

Article

Spiritualities of the Body: Yoga, Spirituality and Health in Italy

Matteo Di Placido

Department of Cultures, Politics and Society, University of Turin, 10124 Turin, Italy; matteo.diplacido@unito.it

Abstract: Modern postural yoga, a body–mind practice developed in the last hundred and fifty years at the intersection of therapeutic, fitness and spiritual logics, is experiencing an unprecedented worldwide diffusion, including in Italy. This article, relying on discourse analysis of three yoga manuals and twenty-seven biographical interviews of yoga practitioners, aims at exploring yoga’s positioning in the Italian context, with particular attention paid to its practical–discursive construction as a contemporary form of *spiritualities of the body*, defined as spiritualities oriented towards practitioners’ ‘unmediated’ relationship with the sacred and the cultivation of well-being through “body work”. More specifically, the article investigates the “cultural pragmatics” of a selection of Italian yoga manuals, scripted performances (regarding health and spirituality) capable of directly influencing and impacting practitioners’ “social imaginaries” of yoga in their everyday practice. In so doing, it also contributes to discussing the circular and reciprocal relationship between “discourses” and “practices” within specific contexts of practice, such as yoga classes and teacher training courses. The article concludes by emphasizing which conceptualizations of health and spirituality are promoted, transmitted and in turn embodied during yoga practice, the role of health discourses and pedagogies in the professionalization of yoga and the growing practical–discursive construction of the yoga teacher as a spiritual director and health expert.

Keywords: spirituality; yoga; health; Italy; imaginaries of health; cultural pragmatics



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1. Introduction

“Modern postural yoga” (De Michelis 2004, p. 187),¹ a body–mind practice developed in the last hundred and fifty years at the intersection of therapeutic, fitness and spiritual logics, is experiencing an unprecedented worldwide diffusion, including in Italy. Yoga, in fact, is swiftly moving from the periphery of the socio-cultural field, where it played a crucial role in the ‘turn East’ of the counterculture of the 1960s (Campbell 2007), to the center of today’s middle-classes’ popular culture (Jain 2014), especially due to its health and spiritual (read exotic) appeal (Altglas 2014; Newcombe 2021).

Scholars belonging to the by now established discipline of yoga studies have so far explored the textual roots of modern forms of yoga (Birch 2019; Birch and Singleton 2019; Mallinson and Singleton 2017), their birth and development starting from the British colonial ruling of India (Alter 2004; De Michelis 2004; Singleton 2010) and their processes of transnational diffusion and transformation in the subsequent decades of the nineteenth century up to this day (Foxen 2020; Newcombe 2019; Newcombe and O’Brien-Kop 2021). The core insights of these studies, characterized by a socio-historical approach (Di Placido 2021) and an anti-essentialist stance (Jain 2014), postulate that modern forms of yoga are first and foremost the result of transcultural encounters and that they are continuously practiced, appropriated and reinvented by different individuals and social groups and for a plurality of purposes in different times and contexts (Newcombe 2018; White 2009; Samuel 2008). Examples of this malleability are the nationalist equation of yoga with Hinduism, yoga as a path to spiritual liberation and the acquisition of a lean body and/or as a therapeutic tool to overcome psychological and physical ailments of different sorts.

Western conceptions of health and the body have, within these intricate and still ongoing processes of translation, adapted and changed, met and merged with yogic theories

and concepts (Di Placido 2020), thus delineating a peculiar framing of what health is and how it can be achieved, regained and maintained thanks to yoga. Health is here invariably associated with an experiential understanding of spirituality, that is, the idea that the spiritual framing and promises of yoga are, in contrast to those of traditional religions, to be directly experienced and accessed through the work on one's own body, most notably through postures (*āsana*) and breathwork (*prāṇāyāma*), among other techniques. As anthropologist and yoga scholar Joseph Alter correctly underlines:

“The worldwide popularity of yoga today is based on the promise of holistic health and fitness. Postural practice has become a global phenomenon for a spectrum of reasons, not least of which is that it is said to be different from and better than other forms of exercise and self-development”. (Alter 2022, p. 50)

