

ISLAM, YOGA AND MEDITATION

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One who has seen this cannot remember it, and one who has not seen does not believe it.¹
*(Amir Khusraw, Nuh Sipihir (1318 CE),
 writing on amazing deeds by Indian Yogis)*

Introduction: the issue of permissibility

When discussing the topic of Islam and yoga, one of the first questions that arises for modern readers is that of permissibility: are Muslims *allowed* to study and practise yoga? This question has much more to do with modern conceptions of religion – heavily rooted in European Protestantism (Masuzawa 2005; Nongbri 2013) – and the idea of rigid boundaries between religious communities than it does with the way Hindus, Muslims and others have historically approached yoga. A quick internet search for ‘Islam and yoga’ produces a series of newspaper and magazine articles written about Muslims who think yoga is permissible, Muslims who think it is not and Muslims who are not sure. As I demonstrate below, these examples taken from the popular press highlight the understanding within modern Muslim communities that there is no singular, definitive yoga, but that instead there are many different yogas. This accords with David Gordon White’s description in *Yoga in Practice* that ‘yoga can refer to things ranging from the literal yoking of one’s animals, to an astral conjunction, to a type of recipe, incantation, combination, application, contact, ... and the work of alchemists. But this is by no means an exhaustive list’ (White 2012: 2). These debates are not restricted to Muslim communities, for there has been a resurgence in recent years within Hindu groups who claim proprietary ownership over yoga as a quintessentially Hindu cultural and religious ‘product’.

Muslim engagement with yoga

There is a long history of Muslim engagement with *al-Hind* (‘India’ broadly construed) in general, and yoga in particular. Arab and Persian settlements in South Asia date back to the eighth century CE, with the much-fabled story of Muhammad bin Qassim (d. 715 CE) leading the conquest of Sindh and Multan. More contact took place leading up to the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate in 1206 CE. Lest we are left with the impression that this encounter is of a decidedly military or imperial nature, trade between the Arabian peninsula and western Indian coasts dates back long before the beginning of Islam, and trade (along with the accompanying circulation of people, especially Sufi teachers) served to firmly establish *al-Hind* as an important part of the Islamic imaginary. Turning specifically to yoga, from the outset it should be clear that

Muslims in South Asia during the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal periods were not encountering anything resembling modern postural yoga; instead, they were learning about tantric forms of yoga and tantric-inflected forms of *haṭhayoga*. These latter interactions largely came through the Nāth yogis. The main evidence for this sustained interest in Hinduism generally, and yoga in particular, over the centuries on the part of Muslim scholars are the translations – dating from the fourteenth to nineteenth centuries – from Sanskrit into Arabic and Persian of texts such as Patañjali's *Yogasūtra*,² as well as the Upaniṣads and Vedas. The Ghaznavid scholar and court astrologer Abu Rayhan Muhammad ibn Ahmad Biruni (hereafter, Biruni) is undoubtedly one of the most significant Muslim authors who wrote about yoga. Biruni is a key source for developing an understanding of Islamicate views on religion in India. He is best known for his *Tahqīq ma li'l-Hind min qabūla fi'l-'aql am mardhūla* ('Investigation of What India Says, Whether Accepted by Reason or Refused'), completed in 1030 CE, and often rendered with the shortened title *Kitāb al-Hind* ('Book on India'). He is also known for his translation and analysis of Patañjali's *Yogasūtra*. 'Written in Arabic, the *Hind* may very well be the first systematization of "Indian belief" into one "Indian religion," as Biruni calls it, preceding by almost 900 years the definitions of Hinduism by nineteenth-century European Orientalists' (Kozah 2016: 1). Biruni focused on metempsychosis as the 'banner' of Hinduism, with Patañjali's *Yogasūtra* elevated to its 'Holy Book' (Kozah, 2). His focus on Pātañjala yoga means that he necessarily left out a great deal of information on Hindu learning, traditions with which he nevertheless would have been familiar. Biruni is more open and/or tolerant of the Hindu beliefs he studies in part because he is so clear that they are not Islamic.

Abu'l Hasan Yamin al-Din Khusraw (d. 1325 CE), more commonly known as Amir Khusraw, holds a special place in the pantheon of South Asian Muslim history. A musician and poet, he was a disciple of Nizamuddin Auliya (d. 1332 CE) of Delhi, in whose dargah he is also buried. His family originated in Transoxiana but immigrated to the Delhi Sultanate during the Mongol invasions. Written in 1318 CE, his *Nuh Sipihr* ('Nine Heavens') is a survey of Indian customs composed in Persian as a *masnavī*, or in rhyming couplets. Its contents include sections on Indian food, music and languages, as well as a list of amazing or astonishing things that one finds in India. It also reflects Khusraw's passionate interest in holding up South Asia as a wondrous place. There are several key verses in this selection from the seventh chapter of the fourth *sipihr*. In this chapter, Khusraw focuses on marvels found within India and includes several key lines that directly pertain to the use of the breath for supernatural powers. Later parts of this same chapter contain Khusraw's insights into the importance of occult or magical powers on the part of Indian *jogis*. As to the powers of the breath, he writes:

Another strange feature is that the Indians are capable of extending the age (of human beings) by different means and methods. It is because everybody has his fixed quota of breaths. One who acquires control over his breath, he would live longer if he takes less breaths. The Jogi (Yogi) who suspends his breath through Yoga in a temple, can live, by this feat, for more than five hundred years. It is wonderful that they (Indians) can spell out omens by distinguishing between the breaths blowing from the two nostrils. By a study of the breath flowing by the right or the left nostril, (thus by distinguishing the open and the closed nostril) they can foretell something of the future. The other thing is that the jogis can send the soul from its own body to another body through their yogic power. Many such jogis live in Kashmir in the mountains and many of them live in the caves.

