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# **The Subtle Body: Religious, Spiritual, Health-Related, or All Three?**

**A Look Into the Subtle Physiology of Traditional and Modern Forms of Yoga**

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Notions of subtle body systems have migrated and changed throughout India and Tibet over many years with much controversy; the movement of these ideas to the West follows a similar controversial path, and these developments in both Asia and the West exemplify how one cannot identify a singular, legitimate, “subtle body”. Asserting that there is only one legitimate teaching, practice, and system of the subtle body is problematic and inappropriate. The subtle body refers to assumed energy points within the human body that cannot be viewed by the naked eye, but is believed by several traditions to be part of our physical existence. Indo-Tibetan notions of a subtle body do include many references to similar ideas when it comes to this type of physiology, but there has never been one sole agreement on a legitimate identification or intended use.

In the West today, Eastern philosophies of the subtle body have been changed, appropriated, and popularized. It is compelling to investigate the progression of these ideas from religious and ritualistic to the “secular”, health-related ideas of the subtle body outside of Asia. The issue of cultural appropriation has been made more prominent within the West, but modern yoga studios have not been targeted as an issue of appropriation as much as others. The “spiritual, but not religious” practices of modern yoga can definitely be considered as adaptations and appropriations of religiously committed and tradition-based techniques.<sup>1</sup> There is tension regarding the popularization and appropriation of religious practice and belief, and the utilization of Eastern subtle-body systems in the postural yoga practice of the West does exemplify such issues. However, due to the fact that notions of yoga and the subtle body have been constantly changing throughout their history, it may be argued that the practices of Western yoga and the subtle body systems that come along with them are no less “legitimate” than the practices that

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<sup>1</sup> Louis Komjathy, *Introducing Contemplative Studies*, (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2018), 60.

they are adapted from. Adaptation has always been a feature of yoga's history, as competing and coexisting theories influenced one another, with some practices disappearing while others take on new forms.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps these issues, to a certain extent, parallel those in the disagreements between Hindu and Buddhist on subtle body ideals, as well as how these practices should be utilized.

Even though there are vast differences in depictions of the subtle body both in Asia and the West, there are similarities regarding subtle physiology between traditions that should not be ignored. Prior to the modern period, the subtle, yogic body was commonly conceived of as a network of psychophysical centres linked by conduits for the movement of airs and vital forces.<sup>3</sup> In Indian traditions, subtle body channels which carry vital energy throughout the body are typically known as *nadi*, and the points of intersection are known as *cakra*, which also serve a purpose of being a focus for visualization in the yogic body.<sup>4</sup> Another piece of the subtle body according to Tantric theories is *bindu*, which can be understood as a “drop” or “point”, which is a focus for meditation that is located in the body.<sup>5</sup> Tantric yoga commonly asserts that the body is conceived of as composed of a number of *nadis*. When the vital energy that flows through the *nadis* is purified, the channels are able to carry this energy through the body.<sup>6</sup> The substance that is said to flow through these channels is primarily viewed as *prana* or vital “breath” energy, and can be associated with specific bodily functions, including sexual energy.<sup>7</sup> This can be compared

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<sup>2</sup> James Mallison and Mark Singleton, *Roots of Yoga*, (London, Penguin Classics, 2017), xxi.

<sup>3</sup> Mallison and Singleton, *Roots of Yoga*, 171.

<sup>4</sup> Mallison and Singleton, *Roots of Yoga*, 438-9.

<sup>5</sup> Mallison and Singleton, *Roots of Yoga*, 438.

<sup>6</sup> Mallison and Singleton, *Roots of Yoga*, xix.

<sup>7</sup> Geoffrey Samuel, *Religion and the Subtle Body in Asia and the West*, (London and New York, Routledge, 2015), 5.

to the idea of *qi* in Chinese thought, which fulfills a similar role to *prana* in Indian and Tibetan traditions.

*Prana*, the vital energy that is said to animate all living things,<sup>8</sup> is an integral piece of the structure and functioning of the yogic body. The major Tantric traditions, both Hindu and Buddhist, agree on there being three principle *nadi*, in which there is a central channel running down the spinal column, and two others to its left and right, winding around it and meeting at a *cakra*.<sup>9</sup> Other traditions depict the *nadis* not winding around the central channel, but straight up and down to its left and right. These *nadi* were conceived as the channels which flowed the vital breath substance *prana*. Another term that permeates multiple yogic traditions is *pranayama*, which has been central to yogic practices since their earliest descriptions. *Pranayama*, which is a compound of *prana* (life-breath) and *ayama* (control), is the subtle body manipulation through one's control and use of the breath. This element of practice was taken over in Tantra and considerably developed within those traditions.<sup>10</sup> Here, Tantra refers to a specific type of text or body of knowledge. Within the tradition, the ritual and praxis of Tantra is regarded as distinct and more powerful than others.<sup>11</sup> It is important, however, to note that *pranayama* was seen as a difficult way to master yoga, and breath control is singled out because of its difficulty and potential danger.<sup>12</sup> Physical yoga today is often identified with bodily postures, but the Tantric traditions of pre-modern India thought that breath control was the defining practice of physical yoga.<sup>13</sup> Modern systems of yoga include the breath as an essential part of the practice, specifically in the linking of breath with movement.

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<sup>8</sup> Mallison and Singleton, *Roots of Yoga*, 440.

<sup>9</sup> Samuel, *Religion and the Subtle Body*, 39.

<sup>10</sup> André Padoux, *The Hindu Tantric World: An Overview*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2017), 105.

<sup>11</sup> Mallison and Singleton, *Roots of Yoga*, 441.

<sup>12</sup> Mallison and Singleton, *Roots of Yoga*, 127-128.

<sup>13</sup> Mallison and Singleton, *Roots of Yoga*, 128.

