

WHITE, GORDON D. (2015). *The “Yoga Sutra of Patanjali”: A Biography* .
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Reviewed by Stuart Sovatsky.

**Sleuthing Hagiography, The Poignant Self, and
A Charismatic Future for Modern Postural Yoga. . .**

Three Riffs Upon

The “Yoga Sutra of Patanjali”: A Biography
Homage to Author David Gordon White
Yoga Historian, Avandhana Yogi, Mortal Being

Avandhana is *citta*'s (mind-stuff's) innate capacities of concentration, cognition and learning, logical reasoning, detailed memory, intellectual and aesthetic creativity, scholarly-dazzle, and good humor, taken to extraordinary levels. Think of *avandhana* as the "good thinking powers" within *citta* that are typically marginalized as being merely diversionary *siddhis* (psychic powers) in favor of the *au courant* pop, "sheer emptiness-fullness-enlightenment" meme.¹

The greatest living *avandhana* master is Dr. R. Ganesh who can engage with over one-hundred simultaneous questioners on diverse topics (biology, chemistry, physics, computer science, extemporaneous poetics, technicalities of grammar, Vedic scriptures, current affairs and many more) in eight languages with sporadic, intentionally off-throwing interruptions, returning to the exact point of his answer prior to each sudden, zig-zagging question-switch (with characteristic humor and wit) and sustained for days, including for twenty-four continuous hours at a stretch. According to Dr. Ganesh, each *avandhana* event is also understood as "a sacred worship where the onlookers are the Gods themselves..." As wavy hip-hop culture would say, *Respect*, Dr. Ganesh, *Respect* (<http://tinyurl.com/oayh7nw>).

As a multi-lingual, myriad-details-ferreting yoga historian, David Gordon White possesses a variety of these *avandhana* skills, perhaps even as a "sacred worshiper" who reverentially considers his readers and colleagues as truth-loving "Gods themselves."

In this case, however, *The "Yoga Sutra of Patanjali": A Biography* reveals this so-modernly worshiped, "foundational-status" text of *asana*-yoga, *The Yoga Sutra* (YS) itself, to be a falsely canonized prophet--a minor acolyte-text, perhaps, and more of a Buddhist-hybrid than *asana*-yogic, at that, and puffed up with modern postural yoga (MPY) lore—appropriately deflated to size by the exacting and erudite efforts-toward-scholarly-truth of the historian of religion.

White's three years of sifting through Sanskrit texts and text-catalogs, Indo-Tibet maps and travel routings, historical-political concurrences and a seven-hundred year evidentiary gap with his sustained academic objectivity (an *avandhana* meditative skill, for sure) deserves to be reckoned with by any reader—as much as the literary-biography he has produced. Perhaps moreso than the book he has produced—surely "lives" are pre-eminent over mere *livres*, as Maugham's "Larry" also shows us in his "razor's edge" yogic discernment that it is better to burn (*nirodha* is, likewise, a "discerning-burning up" process) scriptural-worded parchments to activate their stored-up, solar-energetic warmth than to freeze to death, gripping them tightly.

Yes, the fleeting subjective-actuality of Dr. David White (and thus, each of us) is the ever-elusive, "*citta*-crux of it all." As wavy, difference-bridging, hip-hop culture declares: *Respect*, Dr. White, *Respect*. Indeed, *Respect to All!*

Consider the painstaking, cross-referencing work involved in this tiny glimpse into a few months of Professor White's three-year research. Then multiply by five hundred or so (as his book-length-exceeding online—"invisible," White

calls them—*Notes* impressively persuade us). Then add in the decades of academic training required for any specialist to even get to this point (similar to the myriad thousands of hours involved in pursuing yogic attainments, in these impermanent, fleeting lives) to sense the *Respect* trope I offer him for this scholarly *tour de force* of *avandhana* service for us all.

