoga in relation to issues of cultural appropriation and ethnicity (Lucia 2020), politics (Jain 2020), the democratisation of contemporary post-lineage practices (Wildcroft 2020), and the inclusion of analyses beyond the dominant focus on Euro-American or Indian geographies and that takes into account also medical – or natural scientific – study of yoga and meditation (Newcombe and O’Brien-Kop 2021).

The second strategy, in turn, represents modern yoga research’s attempt to expand the influence of this newly formed discipline and assert its legitimacy also within other disciplinary areas, such as those from which it emerged from. Here, modern yoga research is taught and transmitted in specific departments or research centers, disseminated through specific journals, articles, and edited collections whose purposes are the socialisation of new generations of experts and the broadening of the modern yoga research’s readership, and it is also increasingly made available – via blogs, lectures, and other formats, to a growing population of “lay” practitioners nonetheless interested in the history and development of that which they practice with passion and devotion.

The third strategy of boundary work employed by modern yoga scholars is, finally, protection, that is, the formulation of an object of study whose exclusive concern would be ascribed to the field of modern yoga research, and the delegitimisation of scholarly endeavors that would attempt to study it outside of these newly erected disciplinary constrains. Naturally, protection does not manifest as overt prohibition to outsiders to study modern yoga but it chiefly expresses itself in the self-referentiality of the field, in truth something natural – and to a certain degree also necessary – for a newly established field of study.

Summarising, it could be argued that these three strategies of boundary-work allow to legitimise an emerging field as an independent field of study and/or to establish relationships with existing disciplines and fields. In the case of modern yoga research, we witness to both the tendency of the internal logic of this field to co-opt the methods, theories, and interests of other parallel and overlapping fields, such as South Asian studies

and so on, that is, the majority of the literature on modern yoga so far; and a movement from the center of modern yoga research towards the periphery of this field, intersecting with research interests, approaches, and objects of study which are not under the strict “monopoly” of modern yoga research. The inclusion of the natural scientific, that is, medical, scrutiny of meditation and yoga in the newly launched Handbook, an attention to issues of race, ethnicity, and cultural appropriation (Lucia 2020), or Jain’s (2020) polemical tones against what she calls “neoliberal spirituality”, are all examples of the latter.

Naturally, boundary-work and its three strategies of boundaries exclusion, expansion, and protection, apply also to the sociology of religion and its internal articulation into a myriad of sub-disciplines, each one with its own privileged object of analysis, methodological and theoretical orientations, and partial overlaps with other streams of research. For instance, as much as modern yoga research needs a precise formulation of its object of analysis, the sociology of religion also needed Durkheim’s and Weber’s definitions and interest on religion as a legitimate object of study in order to begin to structure itself as an autonomous sub-discipline of sociology. Moreover, definitions are never univocal and universally accepted, but problematised, challenged, and in constant dialogue with other conceptualisations. This, in turn, contributes to a proliferation of definitions and approaches, as well as to the reification of specific objects of analysis as legitimate and worthy of the attention of specific discursive communities. In the next section I will bring these analyses to a close through a conceptualisation of modern yoga as a “boundary object” (Star and Griesemer 1989).

#### ***4.2. Modern Yoga as a “Boundary Object”***

The concept of boundary objects, similarly to the one of boundary-work, is closely related to the field of science studies, where it is conceptualised to theorise about “scientific objects” such as specific information, research tools, field notes, maps and so on, “which both inhabit several intersecting social worlds ... [for instance scholars’, amateurs’, and lay men’s social worlds] and satisfy the informational requirements of each of them” (Star and Griesemer 1989: 394). More specifically, Susan Leigh Star and James Griesemer (1989: 394) defines boundary objects as:

objects which are both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and the constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites. They are weakly structured

in common use, and become strongly structured in individual-site use. These objects may be abstract or concrete. They have different meanings in different social worlds but their structure is common enough to more than one world to make them recognizable, a means of translation. The creation and management of boundary objects is a key process in developing and maintaining coherence across intersecting social worlds.

Star and Griesemer (1989) introduced this concept in the context of their study on the interactions between professional and amateur zoologists and the processes and methods of standardisation that influenced the development of the Berkeley Museum of Vertebrate Zoology between 1907-39. This concept has then been further developed by Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Star (1999) in their book *'Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences'* where they defined it in a manner that closely echoed the previous definition (Bowker and Star 1999: 15-6). In this Excursus, I intend to take some distance from the malleable nature of boundary objects as bridges stretching across different domains of knowledge, and instead focus on concepts as boundary objects. This idea is closely related to what Ilana Löwy (1992) calls “boundary concepts”, that is, “a loose concept, which has a strong cohesive power” (Allen 2009: 355). Accordingly, I frame the concept of modern yoga with its ideal typical schematisation – alongside the alternative definitions provided in section 3.2. – as a boundary object whose primary purpose is to distinguish itself from a number of parallel and partially overlapping concepts. As a consequence, the concept of modern yoga as a boundary object continues to be intrinsically ambivalent but, as argued by Michèle Lamont and Virág Molnár (2002: 181) in relation to their discussion of the concept of boundary objects, it also remains “particularly important because it underlines that boundaries are conditions not only for separation and exclusion, but also for communication, exchange, bridging, and inclusion”. More specifically, I contend that the most beneficial insights we can draw from framing the concept of modern yoga as a boundary object, are those deriving from an exploration of its partial overlaps and its differences with other foundational concepts of the field of the sociology of religion, such as New Age religion, neo-Hinduism, and NRMs, to mention three paradigmatic examples.

For instance, New Age religion is defined by Paul Heelas (1996: 1-2, emphasis in original) as “an eclectic hotch-potch of beliefs, practices, and ways of life” unified into a single sociocultural phenomenon by their reliance on “the same (or very similar) *lingua franca* to do with the human (and planetary) condition and how it can be transformed”. In disagreement with this perspective, Wouter Hanegraaff (1996: 1) states that the “New

Age” is “a label attached indiscriminately to whatever seems to fit it” and it “means very different things to different people”. How should we then understand De Michelis’s (2004: 189) remarks that modern psychosomatic and postural types of yoga “are generally shaped by the religio-philosophical assumptions characteristic of New Age religion”? One possible way, and that is the way followed by De Michelis (2004: 181-185) herself, is to underline how the New Age movement was instrumental in the processes of discursive and social construction of modern forms of yoga and their translation in the West. Another way is to claim that what we begun to call modern yoga with the birth of modern yoga research, is similarly to Heelas’ and Hanegraaff’s definitions of New Age, a set of partially intertwined, overlapping and/or divergent practices, discourses, and re-inventions of traditions, that were previously accounted for by sociologists of religion with labels such as New Age, neo-Hinduism and NRMs, and are now instead seen as independent phenomena. Here, modern yoga is a boundary object that simultaneously distances itself from the category of New Age religion while also substantially reproducing its core features. This analysis seems to find some support in Foxen’s (2020) recent genealogy of modern yoga as a Western phenomenon rooted in Greek, Hellenist, and Harmonial thought as in her thought-provoking analysis modern yoga is first and foremost an expression of Western esoterism and metaphysical religions rather than Eastern systems of knowledge.

Neo-Hinduism, in turn, is theorised by scholars such as Paul Hacker (1995) and Wilhelm Halbfass (1988), among others, to address the manners in which Hindu thinkers and reformers and a variety of institutional movements – such as the Brahma Samāj extensively studied by De Michelis (2004) – confronted the Orientalist influences of Christianity and Western thought during the British colonisation of India up to its independence (1947), and mobilised them to recreate Hindu dharma as an universal, ecumenic and ethical ‘religion’ (sādhāraṇa dharma). More specifically, as discussed by Halbfass (1988: 219), neo-Hinduism, contrary to its modern traditionalist variants, was particularly receptive to Western influences but “...also invokes the tradition, tries to return to it, and hopes to find in it the power and context for its response to the West”. In this direction of thought, building on Hacker, Halbfass (1988: 219-20) continues:

this return [to tradition] is the result of a rupture and discontinuity. More important than the fact that foreign elements have been added to the tradition is that basic concepts and principles of this tradition have been reinterpreted and provided with new meanings as a result of the encounter with the West.

As previously underlined, neo-Hinduism is considered one of the foundational elements of modern forms of yoga, whether in its psychosomatic, postural, meditational, and denominational variants - as in De Michelis' (2004) first typology - or more precisely in its neo-Hindu variants, as De Michelis' (2007) further discusses in her second typology, or again accounting for the variety of neo-Hindu communities studied by modern yoga scholars (e.g., Altglas 2014a; Lucia 2014a; Williamson 2010). It is clear, then, that there are certain overlaps in terms of geographies of references, practical-discursive universes, events, people, and institutions involved in neo-Hinduism and modern forms of yoga, and as a consequence, I contend that to frame modern yoga as a boundary object helps us to clarify that while in the literature we find modern yoga and neo-Hinduism as two independent concepts with their own specific sociocultural phenomena of reference, a complete decoupling of neo-Hinduism from the conceptual schemata of modern yoga seems implausible. The label modern yoga seems, in fact, to partially address those sociocultural phenomena and practices that previously would have been addressed with the category of neo-Hinduism. In other words, modern yoga as a boundary object creates both semantic differences and shortens the distance with other central concepts of the sociology of religion.

A similar argument could be made in relation to the concept of NRMs (e.g., Barker 1989; Clarke 2006; and Dawson 1998, 2006), defined as “new” or “alternative” religious/spiritual groups (Oliver 2012), where new and alternative can either signify religions and/or groups new to the West (and thus alternative to Western countries' mainstream religious heritage), or new in the sense of newly formed. Importantly, because many NRMs, whether “new to the West” or “newly founded”, are intrinsically related with modern forms of yoga, especially with its meditational, denominational, and neo-Hindu sub types, this is another account of the fuzziness of scholarly categories and of the character of modern yoga as a boundary object. As Davina

Allen (2009: 355) discusses, it is their fuzzy character that grants boundaries concept the ability to “facilitate communication and cooperation between members of distinct groups without obliging members to give up the advantages of their respective social identities”. This signifies that the expression modern yoga could be safely used by historians, anthropologists, sociologists, religious studies scholars and so on, without them having to renounce to the identity markers – in terms of methodologies, theoretical references, and even objects of study – of their respective disciplines. Said this, as testified by the fact that modern yoga scholars may study specific sociocultural processes calling them, for instance, modern postural yoga or modern denominational yoga, while other sociologists may study the very same phenomena but addressing them in terms of New Age, neo-Hinduism or NRMs, I contend that boundaries object/concepts, do not only help to “facilitate communication and cooperation between members of distinct groups”, but they also challenge it.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In this Excursus, I have engaged with a close textual reading and informed critique of a number of modern yoga typologies and definitions as an example of the processes of objectification of specific concepts and the consequent birth and development of (sub)fields of studies in the sociology of religion. To do so, I have relied on an archeological method cross-pollinated with some of the central instances of a certain interpretative sociological tradition, largely inspired by Weber’s methodological reflections on ideal types. Moreover, focusing on modern yoga research and the sociology of religion, I have also mobilised Bourdieu’s concept of field to inquire into the lines of continuity connecting the formulation of specific concepts with the birth and development of specific fields of study. More specifically, I have discussed how modern yoga researcher constitutes itself as an autonomous field of analysis devoted to the study of modern yoga through a specific kind of boundary-work. This is how modern yoga scholars succeed in creating an autonomous field of study with its own professional networks, publication bodies, and educational structures. I have also proposed a theorisation of modern yoga as a boundary object that simultaneously distinguishes itself from other foundational concepts of the sociology of religion while also partially



overlapping with them. In so doing, my focus has oscillated between the case study of modern yoga research, and examples drawn from the sociology of religion.

In this conclusion, I develop my analysis further, exploring in more details some of the points raised above. More specifically, I delve deeper into what I perceive to be one of the main conceptual shortcomings of modern yoga research: the substantially blurred boundaries between the category of modern yoga and other – partially overlapping – established categories of analysis of the field of the sociology of religion and religious studies, such as the previously mentioned New Age, neo-Hinduism and NRMs, among others. I argue that the actual object of study of modern yoga research is not exclusively ascribable to yoga as currently conceptualised by modern yoga research itself because, largely before the birth and establishment of modern yoga research as a distinct field of research, as well as the worldwide popularisation of yoga in the last few decades, yoga was already, perhaps in a less systematic manner and with methodological and theoretical tools borrowed from a variety of disciplines, studied under the umbrella terms and streams of research interested in Esotericism, Hinduism, neo-Hindu movements, neo-gurus movements, New Age religion, NRMs, contemporary spirituality and so on.

According to the perspective advanced in this paper, what is really at stake in modern yoga research is the historical reconstruction and reification of the phenomenon of modern yoga. Consequently, the disparate streams of research that previously addressed the study of yoga within their broader concerns for New Age religion, neo-Hinduism, NRMs and so on, now seem to be channeled into a field of study that conflates their efforts into the study of a single phenomenon, modern yoga, whose ideal typical schematisation and alternative definitions attempt to maintain its internal articulation and complexity. In other words, with the birth of modern yoga research, some of the phenomena and practices previously studied by religious studies scholars, as well as anthropologists, and sociologists, have been reconstructed. Indeed, modern yoga scholars' genealogical efforts have allowed for a new definition of modern yoga that is now rooted in the transnational and transcultural encounters between Westerners and Asian actors and the birth of modern yoga at the end of the nineteenth century. This has allowed both the birth of modern yoga as a sociocultural phenomenon worth exploring in its own right and the creation of the field of modern yoga research. In turn, this opened the way for the formulation of a series of historical and sociocultural questions regarding the role of modern yoga in contemporary societies that scholars have already begun to

competently answer. In conclusion, modern yoga scholars succeeded in unpacking the manners in which yoga has been described and constituted through complex historical processes of social and discursive construction, for example at the intersection of the physical cultural movement, Western science and medicine, esotericism and so on. Yet, these efforts imply a risk of reification, that is, in establishing a finite and precise area of studies for itself, modern yoga research may function as a further step in the process of reification of what it names as modern yoga. In this way, modern yoga research contributes towards providing this sociocultural phenomenon with a social reality that would have been previously dealt with under alternative labels (e.g., Hinduism, New Age, neo-Hinduism, NRMs). Such a methodological move, beneficially or not, can be seen as bringing to a conclusion those processes of objectification individuated as having started 150 years ago at the intersection of Eastern and Western traditions and discourses, making of modern yoga the category par excellence in the study of the landscape of contemporary spirituality.