Although notions of yoga and the subtle body can be traced back to many of the Indian religious traditions, and there are similarities between the language used and ideology behind these notions of *cakra*, *nadi*, and *prana*, there has never been a singular agreement on the meaning behind these notions or their intended use. There is also no “standard” system of the *cakras*.<sup>14</sup> Andrea Jain explains that “premodern yoga traditions were not monolithic; rather, they were dramatically heterogenous, taking a wide range of forms.”<sup>15</sup> Each school, sometimes every teacher within the school, has had their own *cakra* system<sup>16</sup>, and consequently, their own ideas of how to utilize these *cakra* systems, as well as practices implemented in order to manipulate subtle energies. The developments that each tradition made were considered legitimate within that tradition, however, there were considerable disagreements across traditions as each developed subtle body concepts and practices in different ways.

Indic subtle-body-type concepts can date back to the fifth or fourth century BCE, and are said to first occur in the Upanishads, more specifically, the *Taittiriya Upanishad*. The much later *Maitri Upanishad* explicitly discusses breath control or *pranayama*<sup>17</sup>, which, again, is one of the most commonly recognized practices in order to manipulate subtle energies within the body. A description of practices undertaken by yogins of the day is also seen in the renowned Hindu epic, the *Mahabharata*, specifically the section known as the *Bhagavad Gita*, which also presented breath control exercises. This included an internalization of vedic ritual, or the sacrifice of the inhalation (*prana*) to the exhalation (*apana*).<sup>18</sup> It is important to note, however, that the accounts

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<sup>14</sup> David Gordon White, *Kiss of the Yoginī: “Tantric Sex” In It’s South Asian Context*, (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 222.

<sup>15</sup> Andrea R. Jain, *Selling Yoga: From Counterculture to Pop Culture*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 2015), 2.

<sup>16</sup> White, *Kiss of the Yoginī*, 222.

<sup>17</sup> Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 2010), 26.

<sup>18</sup> Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 26,

of the practice of “yoga” within the epic do not describe it as a form of meditative or physical practice, but rather as a technique for the attainment of *siddhis* (supernatural powers).<sup>19</sup> One of the earliest accounts of *cakras* as parts of a subtle body are found within the *Caryagiti* and the *Hevajra Tantra*, two circa eighth-century Buddhist Tantric works. They locate four *cakras* within the human body at the navel, heart, throat, and head.<sup>20</sup> Although these early accounts of a subtle body provide somewhat of a framework for the developments that Indian and Tibetan religious traditions made, this still does not assert that these early texts provide “the one legitimate yogic body”, due to the fact that interpretations of them varied across traditions.

An element that is common to all Hindu traditions, as well as to Mahayana Buddhism, and that is constantly found in Tantra is yoga. Yoga can be understood in this context as a somatopsychic practice used in ritual and for spiritual ends.<sup>21</sup> Yoga was important throughout a range of traditions, predominantly Hindu Saivism and Vaisnavism as well as Buddhism. Together, they constituted India’s dominant religious tradition from the sixth to thirteenth century CE, which came to be known as “Tantra”.<sup>22</sup> The subtle body is a critical component within a multitude of yogic practices, including that of Jainism and Sufism. Over many years with the development of Vedanta and Tantra in India, notions of a subtle body, as well as the purpose and intended use of *pranayama* and other ways to manipulate subtle energy, changed immensely and was interpreted differently within both Hindu and Buddhist Tantric traditions. These ideas also spread throughout other Indic traditions such as Jainism. Geoffrey Samuel explains that “Subtle-body concepts in the Tantric tradition are practical more than theoretical.

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<sup>19</sup> White, *Kiss of the Yoginī*, 221.

<sup>20</sup> White, *Kiss of the Yoginī*, 224.

<sup>21</sup> Padoux, *The Hindu Tantric World*, 47.

<sup>22</sup> Mallison and Singleton, *Roots of Yoga*, xviii.

The aim is not... simply to understand, but to use for the purpose of spiritual transformation.”<sup>23</sup>

This diffusion of subtle body concepts developed tension between traditions regarding the degree of significance given to the subtle body, as well as what traditions practices were considered legitimate. Vedantic traditions reworked the ideas within the *Taittiriya Upanishad*, whereas Tantric traditions took another route in which they saw the subtle bodies as a means to spiritual transformation. Certain Hindu Tantra was criticized by rival forms of religion, such as the Tantric *bhakti* (devotional) cults, as well as sects of Vedantic traditions such as *advaita vedanta*, which counters yogic practices with quietistic practices of *samadhi*, or “absorption”.<sup>24</sup> The yogic practices of Hindu Tantra were viewed as aggressive and dangerous due to their special emphasis on transgressive practices which involved ritual consumption of forbidden substances, sex rites and proximity to death.<sup>25</sup> On the contrary, Buddhist Tantra, especially in Tibet, was and still is regarded as highly elevated and spiritually profound.<sup>26</sup> Even within Tantric practice, both Buddhist and Hindu, the way in which the subtle body was employed varied between Tantric systems.<sup>27</sup> Andre Padoux asserts that “There is no so-called Tantric yoga, for the yogic practices and theoretical constructions of the various Tantric traditions differ on several counts.”<sup>28</sup>

Although there are many different interpretations as to the material existence of *cakra* and *nadi* throughout Buddhist and Hindu traditions, this is not the central issue for practitioners. The main issue regards *how* one uses these systems as a meditational device for personal transformation or other ritual ends.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Samuel, *Religion and the Subtle Body*, 6.

<sup>24</sup> Mallison and Singleton, *Roots of Yoga*, 13.

<sup>25</sup> Mallison and Singleton, *Roots of Yoga*, xix.

<sup>26</sup> Samuel, *Religion and the Subtle Body*, 34.

<sup>27</sup> Samuel, *Religion and the Subtle Body*, 41.

<sup>28</sup> Padoux, *The Hindu Tantric World*, 74.

<sup>29</sup> Samuel, *Religion and the Subtle Body*, 41.