I had this idea that maybe I should quantify the importance of this text by counting manuscripts. And that was a light bulb moment. I spent much of that summer ordering manuscript catalogues from everywhere, and tabulating the number of manuscripts on the different philosophical schools. It was by doing that [*avandhanic*, yet, tedious-sounding, concentration task] that I came to clearly see that at the time that Colebrooke wrote his 1823 essay there were virtually no *Yoga Sutra* manuscripts around. There were oodles of manuscripts from the five other “standard” Hindu schools, with the exception of Samkhya. Yoga and Samkhya were the two neglected orphans of Indian philosophy. So once I realized that it wasn’t an important part of the Indian philosophical landscape at the turn of the nineteenth century, I had kind of a pivot to work off of. I have never started a book with the intention of debunking what everyone else had written before me, but it seems like that’s what I always end up doing. (David Gordon White, interview with *Yoga Teacher Magazine*, Retrieved from <http://www.yoga-teacher-magazine.com/content/david-gordon-white>)

I

Historical-Truth Reductions of Overblown Hagiography and Nimble Narrative Tells

For the historian, every significant published evidentiary claim, text, commentary, historical circumstance, letter, visa-arrangement and travel plan must be re-examined. And, yes, where a “received history of what everyone else has written” once stood, hagiography (followers’ aggrandized stories) can be what the religion historian ends up revealing as the case.

For example, the Desikachar revered-story of his guru, Krishnamacharya’s rediscovery and secretive study of the YS involving seven years of arduous, acolytic mountainous trekking turns out to be logistically impossible and more likely occurred in the lowlands of Chennai, from White’s *avandhanic*—and becoming ever more skeptical—glance into the Krishnamacharya history becoming hagiography.

For, when you really look at it, the zig-zagging, Desikachar-claimed itinerary “makes no sense” (White concludes), and even less so as he continues to consider the broader-historical fact that these were years of political upheaval, (*thus*—implied or stated—the trusty linguistic tool in any sifting-and-weighing, dot-connecting historian’s toolbox of narrative conclusion-pivots) “. . . any sort of official visa or letter of transit such as Krishnamacharya may have been provided. . . would have been worthless”—except (may I suggest) if shrewdly,

undisclosed *baksheesh*-bribes were, possibly, likely, as is common (take your pick), involved. ...

Yes, there are as many alternative histories as can be “reasonably argued” from available historical traces, as White goes on to consider a later Krishnamacharya biography wherein the to-be Master Yogi’s legendary spiritual trekking to Tibet did not commence until 1917. If this date be true, then such a journey *might* have been “politically” possible, but “still highly improbable,” especially when factoring in the (dramatically, as hagiographies often require) arduous return trips to Simla “over some of the most rugged terrain in the world [the Himalayan region]” every three months (pp. 220-222). What passion, what yogic superhuman capacities, what impossible balderdash...Especially when compared with the early-to-mid 20th century credible wanderings and documented austerities of *sannyasin*-yogi, Hariharananda Aranya, lauded by White as “an authentic scholar-practitioner” who left us the beautiful “*Dawning Sun*” commentary on the YS.

White then (*suavely*, to the dramaturgically-tuned ear, or *astutely*, to the “just the facts” ear) introduces the Fernando Pages Ruiz reference of Krishnamacharya being a “shrewd card player” (though, third-listed by Ruiz after T. K.’s renown as a gourmet cook and horticulturist, and not till I looked up this reference did I see that Ruiz referred to literal card-playing and not a “slick character”). White then name-drops for (clarifying, or is it more suavity and that shaded my initial misunderstanding of the “shrewd card player” reference?) emphasis to the Ruiz depiction-description via a sidebar mention of another shrewd card player, the fictive and *virtuoso* of slick, Agent 007, James Bond (that may or may not be more of an author’s playful tell than it is truly “necessary” to illuminating Krishnamacharya’s role in *The “Yoga Sutra of Patanjali:” A Biography*) into his narrative at page 222, serving as a segue-pivot to introduce the contemporaneous, (1900-1901) Rudyard Kipling’s *McClure’s Magazine* serial-alluring publication of *Kim*, with its historical-fictional account of secret-carrying spies cloaked as holy men, traveling between India and Tibet.