Assuming the validity of this argument, we are then faced with two possible interpretations. On the one hand, modern yoga scholarship can be considered to have clarified the role of what it names modern yoga within the broader cultural processes and practices associated with for example New Age religion, neo-Hinduism and NRMs. Else said, modern yoga research may have finally clarified the extensive and previously overlooked role of yoga within a plethora of religious and spiritual practices/movements that developed in the last hundred years, especially starting from Anglophone countries such as the United States and the UK, although not exclusively. On the other hand, it can be seen as conflating the differences and incommensurability between these and other sociocultural phenomena and categories of analysis, channeling a series of part overlapping and part divergent practices and phenomena into a single, all-encompassing phenomenon and/or category, namely modern yoga.

It then appears legitimate to question if modern yoga is a distinct phenomenon at all, or instead a simple ramification, of let us say New Age, neo-Hinduism or NRMs. Moreover, it is not entirely clear to me how phenomena as disparate as Hinduism or neo-Hinduism and postural yoga, as it is presently practiced worldwide, can be fruitfully theorised under the same disciplinary and conceptual label, that is, modern yoga. To what extent, for example, do postural yoga and its study come closer to the study of sporting activities or other forms of movement such as dance and martial arts rather than

Hinduism? Or again, to what extent are denominational (read religious) forms of yoga, considering their concrete disinterest in yoga *per se*, more easily reconducted to analytical categories such as New Age religion, NRMs, and neo-Hinduism, rather than modern yoga?

Answers to this type of questions can only come from a careful case by case scrutiny of the case studies and communities explored by scholars. However, as the previous works of many well-known scholars seem to demonstrate, it is very hard to decouple modern forms of yoga from the discourses and practices of for example Western esotericism and New Age (Albanese 2007; Alter 2004; De Michelis 2004; Foxen 2017b, 2020; Singleton 2010; 2013), neo-guru and NRMs (Lucia 2014a, 2014b, 2018a, 2018b; Lucas 2011, 2014), and “Eastern movement forms” (Brown and Leledaki 2010) and “mindful fitness” (Markula 2004, 2014). In this regard, claiming that what is today considered as modern yoga, is first and foremost an academic category rather than being a homogenous, well defined, and self-standing sociocultural phenomena, seems an idea worth pursuing further. According to this perspective, the category of modern yoga is thought to gather under its conceptual power a variety of different sociocultural phenomena with quite different histories and practices.

Finally, it is perhaps important to conclude underlining how conceptual clarity, sound theorising, and constant dialogue with existing categories – both scholarly and lay categories – although challenging, must be an integral part of any serious attempt to study religion and spirituality. As it stands now, modern yoga research seems to “take for granted” its own object of analysis. It does so problematising – and rightly so – people’s essentialist views about yoga but failing to problematise the kind of discursive apparatus that it contributes to construct as a discipline, or better as a sub-discipline. In fact, as much as we should not – or actually cannot – avoid using categories we should also never take them from granted. In other words, as sociologists of religion we should prevent giving our scholarly categories a life, an autonomy, and an explanatory power that they hardly have in reference to the landscape of religious and spiritual phenomena that we study. A partial solution to the complex conceptual confusion delineated in these pages may come from: (a) the ability of modern yoga scholars to interrogate themselves on the utility, reach, and perhaps even the limitations of their newly created disciplinary area; (b) and the skillful integration of the relevant findings of modern yoga research into the broader disciplinary landscape of the sociology of religion and religious studies. As a

consequence, both modern yoga scholars and their colleagues may unpack, refine, and reassemble their respective categories of analysis in the attempt to add some conceptual clarity to a field in constant expansion.

## **Modern Yoga Research as a Discursive Formation**

## 1. Introduction

The aim of this second part of the Excursus is to analyse the field of *modern yoga research* as a “discursive formation” (Foucault 1972), that is, an ensemble of texts constituting – or contributing to the constitution of – a specific object of analysis, namely modern yoga. In order to do so, I focus on an analysis of the discourses of modern yoga’s foundational texts, such as De Michelis’ (2004) ‘*History of Modern Yoga*’, Alter’s (2004) ‘*Yoga in Modern India*’, and Singleton’s (2010) ‘*The Yoga Body*’, among others, considering also the some of latest publications in the field (e.g., Foxen 2020; Jain 2020; Lucia 2020; Newcombe and O’Brien-Kop 2021; Wildcroft 2020). It is needless to say that a comprehensive analysis of all the material that constitutes the field of modern yoga research would be an impossible task, even more so within the constraints of this Excursus. I believe the task is worth the effort despite its inevitable limitations, especially considering its relevance in shedding light on a number of important aspects of the discipline of the sociology of religion and neighboring disciplines such as religious studies, South Asian studies and anthropology.

This second part of the Excursus was thus conceived with the aim of raising awareness on the identity, discursive references, and the methodological and theoretical commitments of the nascent body of work known as modern yoga research, whose typologies, definitions, and boundaries work have been discussed in the previous pages. Here, in turn, I attempt to dialogue with all those interested in embarking in the academic study of yoga from a social sciences and humanities perspective; those who are already actively shaping the directions of modern yoga research; those who are interested in the politics of scholarly production, with a special focus on the politics of the field of the sociology of religion and religious studies; and finally, all those working at the intersection between the study of religion and other academic studies of culture.

Finally, a cautionary note: this Excursus does not treat the texts explored as self-enclosed academic contributions, nor wishes to single out any author in particular. On the contrary, it seeks to treat a series of texts as belonging to the same discursive formation. As a consequence, the analyses here discussed are considered to pertain to modern yoga research as a coherent, unified field of study rather than being addressed to any specific text or author. Naturally, to delimit a field in constant expansion is not an easy task. Therefore, I hope the reader will forgive me if I do not account for the rich and exciting

material springing from several student dissertations on modern forms of yoga all around the world, that is, the contributions of emerging and talented scholars.

The chapter is structured as follows: first, it offers a short overview of the main methodological and conceptual tools it employs, again largely inspired by Foucault's archeology; second, it provides a brief discussion of the foundational texts of the field of modern yoga research, mentioning also how some of the most recent contributions; third, it approaches the field of modern yoga research as a discursive formation, unveiling its discursive references and methodological affinity with a number of discursive currents such as radical historicism, cultural relativism, modernism, Orientalism and neo-colonialism; finally, it concludes summarising the main results of this contribution and exploring their relevance to the overlapping fields of cultural analyses and the study of religion.

## **2. An Archaeology of Modern Yoga Research**

As already discussed in the previous pages, Foucault's (e.g., 1965, 1972, 1973, 2002) archaeological method seeks to uncover the epistemic, methodological, and theoretical roots of specific "sciences" or domains of knowledge, thus problematising their claims to universality and objectivity. Crucial to this method it is Foucault's (1972: 49) understanding of discourse, defined as a historically contingent social system that produces knowledge and meaning through "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak". In this light, discourse transcends an understanding of mere textual and/or spoken words. It is inherently related to a variety of social practices – academic production and scholarly theorising included – and to the consequent constitution of their object of analysis as a "real entity". Finally, being historically contingent, discourses are always structurally related to the broader structures of knowledge – in Foucault's terminology *episteme* – that characterise the historical period they arise in.

As previously recalled, an archaeological study of modern yoga research implies two different and interrelated tasks: first, it requires to inquiry into *the conditions of possibility* for the emergence of modern yoga research as an independent field of research in its own right, the specific task of this second half of the Excursus; second, it implies an investigation into the manners in which these conditions of possibility translate into, paraphrasing Foucault (2002: 388), the constitution of *the form of positivity proper of modern yoga research*, that is, the concepts it is organised around, the type of rationality

they refer to and by means of which they seek to constitute themselves as knowledge, a task partially carried out in the previous half of the Excursus.

More specifically, the conditions of possibility of modern yoga research are in turn articulated in: (a) the academic literature that prepared the ground for “modern yoga research “proper”” (Baier 2011) to flourish, such as the works of Fuchs (1995), De Michelis (1995, 2002), Sjoman (1999), Alter (1997) and Ceccomori (2001), and, of course the Orientalist works of Max Müller (1899) and Sir John Woodroffe (1927, 1931) before them, not to mention Mircea Eliade (1948, 1962, 1969); (b) and the discourses that characterise the fields of study modern yoga research originates from, namely religious studies, anthropology and South Asian studies *in primis*. Unfortunately, due to space concerns, I will not be able to carry out an in-depth, exhaustive analysis of the conditions of possibility of modern yoga research. Instead, I will devote the remaining of this chapter to the discussion of the crucial – yet at times unrecognised – discursive backbones that constitute modern yoga’s disciplinary roots in religious studies, anthropology, South Asian studies, and sociology, with a special attention to the facets of radical historicism, cultural relativism, modernity, Orientalism, and neo-colonialism.

Through an archaeological methodology, I intent to point out two interrelated aspects of the politics of academic knowledge production. First, I contend – in line with the analysis provided in the previous half of the Excursus – that “modern yoga”, as an *analytical category*, and modern yoga research as a self-standing, *independent field of studies*, have a very specific history, with specific discursive and ideological references. Second, I suggest that modern yoga is thus not merely a socio-cultural phenomenon that we – as scholars – may take for granted in our analyses. Conversely, it is the result of a more or less lengthy process of *discursive constitution* and *objectification*, which culminates in the creation of “modern yoga” as the privileged object of analysis of the field of modern yoga research itself.

### **3. The ‘Classics’ of Modern Yoga Research and its Exciting Developments**

The scholarly study of yoga is not a new phenomenon. For instance, the work of early Orientalists such as Max Müller (1899), Sir John Woodroffe (also known as Sir Arthur Avalon) (1927, 1931), and Mircea Eliade (1948, 1962, 1969), testifies to religious studies’ long-standing interest in yoga, although in the case of the first two it would be better to say in Sanskrit and Hinduism. Overall, this literature was characterised by an

admiration for pre-modern texts and forms of yoga and played a crucial role in legitimising Asian traditions as acceptable objects of academic inquiry. Moreover, it also proved instrumental in the construction of Hinduism and yoga as, respectively, a legitimate religion and an ancient, spiritual, and philosophical system, which Indian identity and anti-colonial movements could fruitfully mobilise within the framework of their own struggles.

A more historically sensitive – thus critical – study of yoga has begun to develop in the 1990s. This later development brought some influential contributions to the study of yoga as well as a progressive shift from pre-modern to modern forms of yoga. Among these contributions it is worth mentioning: Fuchs' (1995) study of modern yoga's evolution in Germany; De Michelis' (1995, 2002) preliminary attempts to systematically survey the history of modern yoga and discuss the differences among a few postural yoga styles; Sjoman's (1999) early reconstruction of modern postural yoga's history; Alter's (1997) exploration of an influential school of neo-Hindu yoga and critique of yoga's representation as a monolithic tradition; and Ceccomori's (2001) work on the developments of modern yoga in France.

However, it was only relatively recently, with De Michelis' (2004) *A History of Modern Yoga* and Alter's (2004) *Yoga in Modern India*, that the studies mentioned above began to be re-read alongside the disciplinary lines of the emerging field of *modern yoga research*. Building from these foundational contributions, a number of other texts such as Strauss' (2005) *Positioning Yoga*, Singleton's and Byrne's (2008) *Yoga in the Modern World*, Singleton's (2010) *The Yoga Body*, White's (2011) *Yoga in Practice*, Hauser's (2013a) *Yoga Travelling*, Jain's (2014a) *Selling Yoga*, Mallinson's and Singleton's (2017) *Roots of Yoga*, Baier's, Mass' and Preisendanz's (2018) *Yoga in Transformation*, Newcombe's (2019) *Yoga in Modern Britain*, and Birch's (e.g. 2019, 2020) contributions to the textual roots of Haṭhayoga, to mention just a few, have further inquired into the history of (modern) yoga and its transnational and transcultural developments. Importantly, the study of modern yoga as a discursive formation becomes a possible enterprise only with a close look to the discursive references of these texts as a premise. Moreover, 2020 was a particularly prolific year for modern yoga research, with the publication of four groundbreaking monographs: Lucia's (2020) study of transformative festivals, where, finally, modern yoga is brought in dialogue with issues of cultural appropriation and ethnicity; Jain's (2020) polemical account of the landscape



of “neoliberal spirituality” and its “neoliberal spiritual subjects” (Jain 2020: 38), of which modern yoga practitioners are a typical example; Wildcroft’s (2020) account of “post-lineage yoga”, that is, a more democratic and horizontally inclined movement within the larger yoga field; and finally, Foxen’s (2020) alternative history of modern yoga as first and foremost deriving from Western Esotericism and its roots in Greek and Hellenic sources. Naturally, also Newcombe’s and O’Brien-Kop’s (2021) forthcoming ‘*Routledge Handbook on Yoga and Meditation Studies*’ merits a mention, as this contribution opens up the field of modern yoga research to a variety of new geographies, case studies, and theoretical perspectives, including a focus on a number of Asian countries and the medical study of yoga and meditation.

