

Paper Proposal / Abstract for

Yoga darśana, Yoga sādhana. Traditions, Transmissions, Transformations.

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The Social Role of Medical Descriptions in Postural Yoga

Modern postural yoga promises much more than health. Still, descriptions of medical benefits associated with each exercise constitute a significant part in yoga tuition. This paper focuses on the ways postural yoga is taught and the impact of these routine statements, exploring health-related comments, descriptions of physical processes caused by yoga exercises and claims on therapeutic efficacy.

In medical anthropology health is not taken as an objective, timeless or universal category, but as a cultural concept that reflects specific social conditions and hence is exposed to changes over time and space. Taking this approach I consider in what respect routine statements on yoga's therapeutic efficacy have shaped popular health consciousness and, conversely, were informed by particular and time-specific notions of the healthy body, causes of suffering, and self-care. My analysis is based on selected yoga manuals and tutorials going back to the beginning of the twentieth century.

I argue that although the present popularity of yoga largely emerged from the field of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM), the kind of health messages conveyed by yoga instructions revive a fairly mechanistic understanding of the human body. In their capacity as attention control, routine explanations on respective medical benefits also contribute to exceeded health expectations, presently theorized with regard to postsecular societies.

Keywords: modern postural yoga, concepts of the body, medicalization, health as a cultural category, transcultural transmission, social anthropology

PD Dr. Beatrix Hauser

Institut für Religionswissenschaft und Religionspädagogik

Universität Bremen

Badgasteiner Str. 1, SpT C 6200

D-28359 Bremen

phone: +49 (0)421 218 67932

URL: <http://www.religion.uni-bremen.de/de/personen/alphabetische-liste/detail/hauser.html>

Email: bhauser@uni-bremen.de