The implication, or is it just a “compelling symmetry” (White’s predicate) of narratives, one purporting to be historical and the other explicitly “fictive history”: Desikachar’s biography surreptitiously (or merely coincidentally) fashioned the scamp’s apparel of a fictive Kim and Kipling’s *Just So* yarns into these “Emperor’s New Clothes” of Krishnamacharya hagiographic embroidery (not to say, “falsehoods”).

“Truth is stranger than fiction,” David next writes, “but where is the [final] truth in all this? The mind boggles” –an infinitive verb of stunning awe echoed indefinitely forward in his final words of *The Alchemical Body*, “Our research continues. . .” (White’s ellipsis). And, let us not fail to mention, *samdhya* *abhasa*, the controversial “twilight language” of wisely hidden and intentionally-secretive (and, heard as a gambler’s “tell,” these twilight-glimmers become unintentionally *alluring*, rather than “merely” concealing) yogic teachings as Woodroffe reports:

Copies of the complete tantra are rare enough. . . . I came across a complete manuscript some two years ago in the possession of a Nepalese Pandit. He would, however, only permit me to make a copy of his manuscript on the condition that the Shatkarma Mantras were not published. ... I was unable to persuade him [otherwise]. (Woodroffe, 1978, p. xiii)

Yes, a detail-ferreting, *avandhana*-level scholar's work is never done. Nor do the effects of this decades, MPY-taught, Krishnamacharya-hagiography wither retroactively, but instead, “. . . in some way extends to nearly every one of the tens of millions of contemporary practitioners who [faithfully] take to their yoga mats [as if practicing on bedrock, historically significant truths] on a daily basis” (p. 223).²

After this brief, but laborious, zig-zagging exegesis through just a few pages of *The “Yoga Sutra of Patanjali:” A Biography*, I can see how the one or many Patanjali(s) would have found a welcomed refuge in a post-narrative realm of wordless awareness and sheer, vibratory *ananda*-ecstasies in *yoga citta vritti nirodha*.³

Similarly, I will now leave-go of all such narrative zig-zagging sleuth-work, enjoyable as it is, to take up a different and more existential-humanistic tack into the subjective realm of “born, desiring, suffering, aging, and dying selves,” like you and me and David and all others. *Respect*, vulnerable humanity! *Respect*. ... Thus,

KA – The “Who” of All

. . . what if ten or a thousand of those modern millions and (innumerable others in India who pondered the YS over the centuries) were guided in dissolving (*nirodha*) myriad suicidally-depressing thoughts, thus uplifting the courses of their “very lives?” Would we still deem it a “minor” text, especially since spiritual succor, not numerically-traceable, Amazon.com-ish prominence, is its *raison d’etre*? Certainly they, nor their sympathetic friends and families would not be so dismissive of this existential (and so-different genre of) “significance.”

Indeed, if the Krishnamacharya hagiography somehow inspired some thousands to do a few heroic actions in their own lives, how might the historian White weigh it differently? By including contemporary subject research interviews, the book might have taken another year to write, but the YS biography would perhaps have been more of a living *biography*, “. . . where is the [*final*: conclusive or temporal] truth in all this?” The mind boggles -- indeed!

So, it is the “vulnerable human being,” who is subject to all manner of suffering, hopes, involvements, illnesses and inevitable aging and (possible, likely, inevitable? finality of) death, as Buddha famously and compassionately noted of each of us to ourselves and to each other, that now concerns me, as it also, foremost, concerns the Patanjalic, meditative introspection and perhaps—

at one point in time or another—some, or all, of the *Dramatis Personae* of *The “Yoga Sutra of Patanjali:” A Biography*.³

The too-commonly backgrounded or (ironically) lost *Ka*, “*Who-Subject*” of *you*— the living, breathing *prana-vayus*, in-and-out, family-embedded or estranged or *sannyasin*-renounced *you* in need of food or money or understanding or a bath, the genius or the dependently mentally-afflicted, the real yogi or beggar-pretender, the in-grouped and respected town-folk or the marginalized-ones, disrespected as if “sinister”—now spending some moments of your *own* precious life reading this (at home, in a prison yoga class or well-appointed studio), and of *me* spending mine writing this as if, “*to you*,” as if we “*mattered to one another*” as “*friends*,” perhaps even as long-lost, now reunited “*blood-family*” (*Vasudaiva kutumbakam*, even) if not also in some strange and flickering way, as R. Ganeshian, “*gods-goddesses ourselves*.”