Summarising the core literature of modern yoga research, it is possible to notice how this sub-discipline of religious studies and the sociology of religion is characterised by its attempt to deconstruct naïve and ideological readings of yoga, unmasking its historical evolution and transnational development across traditions, practices and institutional contexts. However, I contend that what is missing within contemporary modern yoga scholarship is the application of its very critical methodological orientations to itself, that is, the extension of a genealogical method to the genealogies that modern yoga scholars themselves trace. As a consequence, modern yoga scholars have so far largely left unquestioned the ideological matrix and the history, not of modern yoga as a socio-cultural phenomenon *per-se* – which in fact is all they do, and well – but of modern yoga research as a discursive formation, as a unified field of reflections. What I propose in the following is, in a sense, a genealogy of genealogies, a study of the manners in which modern yoga research originated, developed, and defined itself as the main legitimate actor in dispensing the “historical truths” of modern yoga.

#### **4. Modern Yoga Research as a Discursive Formation**

In this section, I propose a reading of modern yoga research as a discursive formation. The concept of discursive formation is one of the key analytical tools that Foucault (1972) forged for his archaeological explorations. In its most straightforward definition, it denotes an ensemble of texts that constitute, or contribute to the constitution, of a specific object of analysis, whether it be madness, sexuality or, in the case of this Excursus, *modern yoga*.

More specifically, in this second half of the Excursus I discuss some of the central discourses that contribute to the emergence, formation, and reification of modern yoga research as a definite, autonomous field of study. In Foucaultian terms, I am here concerned with the conditions of possibility of modern yoga research, namely the discourses that characterise the fields of study modern yoga research originates from, and that as a consequence largely characterise modern yoga research itself. I will discuss *radical historicism*, *cultural relativism*, *modernism*, *Orientalism*, and *neo-colonialism* as some of the driving discursive currents that animate – overtly or in a concealed manner – the theorisation and analysis of modern yoga put forward by the field of modern yoga research.

#### **4.1. *Radical Historicism and Cultural Relativism***

As Baier (2011: 8) has rightly underlined, “[t]he term ‘Modern Yoga’ is in itself a historical category”. He then continues saying it is “a category that defines a historical break”. The term modern yoga is based on the consideration of other, pre-modern forms of yoga, and on “...the thesis that there are significant differences between the yoga of pre-modern India and present-day forms of anglophone transnational yoga” (ibidem). In this section, rather than evaluating this perspective’s claim to the “truth”, I would like to simply point out the *radical historicism* this position springs from. Radical historicism is defined by Bevir (2008) as the rejection of transcendental truths and principles of unity or progress in history. What interests us is that it is closely related to another “principle” of social and human studies which characterises disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and religious studies since at least five decades: cultural relativism. *Cultural relativism* is that epistemological sensitivity to social processes, phenomena, and practices which addresses them in the light of their contextualisation within specific cultural milieus.<sup>9</sup>

Else said, modern yoga research is simultaneously the expression of an understanding of yoga as first and foremost *a historical phenomenon*, versus its ideological and ahistorical readings by a plethora of past and present practitioners. As a consequence of its historical radicalism, it is also particularly sensitive to the study of the *contextual dimensions* of modern yoga’s transnational developments. In order to underline this point,

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<sup>9</sup> For a critique of cultural relativism applied to the study of yoga see Alter (2004).

I only need refer to modern yoga scholars' statements on how modern yoga and its changes must be understood in the light of the sociocultural contexts in which it developed and adapted. For instance, Geoffrey Samuel (2008: 186) underlines that:

To make sense of such a historical complex and varied phenomenon as yoga, it is, however, essential to retain as much awareness as possible of the social environment and historical specificity of each specific context within which it was adopted and transformed. In this way, we can begin to give meaning to each of these various forms of yoga, and to understand them within the life and culture of those who created them and shaped them.

Or, as Suzanne Newcombe (2018: 570, emphasis in original) further states:

If we enquire more into where yoga is practiced and what people are doing with their practices, rather than what yoga *is*, we might find more space for dialogue. It is only by considering yoga in precise locations that statements about yoga's significance and effects can have any meaning.

A very similar view characterises the field as a whole, with, for instance, Jain (2014a, 2020) repeatedly asserting the importance of a non-essentialised reading of modern forms of yoga.

The central tenets of cultural relativism – context and culture – are surely essential conceptual and epistemological tools to “think with” when dealing with the social and human sciences in general, more specifically, in disciplines such as religious studies, anthropology and sociology (e.g., Clifford and Marcus 1986). Nonetheless, Alter (2000, 2004, 2008) has – and I contend rightly – argued that, considering cultural relativism, and I would also add historical radicalism, as the final “explanatory variables” of *what* counts as modern yoga, seems to be as naïve as claiming the existence of an ahistorical, “essential” and “true” yoga that has remained unchanged since its origins. With Alter, other modern yoga scholars among which De Michelis, Singleton, White, Foxen, and Newcombe, have been masterfully tracing the discursive, historical, and transcultural construction of modern yoga. I think, however, that their analyses, considered as belonging to the same discursive formation, can be considered to suffer from a couple of possible drawbacks.

First, the scholar's radical historicism is largely based on historical evidence and an understanding of yoga as a historically grounded phenomenon (e.g., Alter 2004; De Michelis 2004; Newcombe 2019; Singleton 2010; White 2011). This approach presents the risks of ruling out any other position regarding what yoga is, just because historically untenable. This “historical awareness” does not represent a problem for the scholars

themselves, and it surely is one of the main strengths of our scholarly analyses. Nevertheless, it posits some questions regarding the relationship between scholarly and lay understanding of yoga, or to say it in other words, between yoga as studied by modern yoga scholars, and yoga as lived by its advocates and practitioners, past and present. Of course, the complexities of any “politics of representation” extend far beyond the mere study of yoga, and characterise, for instance, the discipline of anthropology (e.g., Clifford and Marcus 1986; Alter 2008: 38) as much as the field of religious studies (e.g., Cabezon 2006; Flood 2006) more in general. In this sense, it is important to underline that a close scrutiny to the development of modern yoga research, or yoga studies, might also be illuminating for those interested in wider debates concerning methods and perspectives in Religious Studies more broadly.

Coming back to the historical radicalism and the cultural relativism embraced by most modern yoga scholars, Andrea Jain (2014b) calls into question the understanding of yoga by what she calls the “Christian yogaphobic position” and the “Hindu origins position” on the ground that “[t]heir simplistic analyses, which are complicit with certain political and social agendas, function to perpetuate ahistorical representations that do not accurately account for the dynamic history of yoga” (Jain 2014b: 459). To use Griffiths’ essay title (2006), the “future of the study of religions in the academy” might depend on our ability to concretely navigate the divide between scholarly and lay perspectives and integrate social actors’ own perspectives and interpretations in the scientific study of religion,<sup>10</sup> without, however, failing to problematise practitioners’ narratives and claims of self-determination. If this is true, modern yoga scholars are then faced with the serious question of how to maintain dialogue with – and perhaps also inform – communities of practitioners whose perspective they deem as substantially fallacious. Importantly, the previously mentioned Handbook, together with a series of efforts to popularise the scholarly study of yoga, are already contributing to bridge this divide.

Second, this type of historical radicalism, if taken to its extreme consequences, may encourage the flourishing of a certain cultural relativism that may allow an “anything goes” understanding of yoga. In fact, in the case of “what yoga is” being first and foremost a question of the sociocultural context in which it is applied and not having anything to do with a supposed “essence” or a traditional form of yoga, then anything, under the right

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<sup>10</sup> See for instance the debate between Cabezon, Flood, Griffiths, and Sagel in a special issue of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* from 2006.

circumstances, can be framed as yoga. Of course, I am not here partaking with the idea that there is a “true” or “ancient” yoga that we may deem superior and more authentic than contemporary forms of yoga, as many lay practitioners and yoga enthusiasts – in my opinion misleadingly – claim.<sup>11</sup> On the contrary, I am simply trying to emphasise a possible distortion regarding what counts as yoga, on the ground of what today’s modern yoga research discursive apparatus looks like, with its focus on radical historicism and cultural relativism.

Third, modern yoga research can be considered as a (discursive) apparatus, namely as an ensemble of “strategies of relations of forces supporting, and supported by, types of knowledge” (Foucault 1980: 196). If we understand it as such, we may appreciate the social and discursive construction of modern yoga as a distinct sociocultural phenomenon and as an object of scholarly investigation put forth by modern yoga scholars themselves. Within the contours of the discipline of modern yoga research, modern yoga is defined as a specific historical phenomenon characterised by transnational networks of events, individuals, practices, and discourses. In this sense, modern yoga emerges from a process of selection and reification put forth by the scholars themselves, rather than simply existing as a natural – although historical – fact, developed transnationally, and adapted to different sociocultural contexts. As we will see in the following, from the perspective of these criticisms, modern yoga itself, as understood and discursively constructed by modern yoga scholars, is a specific historical product, subject to its own ideological and discursive frameworks, although these drastically differ from the ones that compose most yoga practitioners’ ideas of yoga.

#### **4.2. *Modernism***

Beside radical historicism, and its close companion, cultural relativism, modern yoga research is also the expression of certain modernist discourses, first of all a progressive or developmental understanding of history. For instance, in De Michelis’ (2004, 2007, 2020) typologies and definition, a modernist narrative is at work, shaping a description of modern yoga that is not only in contrast with its pre-modern forms – and thus markedly modern – but that is also framed as a series of styles and approaches that progressively evolved from the simplest to the most complex within a defined period of time (150

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<sup>11</sup> See for instance the “Hindu origins position” traced by Jain (2014b) or Narendra Modi’s nationalist, political agenda which attempts to re-frame yoga as one of the landmark constituents of Indianness.

years). In order to make this point clearer, it is worth recalling De Michelis' seminal definition of modern yoga in its entirety. De Michelis (2004: 2, my emphasis) states that:

The expression 'Modern Yoga' is used as a technical term to refer to certain types of yoga that evolved mainly through the interaction of Western individuals interested in Indian religions and a number of more or less Westernized Indians over the last 150 years. It may therefore be defined as the graft of a Western branch onto the Indian tree of yoga. Most of the yoga currently practised and taught in the West, as well as some contemporary Indian yoga, falls into this category. Being only one and a half centuries old, it may well be the youngest branch of the tree of yoga, and it seems to be the only one to have stretched across the oceans to continents other than Asia. *The definition 'Modern' seems precise enough to describe its age (it emerged in modern times) and geographico/cultural spread (it is preeminently found in developed countries and urban milieus world-wide). It also seems open-ended enough to allow for further definition and elaboration.*

These reflections on the modern character of modern yoga, as tautological as they might seem, are spread transversally across the literature. For example, following a similar conceptual framework, Sarbacker (2008: 179) emphasises the distinction between "modern" and "contemporary" forms of yoga, "with modern forms of yoga being understood to be the precursors conceptually, temporally (late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century), and geographically (India) to those of the current, and thus contemporary range of forms (early twenty-first century in an international sphere)". Through this argument, he further problematises the dichotomy "pre-modern" versus "modern" yoga, adding the category of "contemporary (current) practice" understood as forms of yoga "...rooted in, and often inseparable from, its modern precursors" (ibidem). However, the modernist trust in a progressive, developmental understanding of history is still at the center of Sarbacker's conceptualisations. Moreover, Sarbacker (2008: 179, emphasis in original) continues, in line with Alter, Singleton, Foxen, Newcombe and O'Brien-Kop, and White, saying that "[t]he designation *modern* can also be said to suggest contextuality in terms of discourses of science, colonialism, and cosmopolitanism, among others", and, I would add, with a specific reference to yoga's development in the last 50 years, also in terms of globalisation, commodification, and popular culture (e.g., Altglas 2014a; Jain 2014a, 2014b, 2020).

This modernist understanding of history and, for that matter, of yoga, influences the scholarship on modern yoga research. A further example is Strauss' (2005) attempt to take into consideration the divide between "pre-modern" and "modern" yoga by questioning the very category of modernity. Arguing that traditional modernising

narratives both failed and succeeded in making sense of this dichotomy, she advocates for an approach based on “multiple” or “alternative modernities”. Here, according to Strauss, yoga is understood in the light of “...many “fractured” and perpetual projects (Joshi 2001) reflecting a range of different aspirations” (Strauss 2005: 13), and no longer as a merely colonialist and Orientalist project crafted around Western discourses and categories of thought. Conversely, she states “I choose to view the situation as one of alternative modernities”. She further adds that:

one can go too far in localizing or regionalizing modernity, losing sight of its still-relevant origins in Western notions of progress and development. In this book, I join many other anthropologists and social theorists in trying to avoid the reification of modernity as a monolithic force, while retaining the impact of its collective past on the yearnings of people living in the present and future. This effort to reframe what is meant by “modernity” is crucial, because the currently popular way of understanding the transmission of yoga as a unilineal trajectory from (traditional) India to the (modern) West does not permit the complexity of the production of yoga as an explicitly transnational project spanning the period since the 1890s, as described in this book. These various modernities, in India as well as across the West, have exchanged visions of health and freedom with each other, with the actual results in each case dependent upon the particular constellation of participants and histories for a given locale over a specific period of time (ibidem).

I agree with Strauss’ reflections, in particular with the spaces she opens up for a conceptualisation of multiple and simultaneous histories and forms of yoga. However, it is necessary to point out that modern yoga scholarship recognises the fact that modern forms of yoga are not simply reproducing the divide between a “modern West” and a “spiritual East”, but rather represent the fruit of much more complex and multidirectional cultural flows (Van der Veer 2001). In other words, the transnational and transcultural character that she invokes as the landmark of her approach to modernity is not unique to her contribution but spans across the field of modern yoga research as a whole.<sup>12</sup> Finally, perhaps unsurprisingly, it is interesting to notice how her argument seems to be the reflection of the historical radicalism and cultural relativism that I have underlined in the previous section.