While unveiling the progressive assimilation of yoga within hybrid conceptions of health—and more implicitly also with the notion of spirituality—scholars have noted yoga's positioning within a variety of transnational movements, such as physical cultures and Eastern movement forms (Brown and Leledaki 2010; Singleton 2010), Western harmonialism (Foxen 2020), the New Age (De Michelis 2004) and contemporary spiritualities (Di Placido and Palmisano 2023), to name just a few. Particularly prominent, I contend, is the positioning of yoga within the so called “embodied spiritualities” (Bertolo and Giordan 2016), that is, spiritualities that, in line with the “spiritual revolution” (Heelas and Woodhead 2005) and the “spiritual turn” (Houtman and Auspurs 2007; Watts 2022) theorized by sociologists, privilege the experiential, private and autonomous dimensions of individuals' access to the sacred also through the mediation of the body (Giordan 2007, 2009; Giordan and Sbalchiero 2020).

Such a close link between yoga practice, health and spirituality has guided several scholars to inquire into the role of a practitioner's body, both as the main site where health concerns can be individually tackled and as a means to discover and cultivate the sacred, whether in its immanent or transcendental forms (Bertolo 2013; Ciołkosz 2022; Sarbacker 2014). What this literature, however, has yet to clarify is how yoga's therapeutic and spiritual potentials are conveyed to and appropriated by practitioners, that is, the social dynamics and processes through which the spiritualities of the body of modern forms of postural yoga emphasize health and spirituality as their main concerns. In an attempt to contribute to this literature and to explore the sociological vacuum regarding yoga, spirituality and health in Italy,² the article investigates the “cultural pragmatics” (Alexander 2004) of three Italian yoga manuals, that is, scripted performances (regarding health and spirituality) capable of directly influencing and impacting practitioners' “social imaginaries” (Taylor 2004) of yoga in their everyday practice. In turn, these social imaginaries are scrutinized by relying on 27 biographical interviews of yoga practitioners, which enable capturing if and how the main themes and concerns of yoga manuals also have a place in practitioners' narratives and overall framing of yoga theory and practice. In so doing, the article also contributes to discussing the circular and reciprocal relationship between “discourses” and “practices” within specific contexts of practice, such as yoga classes and teacher training courses, explaining how everyday religious and spiritual practices, as theorized by the “lived-religion” or “practice approach” (Ammerman 2013, 2020; McGuire 2008), often have a strong *disciplining backstage*—in a dramaturgical sense (Goffman 1959)—in the shape of textual references and spiritual guidance also in the context of contemporary spiritualities and not only within the framework of traditional religions.

The article is structured as follows: Section 2 discusses, in brief, the methodological and theoretical tools used in this article; Section 3 explores the cultural pragmatics of yoga, spirituality and health in three yoga manuals authored by prominent Italian yoga teachers; Section 4, relying on practitioners' narratives, unpacks the spiritual and health imaginaries of yoga in Italy; Section 5 concludes by emphasizing which conceptualizations of health and spirituality are promoted, transmitted and in turn embodied during yoga practice and considers the role of health discourses and pedagogies in the professionalization of yoga

and the growing practical–discursive construction of the yoga teacher as a spiritual director and health expert.

2. Methodological and Theoretical Notes

2.1. *Discourse and Practice in the Social Scientific Study of Religion*

Methodologically, the article relies on discourse analysis of three yoga manuals and on twenty-seven anonymized biographical interviews of Italian yoga teachers and practitioners (2017–2020) conducted as part of a broader ethnographic project on the pedagogies of modern yoga (2017–present). Discourse analysis, approached through a variety of theoretical sensitivities, has been widely applied to the study of religious discourses and phenomena (Asad 1993; Beaman 2020; Hjelm 2020; Johnston and von Stuckrad 2020; Qadir 2023), showing the socially and discursively constructed nature of concepts, practices and ideologies central to the disciplines comprising the social scientific study of religion. In this article, I build on this critical tradition and apply it to the study of situated discourses and of how language “simultaneously reflects and constructs the situation or context in which it is used” (Gee [1999] 2014, p. 97). Thus, I privileged the study of how language and discourse are used in the production of meaning and in defining the social and discursive construction of yoga as a health and spiritual practice in a selection of Italian yoga manuals. In practice, this includes simultaneously accounting for manuals’ structure and content, with specific attention focused on the discursive strategies employed by the authors to transmit their visions of what counts as yoga, its purpose(s) and how it ought to be practiced.