The Kaula texts of the Hindu Saiva tradition and the Buddhist texts of Mahayoga and *Anuttarayoga Tantra* contain some of the most sophisticated descriptions of subtle body processes within Indic and Indo-Tibetan traditions, and it is within these lineages that these practices have been continued into the modern era. It is in these texts that one can find the well-known and widespread anatomy of *nadi* and *cakra*.<sup>30</sup> The internalized image of the subtle, yogic body is a fundamental element for nearly all meditative and ritual Tantric practices. Manipulation of this body is meant to give supernatural and magical powers or lead the adept to the highest levels of consciousness and liberation. These practices activate different channels, or centers, of the subtle body to the aim of the practice.<sup>31</sup> Although these practices have this in common, there are observable differences in the way aspects of the subtle body were interpreted between traditions. For example, the *cakras* were not always a ubiquitous feature of yoga traditions.<sup>32</sup> The *Bhagavata Purana*, which was perhaps written between the sixth and tenth century CE, can be considered one of the earliest sources for the vertical configuration of the six plus one *cakras* that many identify with Hindu subtle body systems.<sup>33</sup> It's discussion of yogic body cosmology can be regarded as the most sophisticated and fully developed discussions of these topics.<sup>34</sup> The first Hindu source to list the locations explained in the *Bhagavata Purana* is the *Kaulajnananirnaya*. The eleven *cakras* included in *Kaulajnananirnaya* incorporate these seven locations: genitals, navel, heart, throat, mouth, forehead, and crown.<sup>35</sup> On the contrary, the same source seems to contradict itself regarding the number of *cakras*, the meaning of the word *cakra*, as well as their locations and associations.

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<sup>30</sup> Samuel, *Religion and the Subtle Body*, 38.

<sup>31</sup> Padoux, *The Hindu Tantric World*, 75.

<sup>32</sup> Mallison and Singleton, *Roots of Yoga*, 175.

<sup>33</sup> White, *Kiss of the Yoginī*, 224.

<sup>34</sup> White, *Kiss of the Yoginī*, 179

<sup>35</sup> White, *Kiss of the Yoginī*, 225.

A later tradition of Hindu Tantra, Srividya, which arose post-tenth-century CE, contains a critical practice of *kamakala*, which can be understood as the “art of love”. This is a diagram that comes with a practice, and deals with the sequence of *cakras*. The image of *bindu*, which can be interpreted as “drop”, permeates most Tantric theories and practices, as it encapsulates the being, energy, and pure consciousness of the divine.<sup>36</sup> Sricakra, the primary diagrammatic representation of the godhead in this tradition, is portrayed as a *bindu* located at the center of an elaborate diagram of nine interlocking *cakras*.<sup>37</sup> This cult’s six-*cakra* system is attributed to the *Kubjīkamatantra*, which was popularized and inherited by India’s yogi lineages. This subsequently reinforced modern representations of Tantric and yogic esoteric anatomy.<sup>38</sup>

Due to social and political transformation, Tantric systems of Buddhism moved North into Tibet. Tradition holds that it was in the time of Lha Totori (ca. Fourth century ce), a ruler of Yarlung in southeastern Tibet, that Buddhism first emerged. Tri Songdetsen, who was placed on the throne in 755, founded Tibet’s first Buddhist monastery, Samye (ca. 779). The foundation of the monastery is also said to have involved the intercession of Padmasambhava, a renowned Tantric adept from northwestern India. The king Tri Songdetsen, the monk Santaraksita, and the adept Padmasambhava are revered as the trinity of the Tibetan conversion.<sup>39</sup> The Tantric literature and ritual systems that became iconic during the Central Tibetan renaissance were drawn from a diverse background, some of which were late seventh- to early-ninth century compositions.<sup>40</sup> A ritual system that became emphasized in Tibet was that of the *Mahayoga* and

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<sup>36</sup> David Gordon White, “Transformations in the Art of Love: Kāmakalā Practices in Hindu Tantric and Kaula Traditions,” *History of Religions*, 38, no. 2 (November 1998): 174.

<sup>37</sup> David Gordon White, “Transformations in the Art of Love,” 175-76.

<sup>38</sup> Mallison and Singleton, *Roots of Yoga*, 177.

<sup>39</sup> Matthew Kapstein, *Tibetan Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 2014), 16.

<sup>40</sup> Ronald M. Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance: Tantric Buddhism in the Rebirth of Tibetan Culture*, (New York, Columbia University Press, 2005), 36.

*yogini-tantras*. In this system, psychosexual yogic meditations of the completion process were employed. The completion process includes yogas based on the subtle body. As new systems became systematized in the ninth century, the consecrations are said to provide access to ritual or yogic practices.<sup>41</sup> Ronald M. Davidson explains:

The secret consecration authenticated the yogic system of “self consecration” (*svadhisthana*). Here the yogin visualized his internal wheels (*cakra*), channels (*nadi*), and vital air (*vayu*), with a flame arising from the navel wheel, going up the central channel, and causing the semen-related “thought of awakening” (*bodhicitta*) to drip down from the fontanel.<sup>42</sup>

The visualized rise of semen was said to create sensations of joy. Because of difficulties regarding things like celibacy, this practice was usually carried out with a visualized consort, but was still said to bring upon joyous states.<sup>43</sup>

Eleventh and twelfth century Buddhist revival saw intermittent tensions due to various factors, for example, relations between preexisting religious traditions and newly imported Indian teachings, orientations favoring monastic scholarship versus Tantrism and yoga. Despite hesitation of some toward aspects of Tantrism, particularly ritualized sex and violence, it was during this same period that efforts to translate and transmit Tantric traditions were renewed. The new Tantras reflected critical changes within Buddhist Tantrism, including a shift to systems emphasizing internal yoga over external ritual, the new systems being often transgressive and strongly eroticized in their symbolism and sometimes in fact.<sup>44</sup> Those that remained to adhere to “former translations,” or Tantras that were introduced before the eleventh century, came to be known as Nyingmapa. The Nyingmapa asserted the preeminence of Padmasambhava. The pinnacle of the system was the abstract and visionary approach to contemplation known as the

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<sup>41</sup> Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance*, 37.

<sup>42</sup> Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance*, 37.

<sup>43</sup> Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance*, 37.

<sup>44</sup> Kapstein, *Tibetan Buddhism*, 31-2.