I would like to conclude this section with a word about De Michelis’ (2020: 447) latest contribution, where she reflects on the evolution and inclusion of “yogic elements” – whatever she may mean with this expression – “through to modernity”. In the context

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<sup>12</sup> See for example Hauser’s (2013a) edited volume for a collection of essays on this topic, where Strauss and Mandelbaum contribute with a brilliant analysis.

of this discussion, she underlines that “...while yoga did change continuously throughout the centuries and millennia of its history, it would seem that this last change into modernity may have been more radical than any preceding one” (De Michelis 2020: 447). This statement is hard to criticise, especially from the perspective of a progressive understanding of history that posits modernity as a landmark change, not only for the history and development of yoga, but for our human societies at large. What she says afterwards sounds more controversial, and indeed goes in the direction of confirming Strauss’ preoccupation with a depiction of yoga as essentialised on the ground of its “Eastern” attributes rather than as a hybrid, transnational, and transcultural project. In this respect, De Michelis (2020: 447) continues, somehow echoing a certain Orientalist trope, “[a]nd yet, while the spirit of today’s yoga may well be modern, the substantive is still the spirit”.

### **4.3. *Orientalism***

Orientalism retains a long-standing and deep-rooted legacy in the study of yoga, and more generally within the disciplines of religious studies, South-East Asian studies, and anthropology (e.g., Balagangadhara 1994; King 1999). Here, my intention is not to rewrite the history of these disciplines, but on the contrary to simply point out that Orientalism is one of the main forces that contributed to the social and discursive construction of yoga as we know and practice it today. We only need think about the manners in which early Orientalist scholars’ fascination and respect for yoga – as much as their role within the colonial ruling of India – contributed to the Christianisation of yoga during the Bengali Renaissance; or conversely, the manners in which Orientalist discourses were used by nationalists and yoga innovators such as Vivekananda and many others, in the attempt to construct an independent Indian identity, legitimised on the ground of its supposed distinction and superiority from the “materialist” values of the Western rulers.

Although contemporary scholarship is far from reproducing a stereotypical representation of a “mystical East” versus a “modernised and progressive West”, it is nonetheless possible to trace the continued influence of Orientalist discourses also in the most important contributions that make up the field of modern yoga research today. As Richard King (1999: 155) underlines:



it is precisely the continued influence of the early Orientalists and their presuppositions about India that warrants further attention. The comparative study of religion, Indology, Asian Studies and Buddhist studies, etc., are not ossified in an outdated (and largely discredited) colonialist agenda, but the practice of Orientalism remains as embedded in the wider context of power relations between the West and the rest in spite of the (apparent) end of the colonial era. Similarly, many of the presuppositions of the ‘founding fathers’ of these disciplines persist today in both intellectual and popularized conceptions of Asian religion and culture.

But what exactly is this Orientalism that characterised the early study of yoga, and how does it differ from its legacy in contemporary scholarship? In order to answer this question, it is necessary to inquiry what Orientalism is thought to be in the first place. The most renowned definition of Orientalism has perhaps come from Edward Said’s (1991 [1978]) critique of Western notions of the East, more specifically in the light of how these notions and discourses have substantially legitimised colonial projects of domination. According to Said, Orientalism refers to three interrelated phenomena: first, the study or the production of scholarly knowledge of oriental cultures; then, a style of thought based upon the dualistic distinction made between the ontological and epistemological positions of “the Orient” and “the Occident”; and finally, and perhaps most importantly:

Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient” (Said 1991: 2-3).

Thus, according to Said, the early Orientalist study of Asian traditions – yoga included – contributed not only to the discursive construction of its objects of analysis, but to a construction that would encourage processes of homogenisation, control, and management of the Asian cultural forms explored by Western scholars and rulers. These processes of construction were then largely accomplished through a selective reading of these cultural forms, their textualisation and understanding in the light of Western, modern images and discourses. These were chiefly represented by the tendency – Romantic in character and functioning as the bulk of New Age and metaphysical religions (e.g., Albanese 2007) – to read the “East,” as opposed to the “West,” as intrinsically mystical, spiritual, and irrational and promoting a form of self-reflexive body-mind unity assumed to be essentially embedded in the indigenous embodied practices and philosophies of the East (Brown and Leledaki 2010: 128). As we have seen, these discourses were often times skillfully reinterpreted by Indians themselves in the process

of defining the spiritual superiority of India over its colonisers and to legitimise the struggle for independence.

Despite its critical potential and its booming within postcolonial scholarship, Said's discussion of Orientalism is not devoid of conceptual and theoretical shortcomings.<sup>13</sup> One of the main criticisms towards Said's understanding of Orientalism is found in his simultaneous denial and assertion of the existence of an "authentic", "essential" East that ought to be rediscovered and affirmed by the colonised themselves, freed from the mystifications of the colonisers. On the contrary, it is more accurate to think of both "the East" and "the West" as complementary categories, rather than exclusivist ones (Van der Veer 2001). In this light, I think that to better make sense of Orientalism, especially in order to explore the Orientalist legacy of modern yoga scholarship, one should read Hallisey's (1995) notion of "intercultural mimesis", Djait's concept of "creative synthesis" (1985: 6), and of course Bhabha's (1994) "hybridity". Using Hallisey's language, these notions, although different, recognise that the discursive construction of Orientalism involves by definition a certain degree of intercultural mimesis and the active role of the "Orientals" in any process of definition of what counts as East, and for the matter of this study, as yoga. In fact, this position seems to more accurately reflect modern yoga scholarship's depiction of modern yoga as the result of transnational and transcultural encounters, where Indian actors like the previously mentioned Vivekananda, and countless other teachers and yoga reformers have actively contributed to shaping of the system of practices that we call yoga today.

However, whether read through the lenses of Said's Orientalism or Hallisey's intercultural mimesis, modern yoga scholarship can be said to describe and interpret yoga following the binary of "the West" and "the East". This time however, contrary to earlier Orientalist accounts, it does so without reference to the supposedly unchanging, mystical, and spiritual East, but in the light of yoga's modern and transnational features. As rightly underlined by King (1999: 155):

Orientalist discourses construct a conceptual space where the 'East' and the 'West' may meet, but only to be safely and carefully distinguished within that space. A consequence of this (usually unequal) meeting of the domestic and the foreign is that domestic narratives and debates from 'the homeland' are easily transposed onto the conceptual map of the 'foreign land'.

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<sup>13</sup> For a critique of his position see for example Clifford (1988); Ludden (1993); King (1999); and Sardar (1999).

In other words, modern yoga scholarship largely – if not entirely – springs from Western institutions with a strong Orientalist heritage such as the *Faculties of Divinity and Oriental studies* and the *Dharam Hinduja Institute of Indie Research* (DHIIR) at Cambridge University, the *School of Oriental and African Studies* (SOAS) at the University of London, the *Department of East Asian Studies* at the University of Vienna, and countless other anthropology and religious studies departments across the world. Modern yoga scholarship is then prone to providing a normative understanding of what yoga is on the ground of the tools and discourses of the disciplines it originates from. For this reason, it can be claimed to be an expression of scholastic positivism, relativism, and historicism, what Richard King named a form of “enlightenment fundamentalism” (1999: 48-49). Here, critical thought, history, and modernity are the ultimate grounds on which yoga is studied and the claims about it accepted and/or rejected.

The Orientalisms of modern yoga scholarship breaks with earlier forms of Orientalism, insofar as it is not merely concerned with the “ancient” and pre-modern textual traditions of yoga but, at least according to its main commentators – De Michelis, Singleton, Alter, and Newcombe among others – it is also concerned with yoga as a “living tradition”. This focus on the present or “just-past of the present” (Alter 2004: xv) of yoga allows modern yoga scholars to treat yoga as intrinsically evolving, thus in opposition to the Orientalist trope of an ancient, static, and never-changing East. Also, it allows them to maintain more authority and control over what counts as yoga and its historical truths. Following this line of analysis, if Orientalism can be framed as the desire to possess and appropriate the Orient, as Sardar (1999) poignantly suggests, then modern yoga scholarship and its reliance on the tropes and tools of radical historicism, cultural relativism, and modernity, can be seen as perpetuating the dominance of “the West” over the “non-West”, indigenous people of India and as delegitimising their perspectives on what yoga is. Modern yoga scholars deconstructed the chief Orientalist notions of yoga as an intrinsically Indian, and unchanging spiritual tradition. On the contrary though, they underlined its transnational, transcultural character, its historical positioning within the processes of colonisation first and globalisation later, and its language and methodologies, those of radical historicism, cultural relativism, and modernity. This contribution allows for a certain form of Orientalism to survive these deconstructions. Here, history becomes the “absolute truth” each claim about yoga has to confront; context

and culture its final “explanatory variables”; and modernity the yardstick through which yoga is re-constructed and considered by modern yoga scholars.

#### **4.4. *Neo-Colonialism***

With the expression neo-colonialism I address the ensemble of discourses and practices that allow former colonisers – that is to say, for the purpose of this chapter, those social actors situated within the geographical, historical, and ethno-cultural legacy of former colonial powers – to exercise a power of control, definition, and categorisation of certain phenomena or aspects of the economic, political, social, and cultural life of the former colonies.<sup>14</sup> Defined in this way, neo-colonialism is not separate from the previously discussed dimensions of radical historicism, cultural relativism, modernity and Orientalism. On the contrary, it can be understood as simultaneously functioning as either their overreaching framework or merely a further element added to this network of powerful defining forces that constitutes modern yoga research as a discursive apparatus.

In this section, before zooming into the role of modern yoga scholarship in reproducing a substantially neo-colonial discourse about yoga, I would like to briefly recall the colonial origins of modern yoga itself, as underlined by De Michelis (2004) and King (1999) among others. This seems a reasonable move, methodologically speaking, insofar as there seems to be a parallelism between (a) the colonial project of India and the discursive construction of Hinduism, chiefly through a textualisation of the Indian religions and their understanding in the light of Judeo-Christian traditions, values, and linear history (King 1999, 101) and (b) between neo-colonial discourses and the modern construction of yoga (e.g., Alter 2004; Singleton 2010).

During the colonisation of India, the British faced the “impossible task” – although they ironically succeeded – of making sense of an array of heterogeneous practices, cults, rituals, and beliefs, and began to address them simplistically as Hinduism with little recognition of their intrinsic differences (e.g., Flood 1998; King 1999). This expression was quickly adopted and reinforced by the elites of the colonised themselves. It represented an excellent opportunity to, on the one hand, facilitate dialogue with the colonial power, and on the other hand, push for independence in the name of a unified religious and cultural identity. The conflation of the “Indian” and “Hindu”

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<sup>14</sup> For a more in-depth discussion of neo-colonialism see for example Sartre (2001 [1965]) and Young (2001, 2003).

categories/identities at the expenses of Muslim Indians is still cause of problems today, which are a consequence of the processes of construction and re-interpretation of Hinduism from the colonial times. Following this line of reasoning, rather than being an historical truth or a defined religion, Hinduism is more accurately described as a social and discursive construction, fruit of colonialism and Orientalism. Furthermore, during the colonial period, Hinduism was equated with Advaita Vedānta, which provided "...a ready-made organizational framework within which the Western Orientalist and the colonial ruler could make sense of the fluid and diverse culture that it was their job to explain, classify, manage, control" (King 1999: 132). Moreover, as King (1999: 133) has further argued:

The 'discovery' of Vedānta, provided an opportunity for the construction of a nationalist ideology that could unite Hindus in their struggle against colonial oppression. The irony of the Orientalist emphasis upon the apparently quietistic and counterrevolutionary philosophy of Vedānta is that it further demonstrated the impossibility of controlling the polyvalent trajectories of Orientalist discourses once they have entered the public domain and become subject both to contestation and creative representation.

Overall, modern yoga scholars have been very sensitive to these historical processes. In their de-constructions and critiques of yoga, they have demystified the truths of the "essentialised" and "ancient" yoga of Vivekanda – and of today's nationalist groups – stressing yoga's transnational and transcultural development at the intersection of the Indian intelligentsia's and their colonial rulers' interests. Yet, modern yoga is represented and discursively constructed by modern yoga scholars in a manner that emphasises Western academic interests and categories of analysis, such as historical radicalism, cultural relativism, and modernity, among others, rather than the social actors' own takes. In this manner, modern yoga scholars simultaneously confront naïve and ideological readings of yoga, potentially liberating them from the fallacy of their own discourses. At the same time, though, they also silence and/or demystify social actors' perspectives on yoga in the name of their scholarly – allegedly superior – historical truths. This is unfortunately akin to worldwide colonisers' attempt to free the people of the global South and the far East from their backward customs through their – allegedly superior – modernising projects.

As a consequence, modern yoga scholarship, relying exclusively on Western epistemologies, categories, and principles, fails to provide a picture of yoga in line with the indigenous categories, theories and forms of life (e.g., Bhambra, Nişancioğlu and

Gebrial 2018; Connell 2007; King 1999: 185-6; Smith 1999). One poignant exception in this regard is Alter's (2004) work. Through a focus on the body and the formulation of the methodology of "mimetic skepticism", he suggests that the only possible way to make sense of yoga without approaching it from outside of its own ontological and epistemological grounds is in fact to focus on the body as the place where materiality and spiritual pursuits converge. In general terms, modern yoga scholarship seems to be an easy target for criticism by post-colonial scholars like Chackrabarty (1992), Sardar (1999), and Prakash (1992), and their contestation of history as fundamentally built around Europe.