More specifically, I will focus on three yoga manuals authored by prominent Italian yoga teachers and popularizers: ‘*Yoga and Health*’ (Cella Al-Chamali [1992] 2011) by Gabriella Cella Al-Chamali; ‘*The Gifts of Yoga to Practice a Full Life*’ (Nuzzo 2019) by Antonio Nuzzo and ‘*The Way of Warrior of Kindness*’ (Cassia and Milletti 2021) by Francesca Cassia and Roberto Milletti. I have selected these three key texts among a plethora of other illustrious options primarily because they are all written by authoritative Italian yoga teachers who are central to the success and development of the Italian yoga field in the last few decades and for opportunistic reasons: the first manual is currently in its third edition with a major Italian publisher, thus testifying to its importance; the second manual was presented at the Milan YogaFestival 2019 edition, again gaining wide visibility within the Italian yoga scene; while the third was written by the founders of Odaka Yoga, the style of yoga I am most familiar with as I have studied it extensively in the past few years as part of my research agenda on yoga pedagogies. Naturally, there are other yoga manuals that could have been selected on the grounds of their national impact and exceptional sales, such as Iyengar’s ([1966] 1995) ‘*Lights on Yoga*’, Mark Stephens’ (2012) ‘*Yoga Sequencing*’ and Leslie Kaminoff and Amy Matthews’ (Kaminoff and Matthews [2016] 2021) ‘*Yoga Anatomy*’, to mention just a few. Although, from a cursory review of the yoga manuals sold in Italian libraries and on the internet, it is possible to identify common themes and practical discursive registers focused on health, the body and practitioners’ self, it is also important to acknowledge that a different selection of texts may have produced different results. As sociologist of religion Marcus Moberg (2013, p. 12) correctly remarks, “it is quite possible for different researchers to identify different recurring key elements, different discourses, and different relationships between discourses, in any particular body of material”. As a consequence, this article does not aim to provide a monolithic and/or exhaustive interpretation of Italian yoga manuals, recognizing that future studies may reveal different nuances of how yoga is currently conceptualized in yoga manuals in Italy and abroad. Read together, however, these three manuals contribute to illustrating how yoga qua health and spiritual resources is currently conceptualized within the Italian yoga scene.

Following cultural sociologist Jeffrey Alexander (2004), I apply the notion of “cultural pragmatics” to the analysis of these texts, approaching their contents as scripted performances (regarding health and spirituality) capable of directly influencing and impacting practitioners’ experiences of yoga in their everyday practice. More specifically, Alexander is critical of the ways in which social theory has been traditionally either concerned

with structuralist approaches or practice-based approaches, claiming that this polarization does not help to capture the complexity of cultural phenomena in their entirety. Partly echoing this point, sociologists of religion Iddo Tavory and Daniel Winchester (Tavory and Winchester 2012, p. 353) underline that

“In the study of religion, across disciplines, scholars tend to take one of two approaches: a strong phenomenological approach that argues that there is such a thing as a religious experience that can be observed across time and cultures apart from its linguistic representation [. . .] Alternatively, others opt for a discursive approach and argue that it is impossible to speak of religious experience without attending to the way experiences are produced by discourse (Proudfoot 1985), or, in a slightly softer version, that discourse is the only aspect of religious experience to which sociologists have access (Yamane 2000)”. (Tavory and Winchester 2012, p. 353)