(Nath and Gwaliari (trans): 1981: 198)

Khusraw thus demonstrates that it was popular knowledge in the fourteenth century that Indian ascetics known as *yogīs/jogīs* developed particular types of supernatural powers through understanding and controlling their breathing.

Abu `Abdullah Muhammad ibn `Abdullah al-Lawati al-Tanji ibn Battuta (d. 1377 CE; hereafter 'Ibn Battuta') and Wali al-Din al-Rahman ibn Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Abi Bakr Muhammad ibn al-Hasan Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406 CE; hereafter 'Ibn Khaldun') combine to provide a key perspective on the spectrum of Perso-Arabic engagement with South Asia. Together they were important authors whose works circulated widely within the Islamicate world. While both hailed from North Africa, both happened to address the subject of India, specifically with regard to yoga. Both Ibn Battuta and Ibn Khaldun made references to the yogis, the former in his *Rihla* ('Journey'), published c.1355 CE, with the latter author relying on the former's account for some of the material found in his well-known work on the rise and fall of civilisations, known generally as the *Muqaddima* (c.1379 CE).

Ibn Battuta used the term *sihr* ('magic' or 'sorcery') to talk about the yogis and their practices (Ibn Battuta 1893–1922: 35). Given that he spent a considerable amount of time in India during his decades of travel, the observations that he records in his *Rihla* are a valuable (if not always entirely reliable) resource for learning about various practices during his time period. Ibn Khaldun makes references to the yogis' 'many writings', but fails to include any specific information that would reveal what types of sources he has access to or has even heard of. He makes only a few references to yoga in the *Muqaddima*. For example, in his discussion of different kinds of sense perception, he talks about those who engage in exercises (*al-riyāda*):

... such people are the men who train themselves in sorcery (*sihr*). They train themselves in these things, in order to be able to behold the supernatural and to be active in the various worlds. Most such live in the intemperate zones of the north and the south, especially in India (*bilād al-hind*), where they are called yogis (*wa yusammūna hunālika al-jūkīyya*). They possess a large literature (*kutub*) on how such exercises are to be done. The stories about them in this connection are remarkable (*gharība*).

(Ibn Khaldun 1967: 85)

Note that he used the same term here (*al-riyāda*) to talk about the spiritual practice or exercises of yoga as he did for the many Sufi practices that came up throughout his massive text. Unfortunately, he did not provide any additional details in terms of what this 'large literature' included.

So far I have addressed major works by Muslim authors who discuss yoga and other aspects of Indian esotericism, but now I turn to direct translations of yogic texts beyond Patañjali's *Yogasūtra*. The *Kāmarū Pančāśikā* is a Persian text on yoga and divination, known by the Hindi name that translates as '50 verses of *Kāmarū*'. While the author is anonymous and the text's date of composition is unknown, excerpts of the text exist in Shams al-Din Muhammad ibn Mahmud Amuli's Persian encyclopaedia of the sciences, the *Nafa'is al-funūn* (Amuli 1961). At one time Amuli held the key position of *mudarris* (literally 'teacher', but here more likely understood as superintendent or principal) at the Sultaniyya madrasa under Ilkhanid ruler Oljeytu (r. 1304–16 CE). Amuli's death date of 1353 CE establishes the latest date by which the *Kāmarū Pančāśikā* could have been written, and the text was most likely written substantially earlier. Carl Ernst's translation of the only full-length manuscript version of this text highlights a number of difficulties, including the scribe's use of numerical ciphers to describe occult practices, as well as the scribe's less than successful attempts at transcribing Sanskrit mantras in Persian.³ Still, the text 'testifies to the ongoing engagement with yogic materials in Persianate circles over

centuries' (Ernst n.d.): 1). In a separate article, Ernst lays out the manuscript's history as a text that Italian traveller Pietro delle Valle obtains in Persia in 1622 (Ernst 2016: 386–400).

The most frequently occurring form of the *Kāmarū Pančāśikā* is a six-chapter abridgement with a brief preface in which the scribe relates a usually very brief story on the circumstances under which he came to a) acquire the text, usually via contact with Indian *jogis*, or b) translate the text from *zabān-i hinduvān* (literally 'the language of the Indians', meaning either Sanskrit or Hindi) into Persian. The chapters for these abridgements are remarkably consistent. The usual line-up includes (1) knowledge of the breath; (2) questioning the questioner; (3) mind-reading; (4) predicting the moment of death; (5) incantation of actions; and (6) love and hate. The order of presentation varies, but the contents of each section are very stable.