Supreme Yoga (*atiyoga*) or Great Perfection (*dzokchen*). The authenticity of this system was challenged in later times by adherents of the “new translations,” the post-tenth century translations of tantric texts.<sup>45</sup> The Kagyu, Sakya, and Geluk schools of Tibetan Buddhism, also called “new translation schools”, divide their traditions into four tantras, with the *Anuttarayoga Tantra* being the one that is generally practiced. Associated with these teachings are practices of “inner yoga” in which one visualizes one’s body as an inner mandala, composed of the *cakras* (wheels), *nadis* (channels), *prana* (wind), and *bindu* (drops).<sup>46</sup> Six *cakras* are of importance in Buddhist tantric yoga, and four are of special importance: *nirmana-cakra* (navel), *svabhavika-cakra* (crown of the head), *sambjoga-cakra* (throat), and *dharma-cakra* (heart).<sup>47</sup> The *cakra* system developed here is different from those of Hindu Tantric traditions, and consequently, the system that we are familiar with in the West.

A critical component of the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism is the six yogas of Naropa, in which four of the six yogas are associated with a particular body part (navel, crown of the head, throat, and heart), and consequently, a particular *cakra*. They are also associated with certain states of consciousness including the waking, dreaming, and deep sleep states. The Six Yogas form a group of practices that are meant to allow a practitioner to integrate all existential situations with the Buddhist path and transform them into opportunities for liberation.<sup>48</sup> Within this context, six yogas provide tools to root out our deepest habitual patterns, which obstruct our ability to remain in the empty, luminous, and compassionate awareness that, ultimately, is the *yidam* (embodiment of buddhanature).<sup>49</sup> The major Tibetan Buddhist Tantric texts all clearly

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<sup>45</sup> Kapstein, *Tibetan Buddhism*, 27.

<sup>46</sup> Reginald A. Ray, *Secret of the Vajra World: The Tantric Buddhism of Tibet*, (Boulder, Shambhala Publications, 2001), 112.

<sup>47</sup> Ray, *Secret of the Vajra World*, 233.

<sup>48</sup> Ray, *Secret of the Vajra World*, 237.

<sup>49</sup> Ray, *Secret of the Vajra World*, 238.

have their principal aim as Buddhahood.<sup>50</sup> This is considered to be an advanced practice and requires a considerable amount of previous experience in meditation, and is certainly not meant to be practiced by beginners.<sup>51</sup> This practice exemplifies how Tantra and esoteric practice within Tibetan Buddhism was seen as spiritually profound, and did not share the same negative reputation as Hindu Tantra in India. Although this was viewed in this light for the most part, more transgressive and sexual aspects of Buddhist Tantra were reduced or performed symbolically, in part because of the issues that arose in regard to monastic celibacy.<sup>52</sup>

It is the texts attributed to *hatha yoga* that explicitly talk about subtle body manipulation as a means to spiritual attainment, and these practices proved to be an important aspect of the tradition as a whole. In the tenth to eleventh centuries, *hatha yoga*, which is based largely on the *Shaiva Tantras*, emerged in India. One of the main aims of *hatha yoga* was to awaken the goddess *kundalini*, who lies coiled up at the bottom of the spine. She signifies the power of the divine feminine (*sakti*) residing in the body of the yogi, which can be controlled with yogic practices in order to actualize spiritual potential.<sup>53</sup> The breath control techniques utilized within this tradition are meant to draw her up through the central *nadi*, penetrating each *cakra*. She is made to rise up to the crown of the head, where she is united with her male counterpart, Siva.<sup>54</sup> This process is said to awaken the *prana* within the body, and ultimately resulting in samadhi or awakening.<sup>55</sup> *Kundalini yoga* often takes on erotic symbolism, which is one of the reasons it was viewed as transgressive by those outside of the tradition. The first descriptions of *kundalini* are in texts of Tantric Saivism, and have an important role within the yoga system of the

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<sup>50</sup> Samuel, *Religion and the Subtle Body*, 36.

<sup>51</sup> Ray, *Secret of the Vajra World*, 236.

<sup>52</sup> Samuel, *Religion and the Subtle Body*, 37.

<sup>53</sup> Mallison and Singleton, *Roots of Yoga*, 178.

<sup>54</sup> Mallison and Singleton, *Roots of Yoga*, xix-xx.

<sup>55</sup> Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 14.

*Kubjikamatatantra*. These teachings were influential in shaping the yogic body conceived within *hatha yoga*.<sup>56</sup> Interestingly enough, *hatha yoga* techniques aroused interest among the followers of *advaita vedanta*<sup>57</sup>, who previously had looked down on Hindu Tantra for being transgressive in nature.

Many Hindu and Buddhist texts have influenced what modern yoga and modern subtle body systems have become, but among the most influential proves to be one of the most well-known yogic texts, Patanjali's *Yogasutra*, which may have been written around the fourth century CE. David Gordon White explains that Patanjali's *Yogasutra* "was a pivotal compilation of all these prior yoga and meditation traditions, which it framed within the broader context of a unified and rigorous metaphysics."<sup>58</sup> Looking at the *Yogasutra* may suffice to see that the acquisition of *siddhis* was at the forefront of yogic theory in the first centuries of the common era,<sup>59</sup> but there is an extremely limited representation of subtle body ideas. Within this text, one may be able to see indications of a localization of subtle body in parts of the body that may slightly foreshadow the idea of *cakras*.<sup>60</sup> Patanjali briefly states that one can develop intimate knowledge of the physical body, but there is only one mention of *nadi* (channels) in the *Yogasutra*, which explains that "on the navel plexus of the body comes knowledge of the arrangement of the body."<sup>61</sup> *Kundalini* is also not mentioned in the *Yogasutra*. Even though the text is one of the most well-known yogic texts today, presentations of the subtle body are definitely limited.<sup>62</sup> When *pranayama* is mentioned in the *Yogasutra*, it is indicated that it is to

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<sup>56</sup> Mallison and Singleton, *Roots of Yoga*, 179.

<sup>57</sup> Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 28.

<sup>58</sup> David Gordon White, "Yoga in Transformation," in *Yoga: The Art of Transformation* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2013), 36.

<sup>59</sup> White, *Kiss of the Yoginī*, 220.

