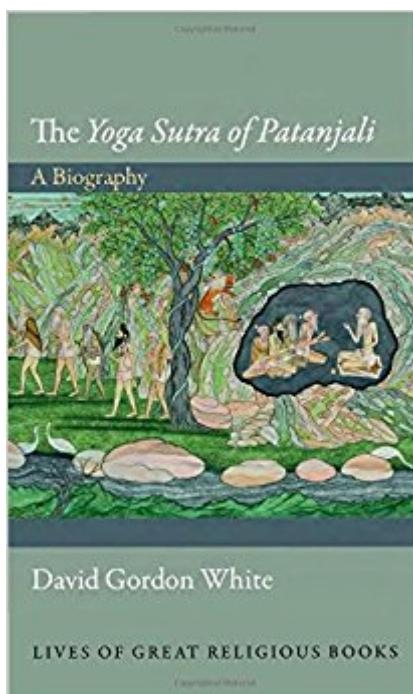


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# The "Yoga Sutra Of Patanjali": A Biography (Lives Of Great Religious Books)



## 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 statusâ •and translated into more than forty languagesâ •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 interpretationsâ •and misappropriationsâ •of the Yoga Sutra led to its revered place in popular culture today. Tracing the remarkable trajectory of this enigmatic work, Whiteâ ™s exhaustively researched book also demonstrates why the yoga of Indiaâ ™s past bears little resemblance to the yoga practiced today.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"White's book, a contribution to Princeton's Lives of Great Religious Books series, delves into the short collection of verses that many contemporary practitioners believe--erroneously--to be the

original, definitive guide to ancient yoga philosophy. A scholar of comparative religions, White conducted sharp and deep research to tell the story of the rise, fall, and modern-day resurgence of the 195 verses attributed to the author/compiler Patanjali, who lived in either the first century BCE or the fourth century CE."--Publishers Weekly"White's scholarly read is a fascinating presentation of the rise, fall, and rediscovery of the *Yoga Sutra*. . . . It will appeal to those looking to expand their knowledge. Concise, yet showing fresh research, this book is well suited for academic and comprehensive yoga collections."--Ajoke Kokodoko, *Library Journal*"Engaging, challenging, myth-busting, and completely au courant, weaving into the debates on cultural appropriation, colonization, and the reinvention of yoga and South Asian spiritual practice in the postmodern west."--Sean Feit, *Nadalila.org*"A wildly entertaining tour-de-force of deconstructive research."--Matthew Remski, *Reality Sandwich*"A lively account of this sutra's unlikely history and how it has variously been interpreted, reinterpreted, ignored, and hailed. The colorful characters on these pages include Vivekananda and Krishnamacharya, two giants in modern yoga, as well as literary figures such as T.S. Eliot. There is also Alberuni, a Muslim scientist and scholar who translated a commentary on the *Yoga Sutra* a thousand years ago, and the outrageous Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, who fused the principles of the *Yoga Sutra* with Western ideas of the occult."--Shambhala Sun"The *Yoga Sutra* of Patanjali undertakes an exhaustive, scholarly history of the titular work of ancient Indian philosophy, lightened by author David Gordon White's provocative wit. . . . White's in-depth examination demonstrates how scriptural exegesis often reveals as much about the worldview and priorities of its authors as it does the wisdom of the works they interpret."--Max Zahn, *Tricycle*"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."--RSR, *Buddhism Now*"[L]ucidly written."--Vithal C. Nadkarni, *Economic Times*"[A] groundbreaking study."--Apoorva Sripathi, *The Hindu*"The *Biography* is a rich and elegant account of the reception history of the [Yoga Sutra] in a variety of historical and cultural locations, and it will be of value to general audiences, specialists, and practitioners of yoga. It is an indispensable addition to the growing literature on the [Yoga Sutra], and like other volumes in the *Lives of Great Religious Books* series, it combines comprehensive scope with detailed analysis, in a form that is both accessible and nuanced."--Peter Valdina, *Journal of Hindu Studies*