Ernst outlines a series of ciphers used in the full-length *Kāmarū Pančāśikā* manuscript. These tend to occur when the author describes spells that have life and death implications for the user and the person(s) towards whom the spells are directed. He states that 'in the translation of a text of occult power from Sanskrit to Persian, the presence of such deliberate esotericism indicates that there were certain subjects that aroused discomfort and hesitation among at least some readers' (Ernst n.d.: 7–8). The use of ciphers and other linguistic means of obscuring or obfuscating intended meaning raises flags because it points to how an author or group of authors responded to a text, and it begs the question of whether or not these types of translations are constrained by limitations based on the scribes' affiliations – be they religious, political or otherwise. For a related example, Hatley (2007) provides examples of medieval Bengali Sufis who developed 'homologies' between the *maqāms* ('stations') found more typically in Sufi texts and tantric conceptions of the subtle body (specifically the *cakras*). Again, I hesitate before imputing that Muslim translators and copyists in any time period or location were unable to render something from one language into another *because of being Muslim*. Taken as a whole, the *'ilm-i dam* corpus is a very large piece of evidence for active and sustained Muslim engagement with practices that were known to have non-Muslim roots. As I demonstrate below, at some points Muslims held up *'ilm-i dam* as worth learning precisely because it was not Islamic, while at other points the techniques were interpreted as being sufficiently domesticated as to be placed along a litany of other esoteric practices. In studying the different *'ilm-i dam* texts, the permeability of the line between translation and interpretation is quite evident. If one author retains references to goddesses and yogis while another excludes them, can these really be understood as approving and disapproving responses to a putative original text? Scholars today can formulate theories to explain the differences between translation and translated, but we must also recognise the very real limits on our knowledge.

The *Kāmarū Pančāśikā*'s contents hold pressing ramifications for understanding the porosity and limits of religious boundaries in the premodern South Asian context. As Ernst has written, this genre of text reflects the extent to which yoga and yogic philosophy is Islamicised, thereby making familiar something that an external observer may expect Muslims to find strange or 'other'. The *Kāmarū Pančāśikā* is a

text [that] demonstrates an unselfconscious domestication of yogic practices in an Islamicate society. Among the breath prognostications, for instance, one learns to approach 'the *qāḍī* [Islamic judge] or the *amīr* [prince]' for judgment or litigation only when the breath from the right nostril is favorable. Casual references mention Muslim magicians, or practices that may be performed either in a Muslim or a Hindu graveyard (47b), or else in an empty temple or mosque (49b) ... [and meant that] for the average Persian reader, the contents of [*Kāmarū Pančāśikā*] fell into the category of the occult sciences, and its Indic origin would have only enhanced its esoteric allure.

(Ernst 2016: 392–393)

For scholars of Islam and of India (let alone the combination thereof), discussion of 'esoteric allure' may raise the spectre of orientalist discourse, which many understand as simultaneously a by-product of and a contributing (i.e. legislating) factor in the European colonial project in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The notion that Persian readers – especially Muslim Persian readers – would have found texts such as the *Kāmarū Pančāśikā* more exciting or appealing because of the strange and/or exotic nature of their contents raises some important questions about the relationship to difference as defined by religious, linguistic or ethnic identity. Were these texts popular precisely *because* they were exotic, or were they perhaps *not* seen as exotic at all, but rather simply as offering up other means for accessing astral power?

The *Amrtakunda* ('Pool of Nectar') is a no-longer extant Sanskrit work on yoga and breathing techniques that survives in Arabic and Persian translations, which in turn preserve excerpts of the *Kāmarū Pančāśikā*. Both Arabic and Persian translations exist under the title *Ḥawd al-ḥayāt*, literally 'the Pool of Life'.⁴ In the mid-sixteenth century, Shattari Sufi master Muhammad Ghaus produced a translation in Persian entitled the *Baḥr al-ḥayāt*, or 'Ocean of Life'.⁵ Perhaps not coincidentally, the 'ocean' is much longer and contains much more material than the 'pool'. Additionally, there are also paraphrases and translations found in Bengali called *puṭhi sahitya*, 'such as the *Yoga Qalandar* of Saiyid Murtada (d. 1662 CE), the *Jñāna Sagara* and the *Jñāna Pradipa* of Saiyid Sultan (d. 1648 CE). Thus, the Sufis incorporated yogico-tantric culture in their own religio-philosophical system through the translations and paraphrases of the [*Ḥawd al-ḥayāt*] and the [*Baḥr al-ḥayāt*]' (Sakaki 2005: 136). Sakaki's presentation here begs the question of whether or not these translations are accurately understood as 'incorporations' of Indian knowledge by Muslims. For example, Ernst demonstrates how Muhammad Ghaus' translation of the now lost *Amrtakunda* makes a noticeable change in chapter 9, in which Ghaus replaces material on summoning *yogini* goddesses with generic Sufi material on *dhikrs* (Ernst 2016, 149–160). This type of alteration marks an area of resistance to the original text. While breath control and related divination practices make it through Ghaus' filter, instruction on summoning goddesses does not. The two texts referenced above serve as case studies, especially for observers interested in a more expansive reading of yoga beyond Patañjali. I now turn from specific texts to high-ranking personas from the Mughal period whose personal interest and study of Indian teachings contributes a great deal to the present inquiry.