Summarising, the genealogical approach to modern yoga provided by modern yoga scholars deconstructs and unveils ideological readings of yoga, but it also seems to sustain a form of exclusion between the Western, knowledgeable historian and the naïve – and largely wrong – (Indian) practitioner. Following the language of Spivak's "strategic essentialism", modern yoga scholarship then seems to equate the emic perspective of yoga practitioners to a substantially unaware, essentialist, ideological, and historically untenable take on yoga; while their position, anti-essentialist in character, seems to represent the etic theoretical truth granted by their superior radical historicism. Perhaps a more sensitive perspective is due, which would encourage practitioners and yoga entrepreneurs to look closer at the history of yoga and, conversely, encourage modern yoga scholars to be more sympathetic with the practitioners' historically clumsy emic perspectives.<sup>15</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

In this Excursus, I attempted to sketch a preliminary outline of modern yoga research as a *discursive formation*. This has implied the exploration of some of *the conditions of possibility* for the emergence of modern yoga research as an independent field of research in its own right. To my knowledge, this is the first attempt to a similar project. As such, it has the merit of paving the way for further, more accurate analyses of this type, as well as the limitations intrinsic in any attempt to move towards an unpaved direction. In a nutshell, with regard to the conditions of possibility of modern yoga research, I have

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<sup>15</sup> See Singleton's and Byrne's (2008) introduction for an initial reflection in this direction and Singleton's and Larios' (2021) chapter on scholar-practitioner of yoga in the Western academy.

underlined and discussed a number of discursive trends that this field inherited from its roots in disciplines as diverse as religious studies, South Asian studies, anthropology and to a lesser degree also sociology. In particular, I focused on the facets of historical radicalism and cultural relativism, modernity, Orientalism and neo-colonialism. I have argued that although these discursive trends have a prominent place within the history and the present of religious studies and neighbouring disciplines, modern yoga scholarship has so far substantially failed to reflexively account for them in its own explorations and historical reconstructions of modern yoga. Of course, this may be simply due to the rather “young” or new character of this discursive formation. However, I believe that, after over fifteen years of systematic scholarly investigation into the history and forms of modern yoga – starting in 2004 with the publications of De Michelis’ *The History of Modern Yoga*’ and Alter’s *The Yoga Body*’ – it is time that modern yoga research begins to structurally investigate and account for its own discursive references. Seeds of change are already emerging, as some of the latest contributions, although most of the time only incidentally, started to self-reflexively account for some of the issues raises above.

Nevertheless, the general picture of modern yoga research as a discursive formation that emerged from this Excursus is the one of a field that is contradictorily stuck in between its overall genealogical and deconstructive attempt to demystify ideological and “essentialised” understandings of yoga in the name of the “historical truths” it provides, and its substantial lack of awareness over its own history and discursive heritage. It is my hope – and I believe the broader fields of religious and cultural studies’ interest – for more scholars to begin looking into the paths opened by this Excursus – and the previous one – exploring further: first, the discursive references and backbones of modern yoga research; and second, the complex interplay and opposition between scholarly and lay theorising about yoga. Naturally, these suggestions could be fruitfully applied to a variety of objects of analysis across a multitude of fields and disciplines. Having said this, these two pointers are only some of the avenues through which we may more fully explore the unavoidable interactions between the study of religion and that of other academic fields prominently devoted to the study of culture and cultural processes, such as anthropology and sociology. As a matter of fact, the arguments here proposed echo clearly with the “decolonising turn” called for by works such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s (1999) *Decolonizing Methodologies*’, Raewyn Connell’s (2007) *Southern Theory*’, and

Bhabra's, Nişancioğlu's and Gebrial's (2018) '*Decolonising the University*', arguments worth pursuing in our attempts to advance critical and multidisciplinary research in the study of modern forms of yoga. It is in following these streams of research, in fact, that I would like to conclude by saying that an awareness of the discursive references of our disciplines – being them modern yoga research, religious studies, anthropology, sociology or cultural studies – is not only important to understand the historical development of our disciplines or the episteme that animates them from within, but, and perhaps even more importantly, is also relevant in framing the radical pedagogical, disciplinary, and institutional changes that our intellectual apparatus of knowledge production needs as it is constantly challenged and confronted by both lay perspectives and broader social, economic, and cultural apparatuses of production/consumption, disciplining, and exclusion.

## **Appendix One: Supplementary Material**

### Note 1

*Francesca*: when you say that you have embraced your Dharma, you are on the right path! We did not want to found a style or to pick up a name, it went all like this, it happened.

*Roberto*: It happened. None of us wanted to teach. I, for myself, just wanted to travel the world comparing myself with martial art styles, working as a waiter to survive...

*Francesca*: and I was destined to work as a business consultant. My father had an important business consultant studio in Rome and I was destined to work as a business consultant. I studied economics and business studies that was my [future], what I should have done.

*Matteo*: right, the path you thought of...



Francesca: right, it was easy, so, why not. But instead, here we are. Here we are (Roberto Milletti and Francesca Cassia, interview by author, audio recording, online interview, May 22, 2019).

### Note 2

I notice how Beatrice never openly intervenes in students' performances, but attempts to guide them with verbal cues such as "If you feel pain in this position, soften the stretch of the trunk" or "there is no need to have your legs completely extended but stop where you feel that your muscles can reach. Don't force". These cues are very useful in regulating the positions, and it is a teaching strategy that recognises the diversity of each body and their different strengths and weaknesses, alongside the actual constitutional differences that each body has. In fact, although flexibility is undeniably a matter of training and exercising, certain bodies are naturally more flexible than others. But today while we are performing a sitting trunk twist, a variation of a classical yoga position, I hear her standing up and walking towards me and I think: "Now she stops and corrects me". I think this somehow with a little bit of apprehension, as if it means that I am not doing the position correctly. And she comes and touches me softly on my back, straightening it. Her hand is warm. She guides me to a better position, and with a gentle, reassuring tone she says: "You are very good, good boy". I feel taken care of, somehow loved, as if a bonding is starting between us. I think that I thought to be in a good position, but that clearly wasn't the case (Field note, Milan, Italy, May 15, 2018).

### Note 3

Verbal instructions play a pivotal role in the knowledge transmitted during a standardised yoga class. Practitioners are expected to follow to the letter what the teachers are saying, with the important caveats of adjusting the practice to their own needs and physical specificities, which nonetheless is something that the teachers themselves instruct them to do. For instance, it is common to hear the teachers first describing a posture and then adding how the same posture should be performed by those who may experience some difficulties or discomfort, as the following field note testifies:

In the last part of the class we are performing a series of stretches of the legs while sitting, and Beatrice provides verbal guidance not only on how to perform, but also on how to stay within one's own possibilities, as she says: "If your leg cannot stretch fully do not force it. You are actually better off if your leg does not stretch fully. Rather than forcing it work within the limits" (Field note, Milan, Italy, May 31, 2018).

In the following note, I recall a similar situation, when in the context of a teacher training week-end Francesca warns me against hyper-flexing the legs and instructs me about the physical cues to notice in order to know if a movement is more damaging than benefiting:

We are going through a short sequence that involves the stretching of the leg, calf, tight and quadricep. Each one practices individually, Francesca walks around, looking and giving suggestions. One knee on the floor and the other leg stretched in front, heel and big toe on the floor. When I try to place the sole of the foot on the mat I feel a burning unease around the knee and on the back of it. I almost lose balance and my back stiffens up too. A perfect yogi! I then do the pose stretching the leg but touching the mat only with my heel and it goes better. As Francesca passes by, I tell her what I felt when I tried to bring the sole to the mat. She then looks at me and say: "You should never hyper-stretch anything. Especially if you feel the stretch behind the knee or at the end of the calf and of the tight, closer to the knee. If the warmth, the stretch

is not at the center of the muscle then bend the knee. It means you are working beyond the capacity of your muscle and you are forcing it” (Field note, Milan, Italy, December 16, 2018).

#### Note 4

Then again, is the technique important? I am not so sure. Nobody really teaches the technique. It is important if you are teaching to teachers. Then you need to teach the technique. But I know a lot of [aspirant or already qualified] teachers that know nothing of it but when they do a class they throw a piece of their heart in the middle of the room and do a great lesson” (Beatrice Morello, opportunist interview, Milan, Italy, May 31, 2018).

Now we enter the central part of the practice, Beatrice says: “Down-facing dog, bend the knees, stretch again and then bend the knees and twist both feet on the right. Try to sit on your heels. Come back to the center, bend the knees, down-facing dog, bend the knees and turn both feet on the left. Again. Try to sit on your heels. Now we do the same”. But when we arrive at twisting the knees on the right side Beatrice says: “Stretch the right leg and remain strong on the left arm and the left feet, and bring your elbow on the back, bring the arm again in front and open it on the back with a broad, round movement”. We perform this on both sides. After a couple of repetitions of these transitions we are again sitting on our heels and Beatrice says “Now we will repeat this a few more times, first with guidance following the technicalities and then we will do it with our flow. Technicalities are important, but to follow one’s own rhythm is more so” (Field note, Milan, Italy, June 06, 2018).

#### Note 5

“After these transitions, or what I now believe to be examples of ki flows, we are guided to go on four. I am happy also because my tights begin to really hurt, and I am beginning to feel restlessness and I desire to move. We go on four, and Beatrice says: “Close our eyes, hands at the floor, shoulders free of any tensions. Toes on the mat and heels that pool back. The weight is not on the arms and not on the knees but is evenly distributed. Focus to the tanden and visualize a sphere there if you can. Observe how your all body extends departing from that point. Listen to the body and how it feels at this moment of the practice” (Field note, Milan, Italy, June 05, 2018).

#### Note 6

Eri, Odaka Yoga teacher and studio owner of the first Odaka Yoga studio in Japan, underlines in an interview: “I always try to motivate the students after class. And the students, many students ask me, like: “Why you are always happy? How can I be like you? You are always enjoying and happy and it looks like you don’t have any problem. How?”. And I always say: “Of course I have a lot of problems, I had! And sometimes I get irritated, sometimes I get angry, sometimes I am really sad, like low motivation, but every day I do Odaka Yoga, every day I meditate and every day I try to be centered. And then is going to be no problem for me”. It is like, long time ago, one thing, I think that that one thing is a problem but now that one thing is no problem for me. Because of the way movements is changing for me the way I receive many things, how to feel. So I always tell them: “Keep be centered, and keep flowing your energy inside. And then you are not going to receive any bad energy from the annoying people or boring people. If you are

keeping flowing your energy inside then there is no space to receive bad energy, you are totally full of energy and you are always perfect”. And then the students say: “Ok, ok, I try, I try”. And yes, it’s difficult so that’s why we need to practice. And the students say: “Ok, ok. Sensei, I come next week” (Eri, interview by author, audio recording, online interview, February 28, 2020). Of course, as this fragment makes clear, the emotional capital of the teachers cannot prescind from the cultivation of her practical/ascetic disposition, through which centeredness (listening/focusing disposition) and fluidity (flowing/fluid disposition) are nourished.

Another instance of emotional capital is captured in the following note:

As we finish the class people start to get up, who faster, in a rush to go to work, and who slower. At the hand it is only me and Beatrice still sitting, she is visibly enjoying the sensations in her body, just being present to herself, eyes closed. When I finally get up to get the necessary to clean my mat, from the speakers starts Karma Coma of the Massive Attack, one of my first concerts ever. I see she starts to move, while sitting, following the rhythm of the music. I feel somehow bounding with her (Field note, Milan, Italy, May 29, 2018).

#### Note 7

Lea’s view represents an exception as she is the only participant that openly discusses her aversion for a “mainstream” career path, thus testifying to the largely middle-class ethos of the practitioners interviewed: “I had done a variety of jobs and I thought, “Ok, I need to do only jobs that would allow me to arrive ready and free at the day that I will find what has to be my life”. So, no career, no to a series of things, in order not to waste energy on false values that for me were false since my youth” (Lea, interview by author, audio recording, online interview, January 18, 2018).

#### Note 8

I mean, I always avoid to introduce something religious during a class, I try to remain on this level [physical and energetic], very clear, very neat, because if you enter into religious scopes you begin a discussion on faith and that could be sharable or not and also it could be a mistake because you may have a person that has her own thought and it is not right to go and say things that could be invasive. While if you stay at this level [physical and energetic] you are sure that what you transmit is acceptable, it can be welcomed (Sofia, interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 20, 2018).

So a few times, a few semesters or sessions I have taught on the yamas and niyamas which I would consider the spiritual, not really spiritual right, it’s a way, it’s a philosophy, it’s a way of living, rather than spiritual. I try, I don’t do a lot of chanting, I will play chants in my class...I mean, they are accepting it there...Once in a while I accidentally put a song that has some Hare Krishna in it and then ops, but that just cause people have a wrong perception of the term Hare Krishna. But I think that a lot of time people just hear that as like background music. Emm, but if someone would say they were offended by it I would never play that song again. Boom, it’s gone...I am not playing anything that is offensive, I don’t think. But if the gym asked me not to [I would stop]. I do Om at the end but if somebody asks me I let them know that Om is just the sound of the universe, it’s nothing, Om is the bases for Amen, you could Amen if you like it, if that is your faith. Yeah, it’s the same thing, so if you’d rather say Amen than Om do that please. If you don’t wanna do it, and just wanna hear the sounds, the vibrations in the room, do that. Yeah. So, and no

one has ever been offended by the Oms or Namasté, no one has ever (Sarah, interview by author, audio recording, Riverside, California, July 08, 2019).