"The who's who of how Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra* came to be, this thoughtful and well-developed

biography gives an in-depth view of each contributor to this once minor, now major philosophical player in the Western yoga world. I will keep this beautiful work in my library to refer back to as I continue to deepen my exploration of this profound spiritual masterpiece. A must-read for any serious academic or practitioner."--Melanie Salvatore-August, YogaWorks mentor teacher, author, yoga and mindfulness practitioner"David Gordon White's unique knowledge of both classical yoga texts and contemporary religious practice in India and the West gives him a unique insight into the troubled question of the relevance (or irrelevance) of Patanjali's masterwork to contemporary postural yoga. Written with White's characteristic verve, rich in fascinating historical documentation, this is an often hilarious and always exciting story. Anyone seriously interested in yoga in any of its many forms, from its profound philosophy to its often life-changing practice, must read this book."--Wendy Doniger, author of *The Hindus: An Alternative History* and *On Hinduism*"Contemporary yoga teachers and gurus have mistakenly made the *Yoga Sutra* into the ubiquitous foundation of all yoga practice, stretching and extrapolating it into a complete manual for living. Now the man behind the curtain is exposed. White mines the truth from hearsay and stands contemporary yoga beliefs on their head. This remarkable, colorful, and engaging book will rattle a lot of cages and hopefully enlighten the enlighteners. I highly recommend it as required reading for anyone interested in yoga."--Ganga White, author of *Yoga Beyond Belief* and founder of the White Lotus Foundation"David Gordon White is not only a magnificent writer and a brilliant scholar. He is perhaps our best modern interpreter of Indian yogic traditions."--Reza Aslan, author of *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* and *No god but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam*"Elegant, erudite, and crystal clear. White shows how the *Yoga Sutra*, which has taken on iconic significance with respect to the practice of modern yoga, has been completely misunderstood and manipulated to mean different things over the course of the past millennium. This book will force anyone who thinks they know what the *Yoga Sutra* signifies to completely change their view on the subject."--Joseph S. Alter, author of *Yoga in Modern India*"A very engaging read. White's book is provocative in all the right places."--Martha Ann Selby, coeditor of *Tamil Geographies: Cultural Constructions of Space and Place in South India*"The best book available on the *Yoga Sutra*. It is a work of original research that will greatly interest scholars and captivate general readers. White performs a great service with this book."--Donald S. Lopez, Jr., author of *"The Tibetan Book of the Dead": A Biography*

Although a worthwhile read and closely researched work on the written legacy of the *yoga sutra*, White's approach seems to lack an integrated understanding. For example he seems unable to

grasp that the necessary distinction between purusha and prakriti can also be understood as their absolute unity. He shows little deep exploration of the oral tradition and the way it has and still does impact on the teaching of the yoga sutra, relying on written records as his source. For me this made the work frustrating to read at times but also challenging in a positive way. I would recommend it for students of yoga.

The "Yoga Sutra" of Patanjali, written between the second and fourth centuries CE, is considered to be the classic yoga text. There are numerous translations and editions that include also the main commentaries written in the last 16 centuries. This excellent book is part of a new series called Lives of Great Religious Books, and Professor White presents a critical biographical account of this masterwork through the years; each one of its 16 chapters is a gaudy historical tableau. The author has the best credentials to deal with such a difficult subject, as he is the J. F. Rowny Professor of Religious Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He is the author of various stimulant works, including "The Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India" (1996), "Kiss of the Yogini. 'Tantric Sex' in its South Asian Context," (2003), "Sinister Yogis" (2009); he is also the editor of "Yoga in Practice" (2012). The book uses a clear and crisp language and many of the statements are provocative and controversial. Such an approach is explained by his declaration that "the task of the religious studies scholar is not only to make the strange seem familiar, but also to make the familiar seem strange ... our goal is both to reorient and to disorient" (this quote comes from his article "Yoga, Brief History of an Idea," included in his book "Yoga in Practice," mentioned above). Prof. White highlights the impenetrability of the "Yoga Sutra" as the text was composed in a cryptic language, intended to be used for easy memorization and for oral transmission and he reminds us that the 195 aphorisms which contain around 1,200 words, have only four verbs. His main thesis is that the generalized idea that the "Yoga Sutra" is part of a long unbroken tradition initiated long time before Patanjali, which has been linking gurus, students, commentators and copyists from those early times to the present, is incorrect. Prof. White puts into question many things, including the relevance and irrelevance of the Sutra for modern yoga, and the identity of Patanjali as the author and Vyasa as the main commentator. He raises the issue that the Sutra could be the result of mixing the first three chapters, which have a Buddhist tone, with a fourth chapter that provides a Hindu expression. He develops the idea that the "Sutra" was ignored in India for centuries and that it was rediscovered by the British Orientalists in the 18th century and that the work acquired its modern reputation after it was recognized a masterpiece by Vivekananda a century later and then became part of the marketing of the "Modern Postural Yoga" boom. He traces the links between the