Needless to say, this division is only partly correct as personal experiences of the sacred, religious and spiritual practices and discourses are, in empirical reality, highly intertwined, albeit representing different facets of the social world. As sociologist of religion Robert Wuthnow (2011, p. 7) correctly argues, in fact, “religious discourse is clearly a social practice—patterned by the social institutions in which it is learned and in which it is practiced, explicitly taught, and implicitly modeled so that practitioners adhere to commonly accepted rules governing the practice, internalized so that these rules often do not require conscious deliberation, and yet observable in the structure and content of discourse itself”. As a consequence, in the following sections of the article, I will attempt to reveal how yoga manuals and practitioners’ narratives dialogue with each other and contribute to construct “what yoga is” and “what it is for” in contemporary Italy.

In this regard, the reliance on 27 biographical interviews of teachers and practitioners allows, through thematic and content analysis, to verify if and how the cultural pragmatics contained in yoga manuals regarding yoga qua spiritual and health-based practice impact practitioners’ narratives, representations and everyday experiences of yoga. The first 7 participants were recruited at the Milan YogaFestival 2017 edition, where I conducted three days of immersive fieldwork and established contacts with yoga teachers and practitioners belonging to different schools and traditions. Subsequently, I recruited and interviewed the remaining 20 participants by relying on a snowball sampling technique. Importantly, this sample does not lay claim to representativeness of the yoga practitioners population in Italy. On the contrary, it may more accurately mirror a specific portion of the Italian yoga field, thus offering valuable insights into its internal articulation. The participants were 20 women and 5 men. Their average age is 44 years old, with the youngest practitioner being 29 years old and the oldest 56 years old. The average time they devoted to practice is 15 years, with the longest engagement being 30 plus years and the shortest being 2 years. The styles practiced and taught by the practitioners at the time of the interviews include Odaka Yoga (11 practitioners); Hatha Yoga (5 practitioners); Iyengar Yoga (4 practitioners); Ashtanga Yoga (2 practitioners); Trauma-informed Yoga Therapy (1 practitioner); YogaFit (1 practitioner); Yoga Harmony (1 practitioner); Yoga for Kids (1 practitioner) and Acroyoga (1 practitioner). This variety of schools, traditions and styles of yoga implies that whatever influence can be ascertained between the manuals analyzed here and practitioners’ narratives has to be ascribed to the current social organization of the larger yoga field in Italy rather than to specific subcultures or yoga lineages.

Through the reliance on these interviews, the article attempts to unveil the “social imaginaries” (Taylor 2004, p. 23) of yoga, that is, “the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations”. Such a focus on yoga practitioners’ narratives is pivotal as contemporary theoretical debates about experience, and especially about religious experience, have been concerned with the proper relationship between experience and its discursive representation (Tavory and Winchester 2012, p. 353). More specifically,

the coupling of discourse analysis and biographical interviews fosters the exploration of the mutually reinforcing and reciprocal relationship between discourses and practices without privileging either of the two—contrary to mainstream approaches to the social scientific study of religion—as the site of sociological interpretation and construction of specific health and spiritual imaginaries of yoga.

2.2. *Spiritualities of the Body*

This article, alongside the reliance on a plethora of “sensitizing concepts” (Blumer 1954), introduces the construct of *spiritualities of the body*. This concept emerged from the aforementioned—and still ongoing—research project on the pedagogies of yoga, characterized by an “iterative-inductive” (O’Reilly 2005, p. 27) approach: a flexible approach to research design where the investigation of empirical reality, theoretical considerations and tentative interpretations are interwoven together in each phase of the research process. In order to thoroughly introduce it and unveil its analytical potential, in this section, I first briefly review the meanings and theoretical bearings of the terms “spirituality” and “body” as two prisms through which to understand key pivotal dimensions of the contemporary socio-cultural landscape of yoga in Italy.