Of the Mughal rulers, Abu'l Faḥ Jalal-ud-Din Muhammad Akbar (b. 1542, r. 1556–1605 CE; hereafter 'Akbar') draws the most attention for his ecumenical outlook and personal engagements with non-Muslim teachings. One key source for examining Mughal engagement with yogic philosophy comes from Akbar's grand vizier, Abu'l Fazl (d. 1602 CE), who composed the *A'in-i Akbari* ('The Institutes of Akbar'), his massive appendix to the *Akbarnama* (biography of Akbar).⁶ As David Gordon White notes, the *Akbarnama* depicts Akbar as possessing a divine power that radiated outwards to encompass those in his presence. Not only did this map onto specific Muslim traditions of sacred kingship (Moin 2014), but additionally this

same supernatural charisma and wisdom also caused the holy men of other Indian traditions, including the yogis, to gravitate toward Akbar's imperial person. In this last case, the attraction was mutual, with Akbar often visiting and holding forth with Hindu holy men, and even building a "City of Yogis" for them on the outskirts of the city of Agra.

(White 2019: 148)

His building of the *ʿIbādat khāna* ('House of Worship') in 1575 CE at Fatehpur Sikri, to which the ruler invited leaders from various religious traditions, is also held up as a sign of his

interest in other traditions. There are a variety of paintings produced, under Akbar's patronage, that document different schools of yogis, particularly the Nāths (Mallinson n.d.). Similarly to the *Baḥr al-ḥayāt*, which furnishes us with the oldest surviving depictions of yoga postures, so too do these painting from Akbar's reign (and subsequent Mughal rulers) provide important historical evidence for the development of different yogic practices and customs.

While the narrative surrounding Akbar is fairly uniformly positive regarding his disposition towards yogis (and other representatives of Indian religious traditions), the waters muddy a bit when turning to his two most famous grandsons, Aurangzeb (d. 1707 CE) and Dara Shikoh (d. 1659 CE) – it is worth noting that the former had the latter executed after winning the war of succession for the Mughal throne. The popular (and oftentimes, scholarly) narrative is that where Akbar was disposed towards toleration, Aurangzeb embraced fanaticism, expressed most notably in the destruction of Hindu temples, imposition of the *jizīya* tax on non-Muslims (which Akbar had revoked under his rule) and rejection of Sufism. These claims are all complicated by historical evidence to the contrary. Aurangzeb's final resting place is inside a Sufi shrine in Khuldabad. He employed far more Hindus in his court than any of his predecessors, and he issued edicts protecting Hindu temples and providing support to Brahmins (Truschke 2017: 12). Additionally, Bouillier provides evidence that he engaged directly with representatives of the Nāth Yogis, resulting in their depiction of this ruler as 'a powerful enemy as well as a clumsy devotee' (Bouillier 2018: 525), while Pauwels and Backrach (2018) critique the narrative of Aurangzeb's iconoclasm through Brajbhāṣā Vaishnava accounts regarding images of Krishna from the late 1660s and early 1670s.

In contrast to his brother, Dara Shikoh is remembered for participating in the translation of Indian texts from Sanskrit into Persian, including his rendering of the Upaniṣads as *Sirr-ī Akbar* ('The Greatest Secret'). Alam writes that following a 'critical examination of Hindu religions [Shukoh] found that all religions are identical and lead to the same goal. His work *Majma` al-Baḥrain* ("Meeting of the Two Oceans") is devoted to highlighting the similarity between the beliefs and practices prescribed in Islamic *taṣawwuf* and Hindu *yoga*' (Alam 2004: 96). The temptation of later histories of the Mughal dynasty has been to elevate Dara Shikoh as a continuation of Akbar's ecumenism and deep engagement with other religious traditions (especially particular schools of thought within Hinduism), as if this was somehow exceptional. Work by Truschke, Kinra and others on the presence and contributions of Sanskrit scholars at the Mughal court disproves this theory. Mughal rulers and courtiers interacted with yogis and ascetics from various Indian religious traditions on a regular basis. For example, beyond Akbar's famed *ibādat khāna*,

Shah Jahan, too, often surrounded himself with mystical consultants, and while he might have inclined more toward 'proper' Sufis, his court was awash with mystically-inclined Hindus like Chandar Bhan Brahman, not to mention various Hindu astrologers and other divines with whom he consulted almost daily.

(Kinra 2009: 169)

However, Kinra shows through a close reading of texts by Dara Shikoh's contemporaries, such as Shir Khan Lodi, who includes stories about Dara Shikoh in his *tazkira* written c.1690 CE, that there was criticism of the prince for exhibiting a variety of youthful immaturities, including his dabbling with the Vedas, because 'only a childish mind ... would be so easily be lured in such heterodoxy' (Kinra 2009: 184). Kinra argues that 'Baba Dara' was thought by many to be too immature to be able to take the throne in the war of succession that he so famously lost to his brother Aurangzeb (Kinra 2009: 190). In short, the popular image of Dara Shikoh as continuing

Akbar's legacy is complicated somewhat when considering the contemporaneous sources that Kinra introduces.