. . . But these leaves [*sutras*] conning, you con at peril,
For these leaves [*sutras*], and me [The Feeling Being], you will not understand,
They will elude you at first, and still more afterward—I will certainly elude you,
Even while you should think you had unquestionably caught me, behold!
Already you see I have escaped from you.
For it is not for what I have put into it that I have written this [YS] book,
Nor is it by reading it you will acquire it,
Nor do those know me best who admire me, and vauntingly praise me,
Nor will the candidates for my love, (unless at most a very few,) prove victorious,
Nor will my poems [*sutras*] do good only—they will do just as much evil, perhaps more;
For all is useless without that which you may guess at many times and not hit—that which I hinted at [the Awe of it all, the vulnerability];
Therefore release me, and depart on your way.
(Walt Whitman, “*WHOEVER you are, holding me now in hand*,” *Leaves of Grass*, (2007, p.122))

**For (Even More!) Future Research:
The “Other Forms of Yoga”
Mother Kundalini’s Sahaja Charismatic Asanas**

This reinvention of the Yoga Sutra as the foundational scripture of “classical yoga” runs counter to the pre-twentieth century history of India’s yoga traditions ...and [when, for centuries,] **other forms** [my emphasis] of yoga (Pasupata Yoga,* Tantric Yoga, and Hatha Yoga) dominated [were foundational for] the Indian yoga scene.

The “Yoga Sutra”; A Biography, pp. xvi-xvii

According to the *Pasupata Sutra* and the *Ganakarika Sutra*, the *Lakulisha Pasupata** yoga sect [150 - A. D.] practiced an ecstatic ritual including “. . . dancing [charismatic, *shaktipat*-awakened proto- *asanas*] consisting of [all

possible] motions of the hands and feet: upward, downward, inward, outward and shaking motion . . . a sacred sound produced by the contact of the tongue-tip with the palate [*nabho* and *khecari mudras*, the summit of *hatha-yogic* maturation]. . . [and] after the dance [*sic*] when the devotee has again sat down and is still meditating on Siva,” an “inner worship” and “prayer.”

Collins, C., *The Ritual and Iconography of Shiva at Elephanta*,
quoted in Sovatsky, 2014, pp. 246-247

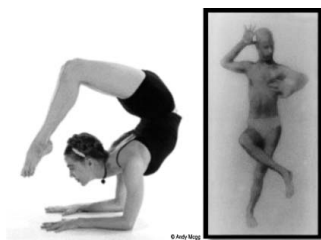
That is called [yogic] action of the body in which reason takes no part and which does not originate as an idea springing in the mind. To speak simply, yogis perform actions [called *asanas*, *kriyas*, *bandhas*, and *mudras*] with their bodies, like the [innocent, natural, *sahaja*] movements of children.

Jñanesvar-gita (1210/1987)

Īśvara-praṇidhāna

Surrender to [be completely moved by] The Primordial Revered Mover *Īśvara*
[*Prana*, permeating energy of sentience and movement, deified as *Īśvara*]

YS, Sādhana Pāda



Clearly, the woman dressed in black yoga garb* is willfully recreating the scorpion pose (*vrischika asana*) in textbook precision, dressed for the camera shoot, holding, holding, stretching, concentrating and breathing steadily. This could be called, Apollonian, form-perfecting *yoga* known in these times as MPY. (SEE IMAGE GALLERY ONLINE AT <http://tinyurl.com/khnnkbs> for all images that accompany text at *)