The concept of “spirituality”, by now, occupies a prominent place within the discipline’s lexicon (Giordan 2007). Detractors of the concept, however, argue that spirituality is inadequate, fuzzy and even meaningless (as a concept) and has no history, organizational apparatuses and/or social impact (as a social phenomenon) (e.g., Bruce 2002; Carrette and King 2005; Lau 2000; Martin 2014). According to these readings, religion and spirituality are substantially antithetical notions: the former represents legitimate expressions of the sacred, while the latter is the mere “commodification of religion” (Carrette and King 2005, p. 15). Most scholars, however, agree that the concept of spirituality owes its success to the fact that traditional religions (stereotypically described as authoritative, prescriptive and requiring faithful obedience to sacred texts, religious authorities and codified rituals) are perceived as progressively giving way to new forms of spiritual practice largely based on individuals’ free choices and personal relationship with the sacred—that is, individualized and privatized spiritualities (e.g., Berzano 2019; Heelas 1996; Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Palmisano and Pannofino 2020). In the words of Stefania Palmisano, “If religion sacralizes the cultural model based on conformity to external authority, spirituality sacralizes experience of the inner self perceived as unique and unrepeatable” (Palmisano 2013, p. 19). Labels such as “seeking spirituality”, “patchwork religion” (Wuthnow 1998), “spiritual but not religious” (Mercadante 2014; Fuller 2001), “believing without belonging” (Davie 1990, 1994) or “spiritualities of life” (Heelas 2008) emphasize a paradigm shift from traditional religions towards more self-centered processes of meaning attribution. They are often used to address those forms of privatized religious and spiritual life primarily based on social actors’ “experiential authority” and their own “selves” (Heelas 2008, p. 1996).

Nevertheless, as Stefania Palmisano and Nicola Pannofino (Palmisano and Pannofino 2020) show in their study of contemporary spiritualities in Italy, spirituality is not entirely new or alternative to mainstream religiosity. Conversely, it has its roots in Christian mysticism, Gnosticism, esoterism and the New Age, thus claiming a longer lineage than usually acknowledged by its detractors. According to this reconstruction of the term, spirituality refers, first and foremost, to the *subjectivization of religion*, that is, the idea that the sacred is not solely the prerogative of institutions, texts or spiritual directors but can and is also experienced in the intimacy of one’s own self. In her study of what she calls “new spiritualities”, anthropologist Gerardine Mossière underlines that

“The religious resources and practices gathered under the umbrella term of “spirituality” are often redesigned to meet the individual’s goals of leading a “good life”, maximizing potential, and focusing on subjectivity. These new spiritualities draw on formerly esoteric techniques of asceticism that have now spread to the wider population, or to secular contexts where they have undergone diverse processes of interpretation and re-appropriation”. (Mossière 2022, p. 6)

Similarly, sociologist of religion Linda Woodhead (2010, pp. 45–46) clarifies that “spirituality’s emphasis on the subjective dimension of religion—in opposition to forms of religion which give greater attention to social and symbolic aspects—is part of its defining character”. Here, as she continues, “What is important for the sociologist of religion is not to take sides, but to give generous and attentive accounts of how different forms of contemporary religion continue to be constructed by those who do” (Woodhead 2010, p. 54); that is, in my reading, abstain from trivial oppositions and value judgments but approach religious and spiritual phenomena as social facts. In so doing, the sociologist may acknowledge and thus inquire into the processes that make spirituality a contested yet available resource to processes of identity construction, embodiment of the sacred and well-being in the context of contemporary societies.

Connected to the rising importance of spirituality and its experiential framing of the sacred, concepts such as the body, practice and embodiment have also witnessed a resurgence of interest in recent decades among sociologists of religion (Ammerman 2014, 2020; Giordan 2009; Mellor and Shilling 1997, 2010, 2014; McGuire 1990, 2008, 2016; Sointu and Woodhead 2008; Winchester 2008; Winchester and Pagis 2022; Wuthnow 2020). For instance, as Daniel Winchester (2008, p. 66) notes, “Within the broader field of the sociology of religion, ‘practice’ has become a key term, even vying to supplant concepts such as ‘belief’, ‘doctrine’, ‘creeds’, ‘texts,’ and ‘symbols’ as the central category around which to empirically and theoretically approach religion”. As he further adds, together with Michal Pagis (Winchester and Pagis 2022, p. 33), “Embodied practices have always been a part of religious life. However, in modernity, we see a growing demand for these practices that can be connected to the modern “subjective turn” (Taylor 1989) and the search for “inner-worldly” salvation” (Winchester and Pagis 2022, p. 33). In this context, as Meredith McGuire poignantly argues:

First, the body should be an important component of our consideration of social aspects of religion. Bodies are important; they matter to the persons who inhabit them, and religions speak to many of these body-oriented human concerns. Part of the reason our bodies matter to us is that we strongly identify our very selves with our bodies. We experience things done to our bodies as done to ourselves [...] Second, bodies are matter. The material reality of our bodies is part of the grounding of human experience in reality: The “lived” body is our vehicle for perceiving and interpreting our world. As material reality, human bodies also vividly experience the material conditions of social existence. (McGuire 1990, p. 284)

Recalling Chris Shilling’s ([1993] 2012) theorization of the body as the multidimensional medium for the constitution of society, I believe, can prove instrumental in fully appreciating the nexus between embodiment and spirituality in the contemporary spiritual and religious field, as called for by scholars such as McGuire. According to Shilling ([1993] 2012, p. 45), “the body constitutes a vital *source* for the creation of society”, “an important *location* on which society imprints itself and through which it is able to exercise influence and power” and, finally, “a *means* through which individuals are attached to, or ruptured from, society”. Paraphrasing, I contend that the body should be simultaneously understood as a source of, a location for and a means to the constitution of spiritual experience, access to the sacred and well-being. This is especially true for those forms of spirituality that I label here *spiritualities of the body*: spiritualities oriented towards practitioners’ ‘unmediated’ relationship with the sacred and the cultivation of well-being through “body work” (Gimlin 2007), that is, work exercised by practitioners themselves or others (read yoga teachers) on their own body to achieve specific objectives (such as health and/or spiritual insight). More specifically, I understand as spiritualities of the body all those spiritual paths or techniques that make of the body their privileged means for practitioners’ access to the sacred, knowledge acquisition and subjectivation processes, of which modern forms of postural yoga, martial arts and a plethora of new and/or contemporary and alternative therapies are examples. The practitioner’s body, its listening, specific use and

modification—autonomously and/or through the aid of expert knowledge—are the main tools and methods for accessing the direct, and embodied, experience of the sacred and well-being that simultaneously emerges from, is imposed onto and related to the body. The body cultivated by these spiritualities is, in line with Shilling’s suggestion, a source of, a location for and a means to practitioners’ processes of self-discovery, apprenticeship and meaning attribution vis-a-vis their embodied experience, their immediate social context and society at large.

3. Yoga, Spirituality and Health in Italy: Cultural Pragmatics at Work

Gabriella Cella Al-Chamali, Antonio Nuzzo, Roberto Milletti and Francesca Cassia are some of the most influential Italian yoga teachers of the last few decades, both in Italy and abroad. As we will see in the following, they are promoters and popularizers of yoga practice, although interpreted, respectively, through specific biographical, philosophical and practical lenses that make their visions and experiences of yoga particularly compelling objects of sociological scrutiny.

3.1. ‘Yoga and Health’