To be clear, not all examples of Sufi–yogi interactions are peaceful. There are many examples of Sufi '*pirs* and *yogīs*' waging spiritual warfare, attempting to out-do one another through performing various amazing feats in order to demonstrate who was more powerful.⁷ There is a temptation to read these conflicts as a type of proxy for the political and military struggles of Muslim and Hindu kingdoms against one another. However, such a reading belies the history of alliances between some of these same kingdoms that cross denominational lines. Instead, I suggest that Muslim rulers were very concerned with accessing forms of esoteric power, and that these accounts could be read as efforts by these mystics to maintain and improve their status in the all too real political realm.

What does all of this mean in terms of the original question regarding the permissibility of Muslims to practise yoga? First, it is a mistake to approach the question as if we can retroactively project the modern-day yoga-scape, with studios popping up all over the world, and then anachronistically imagine whether or not members of the Mughal court or other segments of society were flowing through *sūryanamaskār* ('sun salutation'). As other chapters in this volume highlight, the very meaning of yoga has always been quite varied, and past generations' version of yoga focused much more on its techniques for seated meditation. Second, the evidence I introduced above makes it clear that Muslims did engage with yoga in several different ways, especially through translating key texts and exploring these Indian teachings so as to assess their inherent spiritual value and compare them with the Qur'an and other traditional sources of divinely revealed truth.

When all breaths are not commensurable: `ilm-i dam and zikr, svarodaya and prāṇāyāma

In addition to the question of permissibility, there is also an issue of categorical commensurability. Within Islamic Studies, specifically for those who work on Sufism, there is an expectation that anything associated with paying special attention to the breath is connected with *dhikr/zikr*, the widespread 'remembrance' (of God) exercises that play such an important role in both individual and collective rituals associated with various Sufi communities. Within Hindu or Buddhist studies, I have frequently encountered the expectation that *svarodaya* is somehow linked to *prāṇāyāma*. While perfectly understandable, these connections and associations are also inconsistent.

As mentioned above, *svarodaya* originates in Śaiva tantra sources in Sanskrit, composed as early as the seventh century CE (Arraj 1988). These are typically presented as a dialogue between Lord Shiva and his consort, Parvati. The term translates literally as 'the attainment of voiced breath', and refers to divination practices where the practitioners use knowledge of their breath to predict auspicious moments to engage in various actions, including travelling, waging war, getting married and meeting with one's ruler. In the twentieth century, a series of translations from Sanskrit and Hindi into English occasionally present *svarodaya* using references to *prāṇā*, but more frequent is the retention of the distinction between the two terms for breath (Rai 1980; Ramacharaka 1905; Visaarada 1967). The aforementioned *A'in-i Akbari* provide a clear demarcation between *svarodaya* and *prāṇāyāma* by addressing these practices in separate sections. Amuli's taxonomy in the *Nefais al-funūn* clearly separates the sciences of *tasavvuf* (Sufism) from the natural sciences, within which one finds the material on *`ilm-i dam* in the form of an abridgement of the *Kāmarū Pančāśikā*. This confusion has an earlier precedent. Writing in the nineteenth century, Austrian orientalist Alfred von Kremer places Naqshbandi *zikr* accounts involving specific

instructions on breath control directly alongside Amulī's *'ilm-i dam* text, implying that these practices are very similar *because* of the shared interest in the breath, but without even a cursory examination of how the breath is functioning in each case (Von Kremer 1873). Instead, the presence of breath-focused practices plays into von Kremer's real aim, which is arguing for the Hindu and Buddhist origins of Indian Sufism. In the twentieth century, a series of translations from Sanskrit and Hindi into English occasionally present *svarodaya* using references to *prāṇā*, but more common is the retention of the distinction between the two terms for breath.⁸

In addition to the oft-cited *'ilm-i dam*, there are other terms relating to the breath, such as 'holding the breath' *ḥabs-i dam*, 'watching the breath' *pas-i anfās*, or even another way of 'knowing about the breath' *ma'rifat-i dam*. These terms are related in particular ways, but they are also distinct. The challenge is pushing back against the tendency to collapse all of these into a single category that usually invokes Sufism. In my previous work on the translation of Śaiva divination practices from Sanskrit into Persian, I have deliberately placed an emphasis on the texts using the term *'ilm-i dam*, granting those texts pride of place within this iteration of my inquiry into these breathing practices (D'Silva 2018). Future iterations may include broader surveys not just of unambiguously Sufi breathing practices, but also breathing practices found in yoga and other Indian traditions. The main point here is that one should refrain from making automatic links between a reference to the breath in an Islamicate language and then in Sufism. There are, of course, examples of texts on breathing techniques that are clearly linked to Sufi orders, but these are different practices, with different names, and thus must be recognised as such. Whether reading of *svarodaya* or *'ilm-i dam* in the *A'īn-i Akbarī* or in any of the many other sources that range from the fourteenth to nineteenth centuries, the point I want to emphasise is that the user or practitioner employs knowledge of the breath for practical gains. Drawing down power from the cosmos for one's own benefit makes a great deal of sense. Given that nature is by far the most powerful force experienced by humans, it is inherently logical that these actors would seek out the fulfilment of their agency through gaining and utilising knowledge regarding the channelling of all that the universe has to offer. Stellar work by scholars such as Moin (2014) demonstrates how important astrology was within formulations and justifications of Muslim kingship in South Asia (and beyond) during the Mughal period. The breath's importance in Muslim formulations of connections between the body and cosmos are by no means imported or derived from Indic sources. Qur'an 15:28 reads: 'Then your Lord told the angels, "I am making a human being from earth like clay fired and moulded. I have formed him and *breathed* into him of my spirit, so fall before him in prostration"' (emphasis added).⁹