<sup>60</sup> Samuel, *Religion and the Subtle Body*, 34.

<sup>61</sup> Edwin F. Bryant, *The Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali*. (New York, North Point Press, 2009), 357.

<sup>62</sup> Stefanie Syman, *The Subtle Body: The Story of Yoga in America*, (New York, Farrar, Straus and Girox, 2010), 73.

be undertaken while *asana* is being perfected.<sup>63</sup> Perhaps this was a precursor for the practice of *asana* to become the most emphasized piece of the practice in modern yoga, due to the fact that subtle physiology is left in the background. This text has received a lot of attention from modern scholars, as well as Westerners who practice modern yoga, but it is important to note that it is not *the* authoritative source for Indian yoga traditions, as it is commonly supposed.<sup>64</sup>

The yoga of the West tends to prioritize *asana*, or posture, but still considers their practice to be drawn from Indic traditions such as *hatha yoga*, which historically places a large emphasis on subtle-body manipulation and *pranayama*. The average yoga class today is far more likely to foreground the sole practice of *asana* and largely ignore the subtle body system of *hatha yoga*<sup>65</sup>, but yet there are still discussions of “chakras”, “kundalini” and “pranayama”, as well as depictions of the subtle body plastered on the walls of many Western yoga studios. David Gordon White asserts that “The “Tantric yoga” that is marked in places like Hollywood has elided several centuries from the history of the origins and development of yoga, and altered its content beyond recognition.”<sup>66</sup> Many people who practice modern Western yoga, have little to no understanding of how these concepts originated or their intended use. Although this may be so, it is worthwhile to look at why postural yoga practices are often dismissed from any serious consideration of what yoga “actually” is, when it can be argued that there is no “legitimate” or “authentic” yoga.<sup>67</sup>

There are many yogic traditions with a vast amount of practices, rituals, and philosophical ideas. These differences also pervade their conceptions of subtle energies and the

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<sup>63</sup> Bryant, *The Yoga Sūtras*, 289.

<sup>64</sup> Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 26.

<sup>65</sup> Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 32.

<sup>66</sup> White, *Kiss of the Yoginī*, 221.

<sup>67</sup> Jain, *Selling Yoga*, xvi.

subtle body. Perhaps one can also argue that there is no “legitimate” or “authentic” subtle body system or use of such systems. Although there may not be a singular “authentic” subtle body system, it may be important for those who practice modern yoga to allow themselves a better understanding of where these notions have been adapted from. What we know as yoga today is the product of thousands of years of transformation, and that history should not be ignored.

The Western idea of subtle-body is an appropriation of Indic ideas, and this appropriation can be attributed to modern yoga gurus. In the West, specific *cakras* may be identified with psychological functioning, psychic channels, and releasing emotional blockages.<sup>68</sup> Contemporary conceptions of the subtle body are loosely based on the practices of *hatha yoga*. For example, Mark Singleton explains that one of the most important parts of *hatha yoga*, which flourished in India from the thirteenth century CE to the eighteenth century CE, was *pranayama* practice in order to cleanse and balance *nadi*. Singleton presents that “some schools of modern yoga catering to an international audience do conserve some of these elements... [but] have become distinctly subordinate to the practice of *asana*.”<sup>69</sup> One can begin to argue that the subtle body elements of yoga were dropped as yoga migrated to the west, “As *asana* was assimilated into modern (often medical) physical culture, aspects of the “subtle” *hatha yoga* body were selectively dropped, and the naturalistic (or anatomical) body brought to the fore.”<sup>70</sup> It is important to take into note that *hatha yoga* texts taught that breath-control could be dangerous if not practiced carefully and could harm the yogi,<sup>71</sup> which could have potentially been a factor in the practice becoming subordinate to posture. Modern yoga focuses on the gymnastic processes of practice and their physical effects, which include weight loss, stress reduction, and muscle

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<sup>68</sup> Samuel, *Religion and the Subtle Body*, 7.

<sup>69</sup> Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 31.

<sup>70</sup> Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 170.

<sup>71</sup> Mallison and Singleton, *Roots of Yoga*, 128.



toning.<sup>72</sup> Although *asana*, or posture, is much more focused on in Western yoga, there are still elements of subtle-body practices within it, which includes breathwork, and is still referred to as *pranayama* in some cases. Within *hatha yoga* texts, both the practices of *asana* and *pranayama* aimed to purify and balance the *nadis*, so it is interesting that Western yoga prioritizes *asana* with the goal changing from attaining a higher degree and spiritual attainment, but rather a more health-related goal. It is clear that modern yoga practices can entail other things that are more philosophical and spiritual, but the popular practices of *asana* and *pranayama* are linked to the contemporary ideas about holistic health and wellness.<sup>73</sup>

The transnational “hatha” yoga commonly taught today noticeably departs from models outlined in *hatha yoga* texts. Tantra underpins traditional expressions of *hatha yoga*, but Tantric physiology has only played a minor role in popular modern yoga.<sup>74</sup> The roles of *nadi*, *cakras*, and *kundalini* experiences are sometimes limited in forms of modern postural yoga, however, some systems do continue to utilize these ideas as a way to increase physical and mental well-being. Mark Singleton presents that “Student yoga teachers commonly learn something about *nadis* and *cakras* during their training... but it is rare for theoretical knowledge to be applied as a part of [modern] *hatha yoga*.”<sup>75</sup> It may be asserted that the theoretical knowledge of *hatha yoga* regarding the subtle body has been dropped completely, but it is obvious that some modern yogis continue to utilize these notions in their practice, whether it be subordinate to posture or not. At the initial stages of the popular yoga revival, *hatha yoga* was excluded, partially due to the fact that it was negatively viewed by scholars as obnoxious and dangerous. Due to the negative

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<sup>72</sup> Allison Fish, “The Commodification and Exchange of Knowledge in the Case of Transnational Commercial Yoga.” *International Journal of Cultural Property* 13 (2006): 191.

<sup>73</sup> Joseph S. Alter, “Modern Medical Yoga: Struggling with a History of Magic, Alchemy, and Sex,” *Asian Medicine* (January 2005): 120.