Gabriella Cella Al-Chamali has been a yoga teacher of the Swami Sivananda’s Yoga Vedanta Forest Academy Himalayas (one of the largest teacher training hubs of the world) since 1979. Her dedication to the path of yoga brought her to the feet of several Indian gurus (such as Swamiji Shankarananda, Swamiji Purandarananda and Yogini Gouri Kutti, among others) to receive different honorific titles, such as Yoga Chudamani (yoga gem) and Yogacharya (used to address a particularly valuable and experienced teacher) and to develop her own style of yoga in 1991.³ This style, Yoga Ratna (translated from Sanskrit as yoga jewel), is the result of her spiritual search and over forty years of direct experience with the practice. Yoga Ratna reinterprets the classical textual sources of Hatha Yoga in the light of practitioners’ personal experience following the insight “that underlying the effectiveness of yoga is the power and empathic force of the symbol. This insight opens a new way and a privileged channel of communication with the deepest aspects of our inner selves”.⁴ Among her many publications, *‘Yoga and Health: How to balance the energy of the vital centers’* is particularly important due to the success it has had (as already mentioned, it is currently in its third edition with a major Italian publisher) and for its privileged focus on the yoga–health nexus (the book, in fact, was written in collaboration with a psychosomatic gynecologist). More specifically, as Cella explains in the introduction, “this is not a book on yoga thinking, but a therapeutic manual in which yoga techniques are employed to improve physical health” (Cella Al-Chamali [1992] 2011, p. 10). In circumscribing the boundaries of her manual, Cella also explains what yoga is according to her vision:

“a vast and complex current of thought (yoga means “Union”, union of the physical body with the mind, union of matter with spirit), composed of practices and behaviours that do not aim to achieve material ends; in fact, the various yoga currents aim at complete detachment from all that is material with the goal of achieving a state of superconsciousness”. (ibidem)

Although Cella’s vision of yoga clearly refers to the legitimacy of tradition as the primary source of authenticity, she nevertheless embraces the ambivalence intrinsic to contemporary deployments of yoga in Western societies promoting it, in this manual, as a therapeutic aid.

The manual is composed of two parts. “In the first part, a therapeutic programme was provided for each disease, in which the positions to be performed daily, how to perform them, and the schedules to be adhered to are given” (Cella Al-Chamali [1992] 2011, p. 14). These sequences targeting specific health issues are categorized as follows: 1. respiratory system; 2. cardiovascular apparatus; 3. digestive apparatus; 4. genito-urinary apparatus; 5. osteo-muscular apparatus; 6. nervous system and 7. visual disorders, with further sub-categories for each one. In the second part of the manual, “it is explained in detail

how to perform each position, which *Chakras* are stimulated, what benefits are obtained, and whether there are contraindications" (ibidem). Here, the manual also introduces 88 "exercises and positions", comprising breathing exercises (*prāṇāyāma*), postures (*āsana*) and symbolic gestures (*mudrā*), also relying on the aid of photographs and illustrations. Summarizing, according to Cella, yoga is first and foremost a spiritual path that is, however, in its spiritual components, hard to grasp for a Western mind. From here, her choice is to focus on yoga's health and therapeutic benefits, a much humbler objective where yoga appears as "suited to the needs and purposes of Western life, with all its rhythms, and employed to improve health" (Cella Al-Chamali [1992] 2011, p. 10). In other words, the cultural pragmatics enacted by this manual—similarly to most yoga manuals currently available—are inherently health-based; that is, they foster scripted performances centered on the therapeutic effectiveness of yoga for a variety of physical and psychosomatic ailments.

3.2. 'The Gift of Yoga'

Antonio Nuzzo is, in turn, one of the most influential Italian yoga teachers and one of the pioneers of the institutionalization of yoga teaching in Italian soil. As Di Placido and Palmisano (2023, p. 8) summarize in their recent article on the genealogy of yoga in Italy:

"Antonio Nuzzo, born in Cairo (Egypt) to a Lebanese mother and an Italian father, started practicing yoga very young (age fifteen) and in 1969 was already initiated into "traditional meditation" by Mataji Hiridayananda, disciple of Swami Sivananda. One year later Nuzzo met the largely influential Van Lysebeth, whom he followed for the next fifteen years, delving deeper into the traditions of *Hatha* and *tantra* yoga as thought and transmitted by his teacher. From 1977 onwards, Nuzzo dedicated himself mainly to teaching and training yoga teachers both in Italy and abroad, among other honorific titles and roles, such as being the only Italian observer at the first constitutive assembly of the European Union of the National Federations of Yoga (UEFNY) and one of the main actors in the founding of the Federazione Italiana di Yoga (FIY), of which he acted as president from 1977 to 1987. It was during this period that he also opened the first yoga school specifically dedicated to the training of yoga teachers, the Istituto Superiore per la Formazione di Insegnanti Yoga. In 2019, he published *The Gifts of Yoga to Practice a Full Life*, where biographical remarks, hagiographical elements and yoga philosophy and techniques are masterfully interwoven into a captivating narrative of yoga and its transformative potential".