The standing yogi image* is a snapshot moment of a fluidly moving yogi (Kripalvananda of Kayavarohan, Gujarat, India) during advanced stages of pranically-inspired *asanas*. In contrast to the left, Apollonian, posed (in both senses of the word) photo of this healthy-flexibility *yoga*, this one could be called Dionysian, or inwardly-compelled, ecstatic or charismatic *sahaja yoga* that Kripalvananda claims is the same *shaktipat*-entranced yoga of the ancient *Pasupata* “dance” rituals. See how this pose could only emerge idiosyncratically from within, in its perfect moment, in just *this* way, arms turned, fingers extended and curled, legs lyrically bent, facial expression absorbed in ever-shifting moods of inwardly spellbound transfixations. (See *Gurus of Modern*

Yoga, eds. Mark Singleton and Ellen Goldberg, Oxford University Press, 2013. Ch. 11, *Swami Kripalvananda*, by Ellen Goldberg, http://modernyogaresearch.org/images/stories/yoga/Mark_PDFs/singletonandgoldberg_website%20blurb.pdf)

Thus the *yogi's* body “dances” and moves (even as a fetus, then *Jñaneshvaric* child, incarnates itself *in utero* and in infancy, by fits and starts), generating *siddhis*, “powers” or *charisms*, “gifts” of the Spirit and as discernable in spiritual traditions for thousands of years, from the shaman’s self-empowering trance-dance,* the Grecian Dionysian Revel,* Christian Holy Ghost shivering* and shaking Shakers* to spontaneous *tai-chi* guided by *chi*, the spontaneous, spinal rocking *davening* of orthodox Judaism* and the spontaneous spinal rocking *zikr* of Islam and the transfixedly straight and still spine (*uju kaya*) of Buddhism.* The *Pasupata Yogic Nataraja*–“moving-every-which-way” dance *asanas* of Mother *Kundalini** would seem merely to be the most complex and fully articulated of these species-wide, spiritually-moving *charisms*.

I hope historians of comparative religion will investigate this “other yoga history” and its charismatic cognates, as “our research continues. ...”

NOTES

¹Indeed, the “emptiness-fullness” meme may be a gross and misleading generalization. *Shakta* traditions claim that sustained meditative inspection perpetually reveals fractally-nested, subtler and subtler vibratory realms of *citta*-as-Shiva-Shakti’s “Eternal Dance” that gives rise to consciousness, the body—from quivering chromosomal zygote (from the Sanskrit, *zhog* or union-yogi, the Shiva-Shakti, ovum-sperm, union-being) to the *tandava* dancer’s death-rattling last breath—and the entire quantum universe, including many of the proto- *asanas*, *bandhas*, *mudras* (considered as *sahaja kriyas*, naturally-maturing-incarnating movements) that have been pedagogically formalized into repeatable “practices” of yoga. Oh, and overwhelming ecstatic sensations and moods of awe, often described as a “surrender to God-the Mover (*Isvara*).” See Sovatsky (2014) on charismatic yoga as a Foucaultian *ars erotica*.

²More problematic was *New York Times* science journalist, Bill Broad’s *The Science of Yoga* (Simon & Shuster, 2012) exposé that MPY is riddled with pseudo-scientific health claims and a shadow-stratum of hyperextension, joint, cartilage, and other “yoga injuries.” This was not easy news for the fourteen million yoga folks within the MPY community to quite suddenly learn about and, by extension, its reactive ripples of injury prevention and liability concerns at all levels of Big Yoga.

These ripples of “the becoming more-known problematic of spiritual pursuits” can be traced even further: Before he had discovered this unknown stratum of MPY injuries, Broad’s original book project (that he interviewed me for) focused on my area of clinical concern for forty years, *kundalini* charismatic-energetic “awakening” of *sahaja asanas* and “spiritual emergence” –the auspicious, subjective inner-problems for any “actual, vulnerable person,” associated with believing oneself to be having “religious” or “spiritual” or dramatic “energetic, yogic” experiences, or “*nirodhic*-beyond egoic thoughts-identifications” within a medical-model psychiatric culture permeated with short-cut hopes for instant-enlightenment. See Endnote 1 for even more.