<sup>74</sup> Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 31.

<sup>75</sup> Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 32.

reputation of Hindu Tantric systems centuries ago, it is interesting that the transgressive nature of such practices is still approached with antagonism. Even in modern translations of *hatha yoga* texts, there is often hostility towards the doctrines.<sup>76</sup> This hostility is one of the reasons that Western versions of *hatha yoga* may selectively exclude many of the things that were constitute of the tradition, such as subtle-body manipulation, when it emerged in India. This can also be due to the fact that Tantric religions are studied outside of their original context, but it can be argued that they should be understood by applying their own categories rather than our own.<sup>77</sup>

The way in which notions of a subtle body came to the West is largely intertwined with the emergence of postural yoga and physical culture. Modern postural yoga is a form of practice that emphasizes physical and mental well-being, and emerged directly from the twentieth-century yoga renaissance.<sup>78</sup> Singleton explains that “Transnational anglophone yoga was born at the peak of an unprecedented enthusiasm for physical culture, and the meaning of yoga itself would not remain unaltered by the encounter.”<sup>79</sup> In the nineteenth century, an extraordinary enthusiasm for athletic and gymnastic disciplines swept across Britain and Europe. This enthusiasm made its way to British India where they at once reinforced stereotypes of Indian effeminacy and at the same time offered methods to rebut that image. Indian physical culture was to some extent nationalistically motivated, and the nativized exercise that was practiced was referred to as “yoga”.<sup>80</sup> Here, modern *asana* was understood as medical and curative in function, while dismissing the esoteric specifics of *hatha yoga*. The postural practice of *hatha yoga* was associated with backwardness and superstition, and many people considered them to have no

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<sup>76</sup> Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 44.

<sup>77</sup> Padoux, *The Hindu Tantric World*, 5.

<sup>78</sup> Alter, “Modern Medical Yoga,” 119.

<sup>79</sup> Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 81.

<sup>80</sup> Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 81-82.

place in the “scientific” yoga enterprise.<sup>81</sup> The practice of *asanas* within Western yoga practice is not the outcome of a direct and unbroken lineage to *hatha yoga* whatsoever.<sup>82</sup>

It can be asserted that the rise of “Modern Yoga” began with Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), who also played a large role in bringing ideas of the subtle body to the West. It is believed that he is partially responsible for the appropriation of the notion of the subtle body, as well as systematizing and globally diffusing a narrow and modern version of yoga. He was one among many Hindus who expressed contempt for certain times of yoga based on a bifurcation between yoga’s philosophical and meditative aspects and its physical techniques. Vivekananda sought to disseminate a form of yoga to the West that would be perceived as the antithesis to the body-centered religion popularly associated with yoga,<sup>83</sup> and he presented notions of the subtle body in a way that people in the West, as well as people in South Asia, were able to grasp, straying away from the systems of *hatha yoga*. He clearly viewed the subtle body as highly important, but Vivekananda had very little to say about *asana*, which has come to define modern yoga practice.<sup>84</sup> The *asana* practices of *hatha yoga* were shunned as being distasteful by Vivekananda and many of those who followed his lead.<sup>85</sup> It is suggested that he was the “creator” of “modern yoga”, and was responsible for starting a sort of “yoga renaissance” in both India and the West. Vivekananda wanted to introduce yoga to the West as “one of the grandest of sciences,” which he viewed had been lost to the world through the plots of tantric yogis who wanted it to be secret in order to keep powers to themselves.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 4.

<sup>82</sup> Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 32.

<sup>83</sup> Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 32.

<sup>84</sup> Alter, “Modern Medical Yoga,” 124.

<sup>85</sup> Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 4.

<sup>86</sup> White, *Yoga in Transformation*, 44.

Regarding the subtle body, Vivekananda argued that it has correspondences in the physical body as mapped out in modern anatomy.<sup>87</sup> In his teachings on *Raja-Yoga* (1896), he explains that “The pranas are subtle energies, sources of motion... Pranayama means controlling the pranas through breathing. Breath is fuel, prana is the steam, and the body is the engine.”<sup>88</sup> Here we can see that the language he used when talking about subtle-body systems and *prana* is digestible and engaging to those who do not find the “religious” aspect of the subtle body to be appealing, and he also removes the connotation that *pranayama* could potentially be dangerous and harmful. Joseph S. Alter comments that “it is clear from what he wrote on *pranayama* that he regarded experience - based on the flow of vital fluid energy - as very important.”<sup>89</sup> Vivekananda freely discussed the subtle body, however, these lessons on *Raja-Yoga* omitted their Tantric implications.<sup>90</sup> He utilized *Raja-Yoga* to refer to what he considered “authentic yoga”, based on his selective reading of the *Yogasutra*, and equated *Raja-Yoga* with a modern, non dualistic interpretation of the yoga taught by Patanjali, which provided it with indigenous authority.<sup>91</sup> He placed focus on what he thought to be the psychological benefits of yoga, and argued that the yogic manipulation of subtle energy could function as a healing agent, but that goal was subordinate to what Vivekananda thought was the true aim of yoga: spiritual development.<sup>92</sup>

Contrary to the teachings of Vivekananda, the teachings of other modern yoga gurus have contributed to the idea of yoga as exercise that benefits the individual both physically and psychologically. The medicalization of *hatha yoga* can be attributed to yoga gurus of the

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<sup>87</sup> Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 32-33.

<sup>88</sup> Vivekananda, *Yoga and Other Works*, (New York, Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1953), 547.

<sup>89</sup> Alter, “Modern Medical Yoga,” 123.

<sup>90</sup> Syman, *The Subtle Body*, 58.

<sup>91</sup> Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 32-3.

