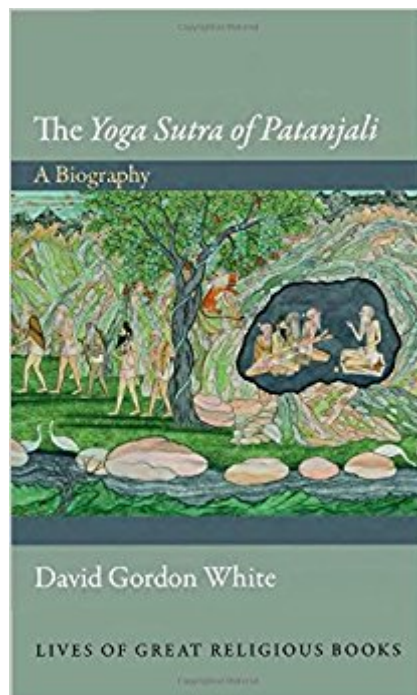




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The "Yoga Sutra Of Patanjali": A Biography (Lives Of Great Religious Books)



Synopsis

Consisting of fewer than two hundred verses written in an obscure if not impenetrable language and style, Patanjali's Yoga Sutra is today extolled by the yoga establishment as a perennial classic and guide to yoga practice. As David Gordon White demonstrates in this groundbreaking study, both of these assumptions are incorrect. Virtually forgotten in India for hundreds of years and maligned when it was first discovered in the West, the Yoga Sutra has been elevated to its present iconic status--and translated into more than forty languages--only in the course of the past forty years. White retraces the strange and circuitous journey of this confounding work from its ancient origins down through its heyday in the seventh through eleventh centuries, its gradual fall into obscurity, and its modern resurgence since the nineteenth century. First introduced to the West by the British Orientalist Henry Thomas Colebrooke, the Yoga Sutra was revived largely in Europe and America, and predominantly in English. White brings to life the improbable cast of characters whose interpretations--and misappropriations--of the Yoga Sutra led to its revered place in popular culture today. Tracing the remarkable trajectory of this enigmatic work, White's exhaustively researched book also demonstrates why the yoga of India's past bears little resemblance to the yoga practiced today.

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Customer Reviews

Where, oh where, are the notes and bibliography? Perhaps on the basis of the small size (in length and in physical dimensions) and assumed popular audience for its series of publications offering

"biographies" of sacred texts, Princeton University Press has chosen to host the notes and bibliography as pdfs on their website. This makes the physical book practically useless to scholars and intelligent readers who want to know where the author's conclusions have come from. The most egregious example of the stupidity of such a choice is on pages 23-24, where a list of twenty-two different published translations of the opening lines of the Yoga Sutra are given--and ONLY ONE is attributed in the physical book. What about the service that could have been done here for the reader who is shopping around for a translation of the Yoga Sutra and finds one or more of these renderings resonant? Furthermore, there are daggers in the margins (yes, daggers--exactly what I would have put there had I been a comic book artist illustrating my thoughts as I read) for all the places where I'm supposed to go to the website to look up the notes. Most of the 236 pages of text (minus a few endnotes, index, etc.) have between one and four of these--and that works out to about 400 trips to the computer (or 50 pages of our own computer paper if we choose to print up the pdfs of notes and bibliography) if we're serious about checking the sources. I'm a great fan of David Gordon White's writings, but I would gladly stage a boycott of his publisher for a year or so directly in front of their offices, if anyone wants to join me, for the grave injustice they have done here for serious readers and researchers who have to go digging on the website for the information they need and then have to figure out how to cite it. Is this an example of dumbing down for the digital age or what?

Was Patanjali a real person or a half-human, half-snake god? Was the Yoga Sutra a "classical" text? Where have our translations come from? These and many other questions are explored in this biography of the Yoga Sutra. Firstly, Patanjali (first century BCE or fourth century CE) is the name of the mysterious author-compiler of the Yoga Sutra. In twelfth century Tamil traditions, Patancali is the name of a half-man half-snake incarnation of the great serpent-god, Ananta. Later scholars, identified this mythic Tamil Patancali with the Sanskrit Patanjali of the Yoga Sutra. Was the author of the Sutra a human, Patanjali? What is the Yoga Sutra? Literally, they are 196 opaque stanzas written in Sanskrit. What we read are not the original. "Big Yoga--the corporate yoga subculture--has elevated the Yoga Sutra to a status it never knew, even during its seventh- to twelfth-century heyday" writes White in his Preface. What we actually get are interpretations of commentaries about the Yoga Sutra. Rutgers University professor Edwin Bryant, a scholar of Hinduism, is quoted: "When we speak of the philosophy of Patanjali we really mean (or should mean) is the understanding of Patanjali according to Vyasa: It is Vyasa who determined what Patanjali's abstruse sutras meant, and all the subsequent commentators elaborated on Vyasa...." The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali: A

Biography is a chronicle of the Sutra's principle commentators to-date: including Vyasa, Hegel, Blavatsky, Vivekananda, Krishnamacharya and others. White, our author-biographer, presents a chapter on each commentator that weaves together an overarching and fascinating biography of the Yoga Sutra. Our author concludes with Yoga Sutra 2.0, that is, what may be next, along with some "alternative theories" about how the Sutras may have been "taken over" or co-opted by translators or commentators to promote their own agendas--including a provocative theory that the Sutra was originally a Buddhist work that was reinterpreted into a Hindu text. Critical scholars, like David Gordon White, could grind the Yoga Sutra down into analytical powder for ever, and not be able to provide definitive answers (kind of like biblical scholarship). Readers attached to their myths about yoga or snake-gods may not appreciate White's critical research. This book is for serious students, historians, and scholars of yoga. Yet, this book is easy to read for the non-technical, non-academic reader who has keen interest in yoga. White concludes that the Yoga Sutra has little in common with the original version. Highly recommended book.

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