#### Note 9

How did I come to yoga? With a DVD. It was eleven years ago, twelve years ago, more or less, and I had just finished the training to become pilates instructor. I had some friends that talked about yoga, yoga, yoga, and I was sure not to be able to do this yoga that they talked about so much. Even though every time we hung out together I tried some things with them, [I thought] “yeah I can make it”. However, they [would put their] legs behind their head while I was a piece of wood. Also, because my sporting history is all, I come from athletics, skating, I mean all power sports and muscle shortening. And so, I said: “All right, I take this DVD and I watch it” (Beatrice Morello, interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 16, 2018).

I started to do yoga because I had backpain. So a rather simple need and as such I really had an absolutely empiricist approach “It hurts!”, and I started to see that this thing started by accident, dragged by other people, was good in the sense that I started to have some benefits and I did not have backpain any longer. So I kept going like that for many years (Daria, interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 10, 2018).

#### Note 10

My boss, who was the CEO, one day asked me to find him a studio where he could practice. And looking on the internet I found Beatrice’s studio. He goes and he likes it, starts to do yoga, because it’s close from [the office], he starts to do yoga. Until one day he comes and he gives me a voucher for 10 admissions to go and do yoga. And within myself I said: “I mean, I don’t think that I can do yoga sincerely”. Being a person used to do sports, my body is, I am quite rigid as musculature...and so in my mind back then it wasn’t possible for me to do yoga. But I said: “I mean since I already have these vouchers let me go to do yoga” (Maria, interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 22, 2018).

#### Note 11

So she [Isa’s wife] was taking a class at the local YMCA, where we lived, in North Hollywood and then I wasn’t interested at all...And then I started to, I don’t know why she talked me into watching like a VHS tape of a yoga class, and I got a little bit interested. But then she talked me into taking a class, that was very, basically I didn’t want to take a class because I am shy. I didn’t want to be in a situation with other people, I didn’t like the social idea, I thought “oh this is gonna be really strange” this is, you know, 2002...I took the class and I thought “it’s ok!” (Isa, interview by author, audio recording, Riverside, California, February 21, 2019).

#### Note 12

Marian underlines how she started: “Because they wanted me to have a back surgery, yeah my mom had one and it wasn’t good enough so “I am not doing that”. So, I did yoga on the TV, did that for two years

till Jane [pseudonym] opened her first studio in Riverside” (Marian, opportunistic interview, Riverside, USA, July 27, 2019).

Marco, newly trained teacher and personnel manager of a hip Milanese yoga school, mentions that: “I see that many psychologists, many people come here and say “I went to the psychologist because I had anxiety attacks and they told me to do yoga” (Marco, interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, February 01, 2018).

Beatrice is skeptical of psychologists’ suggestions to their clients to practice yoga as the practice risks to not being fully grasped or even to unleash traumatic memories, thus complicating the practitioner’s situation: “When they tell me that the psychologist suggested them to practice yoga I am always a bit scared. If you want to free your head for one hour, then poor psychologist. Do something else, do pilates. Because yoga does not come through. I mean, the psychologist that suggests yoga didn’t do yoga. I have many psychologists that practice with me, but they know who to refer to me. Or they in turn are studying some courses in yoga and trauma, beautiful, and so they use yoga to manage the trauma (Beatrice Morello, interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 16, 2018).

Working with yoga you don’t do a rational analysis, how to say, but you go to stimulate the recovery, self-recovery...yes, it’s therapeutic. It is always therapeutic because yoga...we always understand the practice with the word yoga but in reality there are the eight steps of Patanjali. Therefore, it is philosophy of life. But if we simply stop at the physical practice, surely there is a big part of therapy within it. First of all, all the positions are studied to give health and extension to the vertebral column. And so it all starts from there, the torso and many branches that go in all the peripheries. Make the vertebral column healthy, well aligned with the vertebrae well distanced one from the other, really elastic, and as a consequence able to move but with a healthy musculature structure as a support. And so the spinal erectors, the intervertebral muscles, very strong and able to respond. Therefore, we are speaking of deep muscles. From there then starts a series of inputs for the rest of the body, inputs that bring health and well-being, really well-being. That for sure. The ancient yogi measured the longevity of the student in reference to the elasticity of the vertebral column. If a vertebral column was rigid then the student was old. But old in the body. Young is good flexibility, young and nicely elastic, and so healthier. In a nutshell. And so from here you understand already the importance of the work of the practice, properly done, with awareness, being careful and respecting your own body, your possibilities, this always (Sofia, interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 20, 2018).

### Note 13

Personally, I discovered yoga when I was still a girl, I wasn’t living in Italy and I had a small yoga school in the building where I lived and so I started a bit like this, by chance (Gemma, interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, January 16, 2018).

I decided to go to Canada to study English, so I went to Canada to Study English for one year. When I was in Canada, I met Bikram yoga this was the first experience of yoga (Eri, personal communication via Facebook, March 14, 2020).

### Note 14

Then I think that there are limits in yoga sometimes, that pure meditation does not have, because yoga pacifies you. And for whom, like me, had rage as a drive for the greatest part of his life this thing is beautiful, being pacified is wonderful. And it is unpopular to say it, because I say, sometimes [yoga] is better than to take a Xanax. And then if you are not careful you can use it as Xanax and don't do the journey but pacify yourself. So you have to be careful and alert to understand what are the mechanisms that you create. Because if you don't love the conflict but you are always in the conflict because you have within a rage that is yours, that may come from anything, and you pacify it, that thing there will come back sooner or later. And so, you have to go and look at it somewhere. Because yoga pacifies and suddenly you don't know any longer what is that rage except those days in which you wake up and drive on somebody and then you go back to do yoga. Emm, so there it is necessary to keep a high guard. Because the pacifying power makes us keep telling ourselves how beautiful we are but what a hell! It is not true! We only want the light, not the darkness. But that thing makes us absolutely authentic. And so we must seek (Beatrice Morello, interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 16, 2018).

#### Note 15

As you know quite well the word yoga comes from the Sanskrit root Yuj, that means to yoke, that is to bring together. The yoke makes the two cows go together because of the plow in order not to go one one way and the other another way. And so, the idea is "all in the same direction, in the same line". And this is regarding all aspects of our being. So, the physical, that we can say is our practical house, material. Our mind, that in turn goes where it wants and this is one of the most pressing issues of our society. And then the all emotional dimension that our society does not even account for. Because if we really look into this, this is the least considered dimension even though it is the most important in absolute terms, because all we do in our practical life starts from our being, our emotional feel (Lea, interview by author, audio recording, online interview, January 18, 2018).

#### Note 16

I mean, I think that there is a real emphasis in most kind of yoga practice on the breath that's different in other things. So thai chi there is a breathing discussion but it's more advanced and has some kind of subtleties that have to do with chi and martial art. In yoga [the breath] is the foundation. It's like the first thing that's taught about and I think it's a way, it could be almost anything. I actually sometimes teach and I say "You can focus on your heart too", you can focus on your heart beating you know, you can get in tune with your guts. The breath is very easy, it's like why we speak about vision so much. Vision is like an easy sense for us to discuss and so breathing, we feel it very quickly, everybody knows how to hold it, or let it go and so, I would say if there was a kind of essence or something that would be the essence to the practice, because it's part of the prāṇāyāma breathings, it's part of the physical practice, its' a part of meditations (Isa, interview by author, audio recording, Riverside, California, February 21, 2019).

#### Note 17

I think that yoga for me, yoga is a great physical practice that has a value added of, I think what they talked about here about stimulating your pituitary by having the top of your head just in the right place, I think that that is definitely, if you put your head on the ground, in the right place than you do stimulate your

pituitary ahaha...and if you put it in the wrong place then you get something else, you get inversion but you don't get the value added...and so you can relieve heartburn with the Eagle arms, "ahhhhhh" [Louise breaths out] and so I if wouldn't have known that, I would probably have to press, you know, oh gas, but there is a yoga pose for it, that's in the book, and so by also doing that I get a nice back stretch and I can relieve my neck as well. So I think that yoga for me is all around, there is something for everybody, there is something for everything in yoga, and maybe that's what makes it like a religion because it's a practice that you can follow when you need help ahaha (Louise, interview by author, audio recording, Riverside, California, March 19, 2019).

That's it, to grow, to have a wiser stance in life as years go by. For me yoga is this. Then, of course, the mechanics of the body alignments, the study of the human body, being very careful. I mean, I almost take the presence of those aspect for granted (Sofia, interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 20, 2018).

### Note 18

*Matteo*:...what relationship there is, for you, between yoga, Odaka Yoga in particular, but yoga in general too, and other widespread forms of therapy, such as psychoanalysis for instance?

*Francesca*: It is a very interesting question. I have done four years and a half of psychoanalysis, and look, today psychoanalysis has transformed and is increasingly moving towards an approach based on breathing and physical exercises, it is incarnating a bit more. What I was missing in that period where I was doing a lot of psychoanalysis was that in the end everything becomes rational thinking. And so even if I moved a spoon I asked myself: "But why did I move it?". And so, in the end I was a bit blurred in my [mind]...[psychoanalysis] helped me a lot, but physical movement has brought me to, to enlightenment really. I did not need to think about it any longer. I deeply felt what I was. So together with the self-reflection that psychoanalysis gave me it [physical movement] was a tremendous weapon. But I needed both. Otherwise you risk becoming a great thinker that departs from the equanimity of reality as you project on it too many things.

*Matteo*: But do you think it is too far of a stretch to say, for instance, that therapy, let's say that therapy and yoga have a shared purpose?

*Francesca*: I think they have a shared purpose. They use different means to let you find yourself. For me, the psychologists, the psychoanalysts that work with us, we have plenty of them that became yoga teachers, Odaka Yoga teachers. And so, these two worlds are increasingly coming closer. But the yoga teacher has to be skilled because during classes you have people who want from you that you become a little like a psychologist, and so to manage to keep the equanimity, the distance, step out of the role, that you are an instructor, a teacher, is important. You need great balance.

*Roberto*: I don't think it's a too far of a stretch you know Matteo, put it as you did.

*Matteo*: So, do you feel that in your everyday life, in your everyday life of sharing the work you do, [do you feel] that what you do has a strong therapeutic value for those people that interact with you?

*Francesca*: Of course. There is a lot of it. It is important, but for this reason is also important to remind during classes that you point towards a way but it is them that have to walk it. Everyone has to take on the responsibility of their own existence.

*Roberto*: There is a very beautiful excerpt from Lau Tsu that says: “At the origin the way is without words. Then the words are needed to point to the way. When you see the way you can forget the words”. So, the process is a little bit like this.

Look, I approached yoga, I was suffering of anorexia and although I was doing therapy at a certain level, I wasn't able to get out of it. And it has really been the physical realisation of certain things that allowed me to get out of it. And with some of the psychologists and psychiatrists of our center we do also movement based courses for those who have eating disorders and traumas. Also the way you talk and what you say has to be measured but the body really gives you access, it is like if all the traumas remain imprisoned, solidified within the body. Moving you can release them, you can observe them, you can experience what you fear in life and so rework it (*Roberto Milletti and Francesca Cassia*, interview by author, audio recording, online interview, May 22, 2019).

#### Note 19

Louise and Linda refer in turn to this text and the aim of yoga. The former does so implicitly, via the mediation of her first teacher's vision of yoga; while the latter in more explicit terms: “I remember Maria talking about how ultimately the goal of yoga is to be able to sit quietly and meditate and so all of the asana, all of the postures what they are meant to do is to make it easier for you to sit and meditate. And so if the focus is taken away from that and on to the physicality of it, on how long you can hold it, or how deep you can go into it, or how far stretched out you can be into it, then you are taking your mind away from the focus and so is that helpful? is that right? what is that? it is just a different thing. But you know, that's addressed in the limb. You haven't moved in the next limb yet, you are just spending your time here in the physicality of the practice” (*Louise*, interview by author, audio recording, Riverside, California, March 19, 2019).

“So yoga is more than stretching, so in the *Yogastura*, it's philosophical, it comes from the Vedas, em, ancient texts from India. A lot of what is in there, are, not even just practices, not even just meditation, but even just ways of thinking about life so recognising that there is a type of custody, there are principles to recognise and to apply to your life. So for instance they have, the beginnings with yoga, there is *yamas* and there is *niyamas*, so principles that you apply to your relationship to yourself and also principles that you apply to relationships outside of yourself, so relationships with people, to activities, things, so learning how to conduct your-self in a way. So the goal of yoga at the end of the day, the goal of yoga is to create what they call, there is a thing called *satva*, *satva* would be equivalent to balance, *satva* is clarity, calmness, not let her be, but I am just, remember at take your power, the workshop that I thought, that window of colours, when I am alert that I am not interested, I am calm but I am not alert, and right in the middle, that would be *satva*. *Satva* is, you are clear, you are coherent, you are able to handle what challenges you have your way and they will not bother you, but you feel “ok I can handle it, I got this” that is *satva*. So the goal of yoga is to create a *satvic* mind, that is the end goal, that your mind will be clear, capable, alert, all of these things. That's the goal of yoga” (*Linda*, interview by author, audio recording, Riverside, California, April 9, 2019).

#### Note 20

This focus on the self is also remarked by *Lea*: What is yoga? Yoga is nothing but a discipline, it is not the only one of course, that fundamentally aims to bring you into true contact with yourself. It is as if it wanted



to bring you from outside to inside, right? Not so much from inside to outside as the rest of our society is organised. And so, we are a bit, actually a lot, how could I say, totally involved in external values that we have understood not to be those that make us really happy, right? Because we can have all the comforts, all the things we want, all the things we desire, all the external things that can enrich us from a practical, physical, logistic point of view, and so on, but anyway our misery remains still there. And so, at this point let me say that the invitation is exactly to find something that could instead create a balance between what is my external world and also my inner world (Lea, interview by author, audio recording, online interview, January 18, 2018).