<sup>92</sup> Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 143.

twentieth century, for example, Kuvalayananda (1833-1966) and Yogendra (1897-1989), and follows the already present assumption that *asana* was the Asian version of therapeutic gymnastics.<sup>93</sup> Kuvalayananda wanted to purge yoga practices such as *asana* and *pranayama* of all things esoteric<sup>94</sup> and used the paraphernalia of modern science in order to show the psychological effects of *asana* and *pranayama*. Yogendra is associated with the domestication of *hatha yoga*, and also asserted that posture exercises have psychological benefits, as well as health benefits.<sup>95</sup> The body-centered practices that were equated with *hatha yoga* were now reconstructed and medicalized in ways that made them modern fitness techniques deemed original to Hinduism.<sup>96</sup> The orientalized notion of yoga and *asana* proved to be attractive to the West, and this in the mix with the rise of physical culture allowed for it to spread. Throughout the diffusion of *asana* practice, the subtle body was mentioned at certain points, but larger theories and related practices were kept to a minimum. Kuvalayananda and Yogendra's works are deeply concerned with subtle physiology, but the application of the subtle body in modern forms of yoga is limited to a general recognition of three principal *nadis*, the *cakras*, and the role that these may play in *kundalini*-type experiences,<sup>97</sup> and how these aspects may lead a practitioner to physical and psychological benefits.

The extremely controversial fitness giant Bikram Choudhury has also had a massive influence in the popularization of yoga as physical exercise in the West. Choudhury was trained by the internationally renowned bodybuilder and modern *hatha* yogi B.C. Gosh at his College of Physical Education in Calcutta in the mid-1900's.<sup>98</sup> He claims that he has studied yoga since the

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<sup>93</sup> Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 86-87.

<sup>94</sup> Alter, "Modern Medical Yoga," 119.

<sup>95</sup> Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 115-16.

<sup>96</sup> Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 144.

<sup>97</sup> Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 32.

<sup>98</sup> Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 134.

age of four and to have been a world champion yogi by the age of seventeen. Choudhury's posture system has contributed to the massive shift in Western conceptions of yoga by mass marketing a form of yoga that functioned as fitness.<sup>99</sup> He established what is perhaps the most profitable form of today's modern yoga, "Bikram Yoga", which is often referred to as the "McDonald's version of yoga". The Bikram Beginning Series includes 26 *asanas* and 2 *pranayama* exercises that are performed in a studio heated to over 100°F.<sup>100</sup> The *pranayama* exercises that Bikram and his students teach are meant to be good for the lungs and the respiratory system, however, there is no mention of any sort of subtle body manipulation through these practices. There is still more emphasis on the *asana* that goes along with the exercise. The controversial and extremely difficult form of postural yoga, as well as Choudhury's incredible (and not completely reliable) claims about *asana* practice marks a tremendous shift in modern conceptions of what yoga "really" is. Mark Singleton notes that "Bikram... is a powerful symbol of the marriage of these two cultural phenomena and is exemplary of the way in which yoga and physical culture have merged in the modern era."<sup>101</sup>

Modern developments regarding the subtle body come in a variety of different ways, just as they have throughout history. When walking into a yoga class in the United States, one can expect to feel as if they have gotten a good workout, or perhaps had a meditative experience while linking breath with movement. Manipulation of subtle energies is left out of many of these types of classes, as their focus is on the physical body as well as the health of internal anatomy like the respiratory system. However, breathwork continues to be a largely integrated part of these classes, although the goal of these exercises may not be for higher spiritual attainment.

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<sup>99</sup> Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 67.

<sup>100</sup> Fish, "The Commodification," 194.

<sup>101</sup> Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 209.

Over the past century, yoga, as well as the subtle body, has been conceived in various ways. With the recent equation of yoga as physical exercise, the subtle body has also been given a health-related conception. The manipulation of the chakras,<sup>102</sup> specifically, have been given popularity as a way to improve your physical and mental health. It is interesting, though, that the notion of chakras has maintained a reputation as subtle, non-physical, energy points within the body that can be manipulated. The purpose for the manipulation, however, is complex, and are commonly associated with physical processes.

An adequate way of understanding how chakras are presented within modern yoga and spiritual practice is explained by Margarita Alcantara, a certified Reiki teacher and acupuncturist. The way in which she talks about the subtle body is seemingly “spiritual”, but also “secular” or “non-religious” in the way she presents the content. In Alcantara’s book titled *Chakra Healing* (2017), the subtle physiology that is described is an accurate way of characterizing the system of seven chakras that one can commonly see in paintings and posters in Western yoga studios. These seven centers correlate with different points in the body, and they include the *muladhara* (root/base of spine), *svadisthana* (sacral plexus/pelvis), *manipura* (solar plexus), *anahata* (heart), *vishuddha* (throat), *ajna* (third eye located between the eyebrows), and *sahasrara* (crown of the head) chakras.<sup>103</sup> Modern science is utilized in order to back up the assertion that these energy centers exist. Alcantara compares learning about chakras to learning about quantum theory in that either way one will come to the conclusion that everything is energy with its own vibrational

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<sup>102</sup> I switch my usage of “*cakra*” to “chakra” here, due to the fact that the spelling of the term is more commonly “chakra” within the context of modern, Western yoga.

<sup>103</sup> Margarita Alcantara, *Chakra Healing: A Beginner’s Guide to Self-Healing Techniques That Balance the Chakras*. (Berkeley: Althea Press, 2017) 25-41.

frequency.<sup>104</sup> She provides a framework for how the chakras work are thought to work within human bodies in a modern, Western context. She explains that:

When we get in touch with the energy within our chakras, we connect with ourselves more fully, and learn how to heal ourselves on all levels, creating a true holistic healing. This is why mindfulness-based practices, such as meditation, help connect the mind with body and spirit, why certain physical activities can help clear your head and feel more centered...<sup>105</sup>

Her argument asserts that the chakra system connects and supports the physical self with the energy self, and that when they are balanced, our life and our health is good. It can be understood here that when a particular chakra is blocked, there are particular physical dysfunctions that come along with these blockages. For example, it is said when the *muladhara* (root chakra) is out of harmony, it may cause lower back pain, rectal tumors/cancer, constipation, immune-related disorders, and other physical ailments.<sup>106</sup> These blockages are said to be cured through methods such as meditation, the use of crystals and essential oils, and of course, yoga.