Meditation

The preceding section focused specifically on Muslim engagement with yoga, a discussion generally framed with yoga as a set of practices essentially different from or foreign to Muslim communities. I have laid out a series of examples that hopefully demonstrate many ways in which Muslims – especially in South Asia – have encountered yoga not necessarily as something exotic, even if they recognise that its roots lie outside of the Qur'an, hadith, sunna and so forth. In this section, I turn to a more challenging question, namely that of Muslim engagement with meditation. Other chapters in this book highlight the vast diversity of meditative practices, both within and outside of 'Indian' traditions (namely Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism). However, unlike the study of Muslim approaches to yoga, in the case of meditation we must discuss the many meditative and contemplative techniques that Muslims developed from an early point *without any reference to* Indian traditions. If the study of Muslims and yoga always has this sense of syncretism, hybridity and appropriation in the background, then a similar study of Muslims

and meditation must be framed in entirely different terms. Despite earlier orientalist scholarship that insisted otherwise, Muslims *did not learn to meditate* from Hindus. The earliest possible example of Muslim meditation is none other than the Prophet Muhammad. Legend holds that the Prophet Muhammad meditated in the cave of Hira, in the mountains near Mecca, and that it was during one of these meditation sessions that the angel Gabriel appeared to him in order to deliver the first of the Qur'anic revelations. While sparse evidence remains that might give modern-day scholars some idea as to the particulars of the Prophet's meditation practice, this aspect of the prophetic example remains deeply woven within the stories Muslim communities preserve and pass down.

Beyond the Prophet Muhammad, Sufi groups have long cultivated a set of practices known as *dhikr*, the 'remembrance' of God. Below I provide some key examples of debates over *dhikr* within Sufi communities in the past and today. It must be said that *dhikr* is a polyvalent term, and that while many – including scholars of Islam – use it as a general catch-all, one should break it down into more specific parts. For example, the weekly group meditative practice commonly referred to as *dhikr* is more accurately termed *hadra* (literally meaning 'presence', but here understood as a meeting). Another facet of *dhikr* is the performance of and listening to music in varied settings, which one could closely associate with *samā`*. Lastly, there is *dhikr*, understood to refer to the recitation of mantras (both aloud and in silence), which technically is termed *wird*. In terms of outer appearance and practitioners' stated understanding of their internal experience, the visualisations and breathing exercises associated with *wird* is probably the closest to meditation for many scholars of related techniques in Hinduism and Buddhism. *Dhikr* often takes the form of chanting the ninety-nine names of God, either silently or aloud, individually or in a group setting. There are many handbooks and other written guides on how to conduct *dhikr* properly depending on one's *tarīqa* (Sufi order).¹⁰

Beyond *dhikr*, I would add *'ilm al-wahm*, 'the science of imagination', as a form of Islamic meditation. In the *'ilm-i dam* texts referenced above (dating from the fourteenth century CE onwards), many times the authors include a chapter on *wahm*. These sections include instructions for meditation practices designed to aid the practitioner in predicting the moment of their death. For example, one abridged version of the *Kāmarū Pančāśikā* directs the reader to go into the desert and begin meditating. After a time, he will witness a white manifestation of himself. He will then consult the shadow thrown by this projection. By reading the shadow's length, he will be able to predict how much longer he has to live (*Kāmarū Pančāśikā* abridgement, Browne recension). This is a different type of meditation or contemplation, which is not done with the goal of bringing the practitioner closer to God, but instead may be classified more as esoteric or occult technologies for self-knowledge and advancement.

Contemporary issues

The final section of this chapter focuses on the modern day. The debates over permissibility in the early twenty-first century CE are quite different from those that I discussed earlier. At the same time, we can also find certain lingering threads, which merit explication.