³As the *American Psychiatric Association* learned of scientific research on *nirodhic* meditation and cross-cultural or “transpersonal” studies of “the mind” (*citta*) such as published by Lee Sannella, M.D., in 1976 (whose private practice I inherited in 1983), it chose in 2000 to modify that year’s edition of previous *DSM*’s, the *DSM IV TR* by specifying that intentionally-sought meditative states are, henceforth, to be understood in their cultural or religion contexts and no longer as *Depersonalization Disorders*. Sannella opened his study of twenty modern “cases” of *kundalini* “awakening” (*yoga citta vritti nirodha*, from the *pranic* aspect of consciousness and the *anna-maya-kosha* flesh-body) in his book, *Kundalini, Transcendence or Psychosis?* with this paragraph:

“...the heart races and blood pressure soars. There is moaning, crying and screaming. A severe head injury? only a relatively normal human birth. The description sounds pathological because the symptoms were not understood in relation to the outcome: the birth of a new human being. In a darkened room, a man sits alone. His body is swept by muscular spasms. Indescribable sensations and sharp pains [sic] run up his legs and over his back and neck. His skull feels as [if] it will burst. Inside his head he hears roaring sounds... Then suddenly a sunburst floods his inner being. ...He laughs and is overcome with bliss. A psychotic episode? No, this is a psycho physical transformation, a rebirth process as natural as physical birth. It seems pathological only because the symptoms are not understood in relation to the outcome: an enlightened human being.” (Sannella, 1976, p. 1)

And, then consider the “mind boggling” experiential report of the author of the Western-audience classic on this topic, *Kundalini, The Evolutionary Energy of Man*, (Boston: Shambhala, 1970), Gopi Krishna:

Suddenly, with a roar like that of a waterfall, I felt a stream of liquid light entering my brain through the spinal cord. . . . The illumination grew brighter and brighter, the roaring louder. I experienced a rocking sensation and then felt myself slipping out of my body, entirely enveloped in a halo of light. . . . It grew wider and wider, spreading outward while the body, normally the immediate object of its perception, appeared to have receded into the distance until I became entirely unconscious of it. I was now all consciousness without any outline, without any idea of corporeal appendage, without any feeling or sensation coming from the senses, immersed in a sea of light simultaneously conscious and aware at every point, spread out, as it were, in all directions without any barrier or material obstruction. I was no longer myself, or to be more accurate, no longer as I knew myself to be . . . but instead was a vast circle of consciousness in which the body was but a point, bathed in light and in a state of exultation and happiness impossible to describe. (Krishna, 1992, pp. 6-7)

And, from St. Thomas Aquinas of the Catholic tradition upon his “where is the truth in all this” mystical experience, just months before his death:

“I cannot go on. . . . All that I have written [including the *Summa Theologica* “foundational text” of the Catholic Church] seems to me like so much straw [a self-debunking, de-realization of this saint, unknown to perhaps billions of Church-bowing, *Summa Theologica*-revering, Catholics, for centuries] compared to what I have seen and what has been revealed to me.” (Aquinas’s thought-ending (*nirodha*?) declaration. (<http://tinyurl.com/c3h58ub>)

³Indeed, legend has it that grasping mortal impermanence while viewing a funeral procession catalyzed Prince Siddhartha’s path to enlightenment as Lord Buddha and facts verify that vulnerable and fresh-eyed grandchild photos catalyzed the ending of a polarizing, religion-based war at Camp David in 1978: “I handed [M. Begin] the photographs . . . [He] looked at each photograph individually, repeating the name of the grandchild I had written on it. His lips trembled, and tears welled up in his eyes. He told me a little about each child. . . . We were both emotional as we talked quietly for a few minutes about grandchildren and about war. . . . He said, ‘I will accept the letter you have drafted on Jerusalem.’” —Jimmy Carter from *Keeping Faith*, University of Arkansas Press (1995). Retrieved 1/12/15 Entry “September 17” at http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/documents/campdavid25/campdavid25_thirt_eendays.phtml

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The Reviewer

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