Alcantara notes that yoga *asanas* help open various locations in the body, and that opening brings upon awareness to the chakras, and can help “open” them as well. It is interesting that the subtle body here is considered to be absolutely connected to the physical body, as movement and posture can manipulate subtle energy points. Alcantara utilizes the opening of the “Heart Chakra” (*Anahata*) as an example, and explains that in order to protect *Anahata*, we have a tendency to bring our shoulders forward and slouch. It is explained in her work that postural yoga can be utilized in a way to reverse this by helping us become aware of our tightness in the shoulders and upper back. This can be done through several *asanas* that include upper backbends

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<sup>104</sup> Alcantara, *Chakra Healing*, 16.

<sup>105</sup> Alcantara, *Chakra Healing*, 18.

<sup>106</sup> Alcantara, *Chakra Healing*, 26.



and twisted postures. When these energy points are opened, it is said that one's physical ailments will diminish and feel more connected to themselves.

There is also mention of *kundalini* in both Alcantara's book and many modern yoga practices. Here, *kundalini* is described as "the primal, enlightening force that awakens all of your chakras, often at the same time... it's usually dormant, lying quietly and coiled (like a snake) at the base of the spine."<sup>107</sup> This description is interestingly similar to that of the texts of Tantric Saivism. Although the idea is in fact similar, the way in which *kundalini* is described to be manipulated is distinct. It is said that the *kundalini* energy will eventually become awakened from working with and manipulating the chakras in the way described above. More generally, modern *kundalini* yoga is practiced through breathwork, the recitation of *mantras* (sacred syllables), *kriyas* (complete actions of posture, breath, and *mantra*), meditation, and *mudras* (hand gestures). The most common *kundalini* breathwork practice is the "Breath of Fire", where one breathes in and out rapidly while pumping the stomach.<sup>108</sup>

It is compelling to investigate how notions of a subtle body are utilized within a Western context. Although subtle physiology was a critical part of the religious traditions of India and Tibet, Western postural yogis frequently avoid categorizing yoga as "religion", and prefer to categorize it as "spiritual" or utilize other non-explicitly religious terms to describe it.<sup>109</sup> The modern yoga system of the West has been changed and medicalized by many of these yoga gurus. This form of yoga, as well as the ideas of the subtle body that come along with it, is obviously different from the yoga of the religious traditions of India and Tibet, even though the subtle body system has been drawn and appropriated from Into-Tibetan traditions of Tantra. This

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<sup>107</sup> Alcantara, *Chakra Healing*, 22.

<sup>108</sup> "A Beginners Guide to Kundalini Yoga." Yoga Journal, accessed April 18, 2020. <https://www.yogajournal.com/yoga-101/a-beginners-guide-to-kundalini-yoga>.

<sup>109</sup> Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 97.

modern system is particular in the sense that it is commonly viewed that the subtle body can be manipulated through physical exercise and posture. Although very different from the practices and beliefs regarding the subtle body historically, it can be argued that this manipulation is both spiritual and ritualistic.

Spiritualist practices, like yoga, are usually defined in opposition to religion and given the label “spiritual, but not religious”. These practices tend to be more about personal experience and experimental religiosity (which can also be defined as “spirituality”).<sup>110</sup> It is common for these types of “spiritual” practices to draw material from many religious movements. They often emphasize personal belief and practice through experimentation outside the confines of “institutional religion”.<sup>111</sup> The terms “religious” and “spiritual” are regarded as distinct by many, but it may be the case that they are more similar than not. Due to the fact that most modern yogis do not consider yoga religious, and back up their “non-religious” claims by classifying their yoga by medicalizing the practice and “secularizing the body,”<sup>112</sup> there has been debate about the legitimacy of the “spiritual” notions of the practice.

One could argue that the differences between modern subtle body systems and the practices from which they are appropriated also takes “legitimacy” away from ideas presented in modern postural yoga practice, as this reduces it to borrowings from traditional religious products. However, it may be worthwhile to consider modern postural yoga as a body of religious practice that defines itself in terms of a shared belief system that is treated as sacred, set apart from the ordinary or mundane.<sup>113</sup> When viewing Western postural practice in this way, it is easier to understand their subtle body systems as a new interpretation of the matter, rather than

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<sup>110</sup> Komjathy, *Contemplative Studies*, 60.

<sup>111</sup> Komjathy, *Contemplative Studies*, 146.

<sup>112</sup> Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 110.

<sup>113</sup> Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 98.

an illegitimate appropriation of Asian traditions. Andrea Jain makes an interesting argument and poses an intriguing question:

In the history of religions, there are no original ideas or practices, and there are no unchanging essences. Religious phenomena arise from the continued processes of syncretism, appropriation, and hybridization. Yoga is no exception. In short, the problem with any essentialist definition of yoga remains: Who's to say which, if any, yogis have it all wrong? <sup>114</sup>

Jain asserts that there has never been a completely original idea or concept that has arisen from religious traditions. Religious practices have always commonly been new interpretations of another religion's belief system or practice, or have been built off of a preceding system. This is seen in the developments regarding the subtle body in modern yoga. Modern yoga has taken bits and pieces from the theories of many religious practices in order to build what they consider to be their practice. Although modern yogis typically view their practice as "spiritual, but not religious," it should not be asserted that these developments are more or less legitimate than their historical counterparts.

Looking at the historical progression of yoga and subtle body theories, one can see that these traditions were not monolithic. There is a wide range in how subtle physiology was implemented in yogic practice and theory, and it is presented that these traditions were distinct from each other. Ideas and practices regarding the subtle body have been constantly changing throughout their long and complex history, but as this history continues to the West it is sometimes viewed as less valuable and legitimate. This is due to the appropriation of and changes to the practice that was brought by modern yoga gurus, as well as its reputation as "non-religious." It can be argued that the legitimacy of modern yoga corresponds to that of the religions that it is appropriated from. Whether it is "original" or not, yoga and the subtle body

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<sup>114</sup> Jain, *Selling Yoga*, 157.

has always been appropriated and changed. The changes that modern yoga has made follow a path that religions typically make, including syncretism and hybridization. The developments regarding subtle physiology within modern yoga, although typically given the description as secular and related to health, should be considered as a legitimate and worthwhile concept despite its reputation as “non-religious”.

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