Uzma Jalaluddin sets her 2018 novel, *Aysha At Last*, in today's Toronto suburbs. A major plot line concerns the mosque that many of the characters attend. In one scene, several key characters attend a yoga class for women offered at the mosque. At no point in the scene is there any debate over the permissibility issue mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. This is a case of fiction reflecting reality, since a quick internet search for 'yoga classes at mosques' yields a number of links describing yoga classes held at mosques in different parts of North America and Europe. This is by no means unique to Muslim communities, for one can also find a wide variety

of churches offering yoga classes, at times with similar types of tension over the permissibility issue. In the context of the United States, the *Sedlock v. Baird* case from Encinitas, California, demonstrates one rationale for deciding the question of whether or not yoga is quintessentially Hindu (see discussions in Husgafvel, Chapter 3 in this volume). In this specific case, parents challenged the legality of their children learning yoga while attending public schools on the grounds that doing so violated US federal and California state law. The first amendment to the US Constitution states that ‘Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof’. Legal scholars have interpreted this to mean that no *single* religious tradition may be ‘established’ over and above others, which prohibits anyone from declaring an ‘official religion’ in the USA. In the California legal case, the judge ruled that since yoga has roots in *three* religious traditions, teaching it by definition could not result in the establishment of a *single* religion over others. Yoga’s *validity* or *efficaciousness* as a religious or spiritual pursuit is not the subject of critics’ investigation (Laine and Laine forthcoming). A key point of contention is whether or not yoga is uniquely Hindu, or whether the physical postures and some type of generic spiritual outlook can be removed from its Hindu background. In 2013 (and subsequently upheld on appeal in 2015), the court ultimately ruled in favour of the defendants, finding that *because* yoga is found in Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, the teaching of yoga logically cannot constitute establishing a *single* religious tradition over others.¹¹

One gets a different impression when reading Iranian cleric Hamza Sharifi’s criticism that those Iranians who practise yoga do not realise it ‘is just a sport and insist that it is the road to happiness’ (*The Economist* 2014). Hamid Reza Mazaheri-Seif, head of the Spiritual Health Institute in Qom, says: ‘The new teachers of yoga are not even Indian ... They’re European or American’ (*The Economist* 2014). Misbahuddin Mirza’s 2017 article in *Islamic Horizons*, ‘Does Islam Allow Yoga?’ (with the telling sub-heading, ‘What Exactly is Yoga?’) provides a useful overview designed to assist the average Muslim reader (who may not be familiar with yoga at all) with assessing the permissibility issue. Her article cites a variety of Muslim religious officials in assessing how to respond to this question. The key arguments circle on what yoga is ‘really’ about, which in these sources’ eyes is the pursuit of a particular form of knowledge, namely *jñāna yoga*, with an emphasis on *sūryanamaskār* (sun salutation). In reviewing a variety of popular press around the religious decrees, or fatwas, concerning the practicing of yoga, one sees several patterns to the debate. First, there is the notion that chanting *om* and other mantras while practicing yoga is threatening to Muslims’ faith. Second, there are questions about whether the *āsanas* are permissible, and enquiries as to how different they are from the physical motions found in *ṣalāt*, the ritual prayer performed five times a day. Third, what role does intention have? If it is just for exercise, then is it permissible? If it is intended for spiritual development, then is the issue that ‘there’s nothing really there’, or is it that ‘there is something there, and it leads us astray from the proverbial straight path’? As the popular press reaction to the Indian government’s declaration of Yoga Day in 2015 illustrates, this is very much an active debate with a great deal of vibrant interpretation.¹²

Conclusion

In this all too brief space, I have attempted to provide an introductory sketch of the study of Muslim engagement with yoga and meditation. The endnotes and Bibliography provide a guide for accessing additional resources. From a theoretical point of view, examining how Muslims relate to yoga yields results that push against the received scholarly habits of categorisation, such as the notion that only Hindus, Buddhists and Jains can ‘authentically’ practise yoga because it is deemed autochthonous to South Asia. In turn, the orientalist discourse insisting on Islam as foreign to

South Asia led to an understanding of Muslims as not really belonging to the region. Put very simply, if one posits that yoga is quintessentially Indian, and that Muslims are not really Indian, then the conclusion emerges that Muslims cannot practise yoga. However, the evidence (textual, archaeological, anthropological, etc.) counters the idea that Muslims only started to look at yoga in the current culturally deracinated and hyper-consumerist mode that has led to its incredibly strong growth in popularity across the world in the past century. Returning to the *`ilm-i dam* corpus, one scribe who translated a *Śiva-svarodaya* text into Persian comments in the margin that these teachings are ‘not the work of the people of Muhammad, it is the action of the yogis, but it is true’ (*Kāmarū Panāśikā* abridgement, Karachi recension). This is marginal only in terms of its physical location on that manuscript page. In truth, it is marginal only if one persists in interpreting religious identity and reading history through prisms conditioned by the European colonial period and subsequent postcolonial angst over preserving the boundaries between religious communities. If one looks at the permissibility issue using primary sources authored by Muslims in the pre- and early modern eras, at a minimum there is more openness to appraising the yogis’ techniques with a pragmatic eye: do these techniques work or not? Muslim observers in South Asia – such as Biruni, Amir Khusrav, Muhammad Ghaus and Abu’l Fazl – believed that yoga and other veins of Indic philosophy merited serious examination.¹³ Additionally – and perhaps most importantly, in light of the present-day issuance of fatwas or papal decrees advising Muslims and Christians against practising yoga – the Muslim scholars and court officials I just mentioned did not seem to think that learning more about yoga imperilled their status as faithful Muslims. Or, at a minimum I would say that the textual evidence suggests that these ‘medieval’ Muslims displayed more certitude that invalidating their religious status required a bit more than just learning Sanskrit and working on understanding India’s diverse religious and philosophical heritage. As usual, we who style ourselves as moderns have much to learn from our long-gone colleagues.

