

University of Cambridge  
DHIIR / Department of Social Anthropology  
INDIC HEALTH AND MEDICINE RESEARCH PROGRAMME (IHMRP)  
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## Seventh International DHIIR Conference 20-21 September 2002 Indic Health Conference I: The Case of Modern Yoga

In September 2002 the DHIIR, in collaboration with the Department of Social Anthropology, held a public conference on the health- and medicine-related applications of Modern Yoga. This was preceded by a specialist workshop in September 2001.

The aim of the 2001 workshop - 2002 conference tandem was to produce an in-depth analytical report on how yoga-inspired approaches to health, medicine and wellbeing have been assimilated in the developed world, and to discuss critically the historical, philosophical and intellectual contexts of these phenomena.

Following the conceptual framework of the 2001 workshop, the ideological roots and historical developments of Modern Yoga were discussed and contextualised on the first day of the conference. On the second day the focus of the presentations was on recent research carried out in the anatomical and physiological aspects of yoga practice.

The conference opened with welcoming addresses by **Sir Alec Broers**, Vice-Chancellor of the University, **Dr David Thompson**, Director of CARTS and **Mr S P Hinduja**, Chairman of the Hinduja Foundation (UK).

**Prof. Peter Schreiner** started the morning session with a paper on the historical roots of Modern Yoga. Partly based on a chronological review of the many yoga-related textual traditions (Epics and Puranas, Patanjali tradition, Hatha Yoga and Siddha traditions, etc.), the presentation also discussed the more 'performative' aspects of yoga. These, Prof. Schreiner pointed out, may be rooted in very different realms or layers of life and personality (e.g. body, psyche, society, religion). In order to bring the textual and performative aspects together, Prof. Schreiner used the geometrical symbol of a spiral: superimposed to a schematic representation of key concepts and possible 'loci of practice', the spiral ordered all of these categories along an internal/external visual axis.

The paper by **Dr Elizabeth De Michelis**, "Modern Yoga and medicine in dialogue: certainties and ambiguities" attempted to define Modern Yoga in social and conceptual terms and gave an outline of its historical developments from the end of 19th century. Special reference was made to the substantial medicine and health-related trends found within modern and contemporary forms of yoga.

This was followed by a presentation by **Prof. Joseph Alter** who spoke on "Modern Medical Yoga: struggling with a history of sex, magic and alchemy". Here, the ambivalence between a Modern Yoga emphasizing physical fitness, wellness and holistic health in a secularized form and its roots in sexual symbolism, magic and

alchemy was presented as one of the factors that make yoga a powerful tradition today.

Next, **Prof. K.S. Arjunwadkar** discussed "The relevance of yoga today", summarizing various approaches to and interpretations of yoga. He was keen to stress that the more religious and psychological aspects of yoga should not be overlooked, which could easily happen if too much emphasis were given to utilitarian applications of yoga.

The afternoon session started with a presentation on "Contemporary neuroscience: reintegrating brain and body" by **Prof. Stephen Hunt**. Prof. Hunt described how new horizons are opening in neuroscience due to recent explorations on the dynamic interaction between the environment, the body and the brain. He further discussed the relevance of these studies for medical practice. In a paper on "Plural medicine and East-West dialogue", **Dr Waltraud Ernst** spoke about Modern Yoga as part of the pluralist health and self care market in Western countries. She emphasized the practical consequences of medical pluralism in terms of consumer protection, policy decision-making and financial resource-allocation. In the last presentation of the day **Dr Robin Monro** and **Dr Jerome Ravetz** discussed "Methodologies in yoga and modern science: contrasting paradigms?". Here they maintained that the prevailing paradigms of scientific medicine are inadequate as a basis for research and practice in the consciousness-related fields of physiology and healthcare.

The second day of the conference, dedicated to the applications of yoga, began with a comprehensive review of David Coulter's *Anatomy of Hatha Yoga* by **Dr Ruth Gilmore**. Dr Gilmore discussed the many strengths of this pioneering book, and also highlighted some of its limits. She concluded that this first attempt at bringing together modern anatomy/physiology and *hathayoga* will be very useful as a starting point for further in-depth studies.

**Prof. Sally Blank** then gave a paper on "Physiological responses to *hathayoga*: the exercise stress of *asanas*". She argued that the physiological responses of the body to *asanas* generally follow predictable patterns and demonstrated this with data from a pilot study of Iyengar yoga practitioners on the physiological responses of heart rate, oxygen uptake and blood pressure to several *asanas*. Prof. Blank emphasized the importance of correct anatomical alignment for the effectiveness of *hathayoga* practice.

A further example of the contemporary applications of yoga was presented by **Dr Francoise Barbira Freedman** in an outline of the DHIIR's Scientific Evaluation of Perinatal Yoga (SEPY) project in its social and research contexts. SEPY focuses on the effects of yoga in the prevention and care of perinatal maternal anxiety and/or depression. Dr Freedman further discussed the complexities of finding valid methods to carry out scientific evaluation of the effects of perinatal yoga.

**Fr Joseph Pereira** discussed the evaluation of a specialized yoga module devised by the Kripa Foundation (Mumbai) for the recovery of substance abusers. Fr Pereira described the effects of the module on psychological variables such as levels of stress, anxiety, self-esteem, focus of control and depression as experienced by the patients. While the results obtained so far appear very promising, their conclusiveness is restricted by the small scale of the experiment.

The afternoon session started with a paper by **Ms Lila Crutchfield** on stress management and lifestyle change in the treatment of heart disease and early prostate cancer. The paper was based on clinical research conducted by the Dr Dean Ornish Preventive Medicine Research Institute in the USA. The Ornish programmes involve

comprehensive lifestyle changes, including a low-fat diet, moderate exercise, psychosocial support, smoking cessation and yoga-based stress management techniques. Ms Crutchfield discussed the yoga component of the programmes, delineating the scientific rationale for its benefits.

The next paper, by **Dr Otto Brusis**, took up the same theme. Dr Brusis described the Ornish approach to the treatment of ischaemic heart disease and the results obtained with patients suffering of coronary arteriosclerosis. He concluded that while the Ornish programme had proved successful by leading to the regression of coronary arteriosclerosis, it was not clear to what extent these results were due to the yoga-based stress-management techniques or to other factors.

In a lively and provocative presentation, **Mr Frederick Leboyer** spoke on the benefits and drawbacks of yoga practice. Mr Leboyer's satire of academic approaches to yoga and of his own yoga experiences (as opposed to Tai Chi) was felt to be rather controversial by many of the conference participants. This was reflected by the animated discussions that ensued.

The afternoon presentations were brought to a close by a visual montage of contemporary living yoga entitled: "The most valuable inheritance of the present" presented by **Dr Uma Dinsmore-Tuli**. The range of archive footage and photographs selected for the montage spanned the rich diversity of approaches to yoga from Naths and Naga Babas to Tibetan yogis and dancers, from warrior monks and pious householders to celebrity popularisers of *hathayoga*.

On each day an average of 120 participants attended the programme. Discussion groups were formed at the end of the day to give speakers and audiences an opportunity to interact at close range. The final plenary meeting took up the main points discussed in the groups and with this overview on its proceedings the conference concluded.