"Sutra" and the rise and fall of the Theosophical movement. One of the most debatable chapters has the title "The Strange Case of T. M. Krishnamacharya;" Krishnamacharya (1888-1989) is considered the father of modern yoga. After long well-documented detours, using a long list of notes and references, many of which are accessible only online, Prof White simply concludes his deconstructive analysis indicating that the yoga that we practice today, particularly in the US, is completely different from the yoga of past India. One of the critics of this book is the yoga teacher and co-founder of "Yoga Community Toronto," Matthew Remski, who wrote a very challenging review comparing Prof. White's biography with the story in the film "The Red Violin," where the final message is that what really counts is the recognition of the power of great music (this article can be seen at the site

<http://matthewremski.com/wordpress/the-yoga-sutras-and-the-red-violin-a-review-of-david-gordon-whites-new-book>). In a similar vein, we may conclude that whatever is the real story, the "Yoga Sutra" remains a great source of inspiration.

Author, scholar, and yogi, David Gordan White has given us several deeply insightful (and I must say highly enjoyable to read) works on yoga history and philosophy, including *Yoga in Practice*, *Tantra in Practice*, *The Alchemical Body*, *Kiss of the Yogini* and others. Here, White combines his usual impeccable scholarship and highly accessible writing style to offer a deep meditation on the origins, development, and extraordinarily diverse array of transliterations and commentaries on The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, which along with the *Bhagavad-Gita* is the most read ancient book on yoga. If you read twenty-five different books on the *Yoga Sutras*, you are likely to discover twenty-five very different - even conflicting - interpretations. On deeper study you are likely to start asking questions such as, "who was Patanjali?" or "why does this or that particular author offer such different views?" or "how does this pertain to my personal practice or my teaching?" White untangles these and other questions, and along the way the reader comes to appreciate that most of what we have previously learned about Patanjali's ancient set of 195 brief aphorisms on yoga practice, method, and benefits is extremely distorted, more in service to one's contemporary brand or power in the yoga community than to excavating or sharing what insights might have been in the original writings. If you've ever wondered about the origins or veracity of ancient yoga writings, if you've pondered the relationship between the received wisdom of tradition and your practice or teaching today, this book is most definitely for you. It's deep yet also a delightful page turner, taking us up and down and all across India, back-and-forth from India to the West, to the Muslim world, and into the heart of the practice. NOTE: If you do not have an open mind, if you cling to the

teachings of a guru as the source of truth, this book might be terribly upsetting. Read it at the risk of further opening to a practice that liberates you from myths, distortions, and boldface lies, that opens you to a yoga practice that's about awakening to greater clarity.

Great book. However, if you are unfamiliar with the non-dual religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, etc..) you will have to concentrate, read it again and you will figure it out. Otherwise, great, ancient book, source.Chuck

This book turned out to be an eye opening surprise. I had been reading a number of different commentaries on the Yoga Sutras (of which this is not) and I stumbled upon this book. It is a book about the history of the text itself through out its long history. This book is a great read for anyone looking to deepen their understanding on where the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali have come from and their recent prominence on the world stage.

Modern yogi? After reading this book this term may be an oxymoron. Lots more reading to do. Thank you for laying out this argument. It is highly enjoyable, laughable and enlightening!

this is very interesting book I recommend it for anyone with strong general interest in history of ideas and religion

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