Glossary

- dam* (دم), Persian for breath (not to be confused with the Arabic word for blood, which is also *dam*). Used somewhat interchangeably with the Arabic term *nafas*
- dhikr* (ذکر), Sufi practice dedicated to the remembrance of God, can be performed individually or collectively, silently or vocally
- ḥaḍra* (حضرۃ), literally ‘presence’, but a gathering for the purpose of *dhikr*
- `ilm* (علم), Arabic/Persian for ‘science’, but more generally ‘knowledge’
- ma`arifa(t)* (معرفت), Arabic and Persian term for more personal, or sometimes mystical, forms of knowledge
- masnavi* (مثنوی), poem written using rhyming couplets (from Arabic, ‘*mathnawi*’). Most famous example is the mystical and didactic poem written in Persian during the fourteenth century by Mawlana Jalal al-Din ‘Rumi’
- nafās* (نفس), see *dam*
- riyāḍa/riyāzat* (رياضۃ), Arabic and Persian term for spiritual practice
- samā`* (سماع), literally ‘audition’, the ceremony in which Sufi practitioners of certain orders (such as the Mevlevi) use music as part of a *dhikr* practice
- sihr* (سحر), Arabic/Persian term usually used to mean magic or sorcery
- ta`mal* (تأمل), Arabic for meditation
- Tāriqa* (طريقة), literally ‘path’, but usually used to refer to a Sufi order
- wird* (ورد), daily litany that a Sufi practitioner repeats, similar to a mantra
- zikr*, see *dhikr*.

Notes

- 1 Adapted from the translation provided by Nath and Gwaliari 1981: 99, para. 30. The original text reads ‘*an-keh bidid in sar azu bar nakonad / va an-keh nadid in hameh bavar nakonad*’.
- 2 A particularly beneficial – and quite accessible – resource is David Gordon White’s chapter on Muslim engagement with the *Yogasūtra*, specifically his analysis of the differences between the ‘standard’ Sanskrit recensions of Patañjali’s text that scholars work with today, and the versions that al-Biruni and Abu’l Fazl apparently worked with (White 2012).
- 3 This translation will be published in D’Silva and Ernst forthcoming.
- 4 For a detailed review of the translation history of the *Amrtakunda*, see Ernst 2016: 186–228.
- 5 The *Bahr al-ḥayāt* is also the oldest extant source for illustrations depicting yogis in various postures. See more examples of Sufis’ interactions with yogis as seen in Mughal artwork in Diamond 2013. A groundbreaking study that uses art, architecture and material culture as a means of analysing exchange between Muslims and Hindus during the Delhi Sultanate period is Flood 2009.
- 6 There are several key editions and translations of the *A’in-i Akbari*. See Gladwin (1777), Abu’l Fazl (1869); Abu’l Fazl (1978). Additionally, Wheeler Thackston translated both volumes of the *Akbarnama* (2015 and 2016, respectively).
- 7 For several examples of these tales, see Digby 2000.
- 8 See the following for a representative sampling: Svami 1987; Vissarada 1967; Muktibodhananda 1984.
- 9 After Kugle’s translation, as found in Kugle 2007: 30.
- 10 For example, the Naqshbandi *tariqa* has a variety of these materials, including translations and audio files with different types of *dhikr*. www.naqshbandi.org. Accessed 31 December 2019.
- 11 Jain provides an excellent analysis of this issue, distilling the perspectives into two schools of thought, the ‘Christian yogaphobic position’ and the ‘Hindu origins position’ (Jain 2014: 131).
- 12 For a representative sample of reactions, see the following articles: 11 June 2015: ‘Darul-Ulum says yoga day is alright because of similarities to namaz’: www.indiatoday.in/india/story/darul-uloom-deoband-okay-with-yoga-world-yoga-day-namaz-839259-2015-06-11; 11 June 2015: ‘Darul-Ulum says yoga as exercise is acceptable’: www.hindustantimes.com/india/darul-uloom-deoband-says-ready-to-accept-yoga-as-an-exercise/story-4VAzxE53ZdD2SIgiS7RptL.html; 19 May 2016, ‘Darul-Ulum says that chanting “Om” is not allowed for Muslims, reaffirms that yoga as exercise is permitted’: www.asianage.com/india/deoband-fatwa-chanting-om-809. All accessed 31 December 2019.
- 13 For an example of cutting-edge scholarship that sets new standards for future scholars working on philosophical and theological debates taking place across Sanskrit, Arabic and Persian texts from the Mughal period, see Nair 2020. Nair analyses the translation of the *Laghu-Yoga-Vāsiṣṭha* from Sanskrit into Persian under the sponsorship of future Mughal ruler Jahangir (d. 1627 CE), known in Persian as the Jūg Bāsisht.

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