Following Lea's narrative, the discipline of yoga "aims to bring you into true contact with yourself" converting one's own attention from "the external values" of "the external world" – the perspective mostly valued by our society – to our "inner world". This revolutionary stance should bring balance between the inner and the outer and for some may become the first step towards a more general reorganisation of one's own life, as Lea further recounts: "Yoga has become my life. Namely to live in what is a yogic context, both from a practical, logistic point of view, because all my life revolves around this thing, it has actually become a job, my passion, my commitment etcetera. Besides being my daily practice, because I dedicate many many hours of my free time to this discipline, it has also become the container of my life. But not the container only from the point of view of moving within a milieu, it has become a container really as a principle, as a life, as a rediscovery, as self-knowledge, as a deepening of my being, even if now I do it since many years, in any case it is a never-ending work, right? Exactly because it is something that does never come to an end, it is always deepening" (Lea, interview by author, audio recording, online interview, January 18, 2018). Yoga here has become Lea's life, not only from a professional point of view, but also as a "passion" and as a "commitment". As she further states, yoga has become "the container" of her life", that is "a principle", "a rediscovery", "self-knowledge" and "a deepening" of her own being. It would be hard to imagine anything more meaningful and all-encompassing than this.

#### Note 21

So it is incredibly free, the more I learn about it the more I am just in awe, wow, this is really so encompassing, and it is so, in a way, very inclusive for people of different flocks, different experiences, there is room, there is something that will apply to anyone and there is no limit on "you must do it this way", it is just, at the end of the day, all an invitation, try it, Does it work? Yes, it does, keep it. If it doesn't don't keep it, don't do it. I was always so fascinated when I found out that in one of the yoga sutras said: "Believe in a higher power, or not" (Linda, interview by author, audio recording, Riverside, California, April 9, 2019).

#### Note 22

Gautama continues underlining that: "The mistake that Osho has done from my point of view is the one to let himself get involved with popularity. He probably wasn't so attached to the "famous figure" but for some time he was fully involved in that. And that has clearly brought some negative effects, that we all know. Sai Baba the same. And so let us really try, as I say, I guide you to know yourself, I guide you to perceive yourself. Also in yoga I say, "Guys do not imitate me when I do the postures but look and do them within your limits" and one incredible thing is that 40, 60% of people do it while the other are still attached

to the figure. And so, why are yoga lessons doing well today? Because I teach, I do everything. I tell you what you have to do and I do not bring you at the expansion of consciousness and at the perception of your body” (Gautama, interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, January 21, 2018).

### Note 23

Lea elaborates on her description of the chief function of the guru providing the following illustration: “If you look for the guru yantra, go look for it and you’ll find it, the guru yantra, yantras are very beautiful symbolic images with a square frame, I can say, of angles. As you will look at it you’ll understand what is a yantra. The one of the guru is really blue night, with a series of petals coloured red but the background is night blue anyway. And slowly slowly going to the center imagine to reach the point [at the center]. It is all white and yellow and there is light, right? And so this moving towards the center and towards your own light” (Lea, interview by author, audio recording, online interview, January 18, 2018).

### Note 24

Sofia further elaborates on the importance of being humble in the following terms: “So, you do your best but it is not sure that you manage to reach that person there. And so maybe say: “Ok, it is ok like this”. And instead I clashed with people that in some way you see that they are full of ego in the way they teach as if theirs would be the only truth. There is not only their truth. It is like this, then maybe it is hard to accept it but to be humble is this” (Sofia, interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 20, 2018).

### Note 25

Beatrice further comments on this point as she underlines that: “When you don’t have the founder any longer [the teaching] as they spread impoverish, do you follow? It is not good or bad, it is simply different. I mean, it is a great privilege to do the training with those that created that thing. Because I work with Francesca and Roberto and I realise that I relate with pure talent. I mean, it is independent from what they do or don’t do. You feel them a lot. That thing that they created was born from their talent coupled with the technique, [but] they have that talent. And I see that, especially when people depart from the school, they go on for heaven’s sake, but if they lack their own resources [the teaching] impoverishes. How many people of pure talent can you find? I don’t know, [if you look at] Vinyasa you find, from Krinshamacharya and then you arrive to Pattabhi Jois, Iyengar, they had talent. How many more then? I mean, on the way you find somebody that creates a new direction, a new possibility and others that make use of that possibility” (Beatrice Morello, interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 16, 2018). Of course, Beatrice’s narrative closely parallels Weber’s discussion of charismatic authority and its substantial reliance on the individuals’ “exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character” and his supposed “supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities...regarded as divine in origin or as exemplary” (Weber 1968: 241) as the primary grounds that determine the teacher’s legitimacy to guide others and transfer his or her knowledge to them. In Weber’s theory, as already mentioned in Chapter Five, the charismatic type of authority is the only one that does not rely on external formal structures or norms for its transmission and as such its institutionalisation is particularly challenging. It is in this light that to train and practice “with those that created” a specific style becomes particularly legitimising for those practitioners that have the chance to do so. Also, it is quite telling that Beatrice compares Francesca and

Roberto with some of the “holy monsters” of modern postural yoga, effectively conveying her attribution of specialness towards her own teachers.

#### Note 26

This emphasis on sharing, again, is reiterated by Lisa as she states that to “share something that feels good, that made me feel good, so to say, it also helps me to ground a bit more” (Lisa, interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, January 08, 2019). In fact, as Jane comments, “talking about teaching, what we had back then [when I started to teach] and what we have now, we have people who would think that yoga is amazing and then they wanna share it” (Jane, interview by author, audio recording, Riverside, California, July 15, 2019).

#### Note 27

“We get resumes all the time, you know, some, sorry to say but, the average rich kid that goes to two weeks in Mexico or Costa Rica and send me her resume and I go, “Mike, look! So, she has only been practicing maybe a month, she went there, and she want to be a teacher” (Marian, interview by author, audio recording, Riverside, California, July 27, 2019).

#### Note 28

See note 24.

#### Note 29

Yeah, because before I would just go for the physical practice, I would just go in there to work out, but when I was laying in savasana I was kind of more tired cause the class was really hard but I never felt that level of inner peace or just that feeling of, not total peace cause still I had to work the next day, but just feeling like I can handle it. Like I can meet the challenges in my life and it’s gonna be ok, it’s gonna be ok. Instead of just this chronic feeling of fear or anxiety that was just what I felt like all the time. I was always feeling it, I was always, I even asked my, when I was working in that office, I asked them “Do we have like a meditation room or something, that we can just kind of calm down a little bit, cause this day is very stressful” and the leadership they were really, really hard core, they yelled at you all the time, they would speak bad about other employees in front of other employees, I am like “We are right here, we can hear you”, and I was I like “Everybody here is working so hard and you don’t recognise that” when everyone is working at their full capacities. So it was that experience that led for me to a change in my yoga practice and I finally felt “Wait this is not”, I remember I was thinking “I don’t think that this is just for my body, I think this is for my mind. I think it is for my mind” and I started going more regularly because of just that flight of peace that I would receive at the end of that hour. I was like “At least I can be for one hour where I can feel ok. The rest of the day I felt crazy, the rest of the day I feel anxious and really, really worried all the time cause I was really edgy but I knew that I could feel this type of peace, just from stretching, breathing, so I started just taking that classing more regularly and seeking out teachers that taught the way. And so, I saw myself not wanting classes that were sweaty and hot and loud, I wanted silence...which was new for me because I noticed that another one of my old coping mechanisms that I have is to be very busy. I am one of those people who like to be very, I have a lot of interests so my schedule is always full, I always

wanna have a lot of things to do but I recognise now as I have been on this journey of healing [that, that doesn't necessarily bring joy either when you have too much stuff going on, and it was a coping mechanism, it was, "I don't wanna be with myself, I don't wanna be single, I don't wanna be quite because I don't wanna know what's going on in my life"ahaha. But that was the first time that I was able to just allow, it was more, not that anything big changed, but I was able to be open to the idea of just "Can you let it be"... "you don't have to fix it right now, but can you let it be, just let it be the way that it is, it is that way, you can't change it right now, but can you just sit with it, can you be ok with just the way that it is?". That was new, that was a all new concept for me, so going to that yoga class, and going more religiously I kind of went for that, to take the lead in my mental health and then I started seeking out, I thought "Gosh this is so powerful for me, how amazing would it be to be able to share the same kind of feeling with other people". Cause I mean I looked around and everybody else at work with me in the corporate setting, everyone is stressed out, everyone has insomnia, everyone drinks too much, everyone is coping in many other different ways that aren't necessarily so helpful but for good reasons because work is hard, because the demands on your attention, your time, your energy are so intense that "Yeah, I need to relax". You need to be able to decompress in some way, whether happy hours after work, or really partying hard on the weekend, which that was my old coping habit. I looked at my past and I partied a lot, I did a lot of drugsahaha cause I was just, during the week was so intense that those two days like when I left my office on Friday I need to have a drink, I need to seek these things out because it would give me that big change, I need that instantaneous, I mean I could achieve it if I go to yoga, "Oh but if I smoke that joint that would make me feel so much better". So I recognise that I was going for the coping mechanism, not consciously but just out of trying to feel a little bit better. But when I started going to yoga I started feeling, finding in me this feeling of peace, I was like "Oh my gosh, I don't need to, there is another way to find that peace. You don't have to be so high, you don't have to be so drunk all of the time, and you don't have the hangover",ahaha, you feel better (Linda, interview by author, audio recording, Riverside, California, April 9, 2019).

### Note 30

As also Beatrice recalls, Odaka Yoga is "working a lot on the transition. As such it is also important how I go to do the posture, how I arrive into the posture, and not so much the posture in itself but the journey. You can do a moving meditation. And so, at the end you leave from one hour lesson in which you have done moving meditation, you are regenerated" (Beatrice Morello, interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 16, 2018).

### Note 31

Yoga, I work a lot with the chakras. Chakras are identifiable as energetic centers within the body, that roughly corresponds to the important glands of the body. A series of channels called nadis pass through these energy centers. We have tree main nadis...chakras, in yoga there are a series of specific poses that go to stimulate these chakras. How? Through the same blood circulation and so the oxygenation of that zone.

So we go at a very physical level...that's how, working on one chakra you work on the physical level and on the mental level simultaneously (Sofia, interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 20, 2018).

#### Note 32

Physically, because there is also a physical plane where we live, [yoga] helped me to be better in the body. A bit because it has solved some problems and also maybe it has also helped me to accept myself more...instead on the emotional and character level...I have always been very dashing, and I [still] am, but it gave me the ability to slow down (Daria, interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, January 01, 2018).

#### Note 33

Surely yes, it changed me. I would say that it changed me in the way in which I face the rest of my life because before I was a really closed person, I talked very little, I mean, I still struggle to talk with people I don't know but surely in the last four years I have done some sort of mental work that yoga has helped me to do, it helped me a lot to open up with other and in some way also to be more self-confident, not too much but a bit yes ahaha. Too much is too much. Enough anyway to be able to overcome this blockage that I always had in relating with others. And so, clearly yoga helped, I would say, from an inner point of view (Viola, interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 08, 2018).

#### Note 34

I mean, it wasn't like the first time you open your hips you feel anything. After months that you do it for two, three times a week you notice that something has changed. I, when I started to practice yoga intensively, the period after having lost the job, that I wanted to get fit again, like this, I mean it wasn't really so sudden, so logic, not this. But the result, after a few months I felt very good, much more at ease with my own body, I liked it much more. I don't know, it even happened that I noticed that men were looking at me a bit more, so to say, gradually. It didn't happen in one day. It is not like you do one thing and it gives you the result immediately. But yeah, after a few months everything was different (Giada, interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 22, 2018).

It is not sudden eh, I mean, maybe I talk to you about this with a certain awareness now because I practice since, I don't know, ten years emm, it is all something that happened gradually and of which I became aware slowly, slowly (Daria, interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, January 01, 2018).

#### Note 35

Then my adolescent son adds on it his heavy burden, therefore the two things [work is the other one]. And instead I realised that in the interactions with my son I have learned to accept what he is a bit [more], what is his own slightly difficult moment and so to take him for what there is and understand that anyway there is some good there too that needs to be underlined, and that he needs to be helped in some way. Because when I find myself to face certain situations with him the things that Roberto says come to mind, or what we do, and so for me it is a great help (Desire, interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 10, 2018).

Look, as I told you I lived of personality as everybody else. Therefore, yoga changed me in the sense that it forced me, let me say, to take off the armor. To not necessarily laugh in the group because the group laughs. To not necessarily having to go out because otherwise I was home alone on a Saturday night. To not necessarily have to go on vacation in August to show off that I have been in vacation. To not appear too much on the social networks [medias] to show that I exist. To not only accept the working place in engineering because I have something else to give to people. Yoga has been this. If you like, yoga helped also in my alimentation because through yoga you perceive your body better, but it did not change my eating habits that I consider valid as I have done a lot of physical activity since I was little. So eat a bit of everything and avoid to eat what you don't feel like. This is yoga. How did I arrive here? Through an intense practice but especially through an intense meditation. Or better, an intense reflection upon myself. And to reflect on oneself means already action (Gautama, interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, January 21, 2018).

I changed from "I need to be absolutely liked by everybody", "I need to have a solution for everything", "I will fix things" to listen to myself. And so even if you had done to me a very serious wrong and I manage to forgive you and put it aside good. If otherwise you hurt me so much and to continue seeing you hurt me, I don't want to see you again, but without Neapolitan tragedies. But I realised that I tend to turn away the people that I perceive as negative for myself, but without judgment, simply I feel they aren't good for me. This happened in a really tangible way and also other people noticed it. And so, emm, and I perceive this as a very positive thing because it is good to be sociable, be accepting, be nice, but if it has to become a boomerang that creates you a malaise, a state of anxiety, maybe isn't good (Daria 18/01/2018).

So I recognised a lot things and again making different choices, recognising, "If I now know this, how can I continue unknowing that is not, that is not aligned with what is true for me in my heart?". That was hard for me, I had to now speak up about it, I had to say that to him [Linda's ex-husband] and recognising that I was gonna break his heart, someone that cares for me so much. And that was another thing that I was not used doing. Learning how to and again I was always seeking other people approval, so I would never say anything that would not make you like me. So I would not stand for myself a lot. But he happened to be the one person that held space for me in such a way and as I was learning to stand for myself I have to know what my needs are, I saw I never knew what they were. Now that I know what they are and now that I recognise that on my list of negotiable and non-negotiable there is a non-negotiable that I am missing, I know I have to advocate for myself, I am learning how to do that and what does it mean to speak up and speak your truth even though you know that that person may not agree with it, or that they may not like you anymore, I used to be such a people pleaser, someone who was always, I am just agreeable, even if it something that I don't agree with I am still gonna be easy, I don't wanna make trouble, I used to be that all the time. Because I just wanted people to like me, I just wanted to find that validation from everyone around me. So I wouldn't say anything that was contrary to the popular thing to say, or the right thing to say, so I didn't advocate myself for a long [time] and for a lot of things. But as you learn to gain these skills, so you learn how to have boundaries, so you learn how to recognise your own needs, you learn how to speak up for yourself, it completely changes you as a person because now you do speak up for the things that you want, you do say when things aren't right for you, even if it will make someone else not happy. You recognise again, and again this is another skill, how do you do this in a way that is helpful? How to do it in

a way that isn't cruel but still truthful? So there are a lot of skills that I've got throughout the entire process but they did definitely transform my all life, it is not anything like it was before (Linda, interview by author, audio recording, Riverside, California, April 9, 2019).

I still have a whole group of friends that were from my old life that'll party so much, and again I wish them well, I wish them so much, I had such a great time with them, they are wonderful people but I don't wanna live that life anymore. I just, so I have to slowly wish them well but also let it go and recognise that "I am happy here, I am sorry, but I wish you well" (Linda, interview by author, audio recording, Riverside, California, April 9, 2019).

### Note 36

For instance, Desire, states that: "The beautiful thing is to try to bring yoga outside of the mat, that is in your life. Whatever you do there [on the mat], you experience it and bring it outside. It is beautiful" (Desire, interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 10, 2018).

Or again, as Sofia underlines, in the context of her own teaching experience: "And so I try to make them passionate about it [yoga], to make them understand that in the end this is a way to face life, a tool that can be of support, that goes out of the mat, it is not only on the mat, it does not exhaust itself on the mat" (Sofia, interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 20, 2018).

*Aurora:* You have to take yoga into your life.

*Matteo:* And how do you take yoga into your life?

*Aurora:* Well, how do you do it? It is a mental activity, it is a mental activity. Yoga is when you are queuing, yoga is to say thank you, yoga is to be kind. Yoga is to know when you can drink that one more thing and when not. I mean yoga is to be aware, it is a path of awareness. And when you reach there probably you can also start to enjoy the moment because you are really aware (Aurora, interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 17, 2018).

The permeability between the practice on and outside of the mat is further argued by Francesca as she recounts a teaching her and Roberto received from one of their teachers: "Our life is like a circle. Half of the circle is the practice on the mat and half is reflection, study, and your life. If you only engage with the first half on the mat in the end you will evolve little and slowly and the other way around. So remember that to evolve you have to do the all circle every time. And it is true. Let me say, this I can tell you of the world of modern yoga. That these two semicircles do not always become a circle. There is who loves one part and who loves the other one and it is a pity" (Roberto Milletti and Francesca Cassia, interview by author, audio recording, online interview, May 22, 2019).

"Therefore, it is going slowly, slowly, gradually, always more in-depth within a series of so called practices, because yoga is practical, I mean in the sense that you must practice, you must apply it, from a physical and mental point of view but also in the everyday work of facing life's challenges that always invite you to try to be always in harmony with the context in which you are in, isn't it?" (Lea, interview by author, audio recording, online interview, January 18, 2018).

"But when you become a populariser and we are today at the point in which this popularisation does not have to be enclosed in [certain] contexts, it must be open. So, I do yoga and I take yoga in my workplace. It does not mean that I do the exercises with the mat. I take the principles of yoga on my workplace. I have

a following of people and they are all great professionals that live their job following the principles of yoga and they try to maximise it. And when they succeed to do it results are guaranteed. Companies today, look, incredible, the other day we started a course that an insurance company asked for after they have done their own research and so on, to create a new approach, modality, also working wise but [focusing] on the qualities of people, right? So there start to be these [type of] requests, increasingly, because there start to be the realisation that you can't have a good worker that is performative if it is in a terrible shape at a human level. I mean, we are heading there. And so in the context of society we have to increasingly become practitioners who popularise into their environments a principle of life that make us all feel better, that is no longer based on competition, on I kill so I rise. No, I rise you to rise myself too. And we all rise. Because all together we can do much better. This is one of the hardest things to do" (Lea, interview by author, audio recording, online interview, January 18, 2018).

"I did work in an office, I did manage stores, you know, and those jobs just never felt really right to me, you know, there were just a pay check, yeah, but this is, especially with my seniors, this is more like a calling and yoga gave me a way how to do that. But, yeah, my kids say that when I come back from yoga conferences I am different, you know, cause you are in that whole yoga mind, you have been with all these people that are like minded and doing the same things, cause I go to conferences probably three times a year, and with those people you are talking the talk and you walking the walk and you are just so in to it and then you come home, and you are a little weird for a couple of days. You are just a little off until you can wave that into your regular life. You know. So I am just trying do that ahaha" (Sarah, interview by author, audio recording, Riverside, California, July 08, 2019).

Similarly, Giada evokes the image of the mat as a "battlefield" arguing that the mat functions as a "metaphor of your life": "And this Aladdin carpet, this fifty for hundred centimeters where we do our journeys, where everything can happen or not happen, that gives us our space...it is a bit like our battlefield...it is a metaphor, your mat, where you come back, do the same things, they turn out better, they turn our worse, you feel differently. It is a bit of a metaphor of your life" (Giada, interview by author, audio recording, Milan, Italy, December 22, 2018).

#### Note 37

The egoic sense of self, that has troubled everybody but no one thinks to challenge it because you take it as a fact. We take our egoic personality, our identity, to be a fact whereas I see it as a fiction <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2MDrdJGmUQE> Accessed April 22, 2020.

#### Note 38

...at the root of all struggle is identity. All struggle is identity; that we are living with a notion of ourselves that is not true. That is the chief cause of suffering, confusion, frustration, and aggression. We are suffering from a kind of delusion; it's almost like a fever of misunderstanding (Mooji 2018b: 57).

#### Note 39



“I really liked my successful life, travelling around the world for businesses, cruises, the challenges of my job, the beautiful cars, my beautiful house. I do not deny it, nor I think that money is a bad thing. What I think is that is not one of the necessary ingredients to be happy” (Shree, in [https://www.elconfidencial.com/mundo/europa/2019-09-02/ganaba-120-000-euros-en-endesa-pero-soy-mucho-mas-feliz-en-esta-comuna-espiritual\\_2204499/](https://www.elconfidencial.com/mundo/europa/2019-09-02/ganaba-120-000-euros-en-endesa-pero-soy-mucho-mas-feliz-en-esta-comuna-espiritual_2204499/) accessed April 30, 2020).

#### Note 40

Mooji’s website directly addresses this point underlining that:

Many in the Sangha naturally feel a great love, respect and gratitude towards Moojibaba. Although some people show their love for him by touching his feet, particularly in the East, he does not encourage anyone to approach him in this manner. He prefers to be greeted with a polite ‘Hello’ or ‘Namasté’. Moojibaba likes when we are natural with him. <https://mooji.org/sangha-groups> accessed May 01, 2020.

#### Note 41

During the summer of 2017 while I was residing in the ashram, one member of the Sangha, Flo Camoin, active within the land-care and dishwashing teams, killed himself a few days after being relocated to Mooji Sangha Bhavan as he was asked to give his spot in the ashram to a retreat participant. It was July and the retreat in question was ‘*One Love Sanga Gathering*’ (2017), the first time that Mooji’s international sangha representatives from all over the world were invited for a 10 days silent retreat at Monte Sahaja. An historical moment. Within the highly charged atmosphere of “collective effervescence” (Durkheim 2001) engendered by this retreat, coupled with the culture of denial of individuals’ emotional and psychological problems (formally framed as merely egoic manifestations that must be transcended), nobody in the sangha was able to fully understand – or perhaps even cared for – Flo’s long-lasting depressive symptoms and unease. I recall him addressing the issue after an intense lunch shift with the dishwashing team as he stated that Mooji’s teachings were helping him to gain some distance from his emotional pain. Unfortunately, Mooji’s teachings have not been sufficient and we all are responsible for his death as we could have voiced his unease instead of simply ignore it as “personal chatter” as the culture in the ashram and Mooji’s teachings seemed to imply.

#### Note 42

The page continues with a prayer signed by MoojiBaba, as follows:

Let us offer prayers and blessings  
for all people and all nations of the Earth.  
Let us bless that, though intense, this will also become a time  
of conscious awakening and healing for everyone.  
We know, from the lessons of history,  
that great difficulties, disasters and challenging times  
also can strengthen and unify us by dissolving the differences  
that appear to divide us.  
Calamities often strengthen us internally,  
making us more deeply aware of the highest values of life.

Troubling times encourages us to work together,  
to genuinely care for each other.  
Such events make us more aware of our collective strength  
when we work together as one united human family.  
May we grow in unity, love and understanding.  
The Lord's Blessings be upon  
all people and nations affected at this time.  
May governments and all helpers move in an inspired,  
co-operative and harmonious way,  
so that collectively we are able to put right  
whatever needs to be put right within our capacity.  
Our prayer is that this disease comes to an end soon.  
We believe, trust, know this will happen.  
This is a prayer for our entire world and its leaders.  
We pray that the greater, higher Truth which dwells inside us all  
raise us up in conscious awareness of our true nature and Being  
so that we become more kind, more open,  
more loving, wise, peaceful and powerful in the Truth we are.  
May we live fully in the joy of our real nature  
in accordance with the will of the Supreme God Almighty.

Note 43

“These days, more and more sangha groups are coming together via online platforms such as Zoom. Especially since the Covid-19 pandemic, people find tremendous benefits of gathering in this way as they cannot do so physically. Going one step further, as physical location is no longer a factor, some sangha groups have also beautifully extended their invitations countrywide or even to other countries”  
<https://mooji.org/sangha-groups> accessed January 20, 2020.

## Appendix Two: List of Figures

<b>Figure 1 (chapter Three):</b> The Yoga Field as a Hybrid Field	<b>81</b>
<b>Figure 2 (chapter Three):</b> Roberto Milletti (Sensei)	<b>97</b>
<b>Figure 3 (chapter Three):</b> Francesca Cassia (Niji)	<b>99</b>
<b>Figure 4 (chapter Three):</b> Beatrice Morello (Beatrice)	<b>109</b>
<b>Figure 1 (chapter Four):</b> Arms balance pose with side straightened legs	<b>142</b>
<b>Table 1 (chapter Five):</b> List of practitioners interviewed	<b>182</b>
<b>Figure 1 (Chapter Six):</b> Mooji	<b>253</b>

**Figure 1 (Chapter Seven):** Main Entrance to Monte Sahaja

287

**Figure 2 (Chapter Nine):** The map of Monte Sahaja

296

### **Appendix Three: Glossary of Sanskrit Terms**

Ācārya

Adhīkāra

Advaita Vedānta

Ākāśa

Ājñā

Anāhata

Anandamaya-kosha

Annamaya-kosha

Añjali mudrā

Āratī

Āsana

Ātman

Ātma-jñāna

Ātma-vichara

Avidyā

Bālāsana

Bhakti

Bhaktiyoga

Bindu

Brahmān

Brahmajñāna

Chakra

Darśana

Dhāraṇā

Dharma

Dhyāna

Gūru

Gūru-śiṣya

Kalpa

Karma

Karmayoga

Kirtan

Kriyā

Kuṇḍalinī

Jñāna

Jñānayoga

Jñāni

Jīva

Jyotiṣa

Mala  
Mantra  
Māyā  
Mīmāṃsā  
Manomaya-kosha  
Mokṣa  
Mūlādhāra  
Nāḍī  
Namasté  
Nirukta  
Nyama  
Nyāya  
Óm  
Paramapuruṣa  
Paraṃparā  
Prāṇa  
Prāṇāyāma  
Pranamaya-kosha  
Prasārita pādottānāsana  
Pratyāhāra  
Ṛṣi  
Sādhanā  
Sādhāraṇa  
Samādhi  
Sāṃkhya  
Sampradāya  
Sat  
Satguru  
Satsaṅg  
Saṃgha  
Savasana  
Seva  
Śikṣā

Svādhiṣṭhāna  
Tapas  
Trikoṇāsana  
Vaiṣṇavism  
Vaiśeṣika  
Vidyā  
Vijñanamaya-kosha  
Vinyāsa  
Vīrabhadrāsana  
Vīrāsana  
Vyākaraṇa  
Yantra  
Yama  
Yoga  
Yogaścittavṛttinirodha

### **Other Terms**

βαρύς (Greek)  
Dan tian (Chinese)  
Epimeleia heautou (Greek)  
Gravis (Latin)  
Hara (Japanese)  
Ki (Japanese)  
Parrhesia (Greek)  
Sensei (Japanese)  
Tanden (Japanese)

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