This manual, whose presentation at the Milan YogaFestival 2019 edition I was able to attend in person, is divided into three parts. In the first part, the author traces his biographical trajectory within the path of yoga, focusing on his teachers (e.g., André Van Lisabeth, Satyananda and Vimala, among others), discussing how he became a teacher in his own right and finally his way of yoga, what he calls the "middle way", where the search for the transcendent is fully integrated into a non-renunciatory lifestyle. Openly opposing contemporary evolutions and adaptations of yoga practice, Nuzzo claims that "yoga is not an anti-stress, but a spiritual path" (Nuzzo 2019, p. 39) that ought to be practiced not for therapeutic purposes but "if you want to seek Purusua [according to *Samkhya* philosophy the highest ontological principle], the Self, if you want to find the essence of who you are" (Nuzzo 2019, p. 40). The second part is a commentary on Patañjali's '*Yogasūtra*' and its eight limbs (*aṅga*) reinterpreted in the light of the centrality of physical practice. Here, the ethical and behavioral precepts of yoga (*yama* and *niyama*) find their most refined expression within *āsana* practice (Nuzzo 2019, p. 89), which, again, according to Nuzzo's "middle way", can be practiced without looking for seclusion from the world and its distractions.

The third part, in turn, postulates the meaning of yoga through the method of "transforming the mind, not the body" (Nuzzo 2019, p. 112) and introduces a list of 10 "secrets" to a successful practice on the mat and a series of twelve exercises (ten *āsana*, one *prāṇāyāma* and one *mudrā*) minutely described in their physical, psychological and spiritual con-

stituents. Nuzzo, although providing technical details to correctly perform these exercises, privileges an interpretation of yoga oriented towards “expanding one’s consciousness” and “knowing yourself” (Nuzzo 2019, pp. 121–22) rather than as a therapeutic path or a self-enhancing technique. Read in its entirety, this manual traces four main tensions: spirituality vs. religion, favoring the former as the experiential domain where the gifts of yoga manifest; authentic vs. modern yoga, where he advocates for the former and criticizes the latter as having betrayed its original vocation focused on spiritual liberation in the name of fitness and health; spiritual vs. health benefits of yoga, where the latter are openly accounted for as a secondary aspect of yoga practice or at best as possible but not necessary byproducts of one’s spiritual research; and finally immanence vs. transcendence, where, according to Nuzzo’s interpretation of the ‘*Yogasūtra*’ and his life-long experience, the body is the domain where the transcendent can also be experienced in its immanent form. The cultural pragmatics at work in this manual are organized around a discursive representation and scripted performance of yoga qua spiritual path of liberation, approached, however, through the lens of a “middle way” that does not stand for world renunciation but encourages the search for the sacred in the immanence of life’s challenges, relationships and limitations.

3.3. ‘Warrior of Kindness’

Roberto Milletti and Francesca Cassia are, similarly to Gabriella Cella and Antonio Nuzzo, authoritative teachers and innovators. However, contrary to them, they have developed a style of yoga, Odaka Yoga, departing more evidently from traditional yoga sources and in close dialogue with different systems of knowledge, ranging from Bushido (the way of the warrior), Zen, biomechanics and a continuous reference to the rhythmic movement of ocean waves. Roberto “has been featured in “Om Yoga Magazine UK” as one of the three world leaders in new, contemporary forms of yoga”.⁵ According to the Odaka Yoga website, Roberto is “one of the 14th Yoga Alliance International Australia: Master Yoga Platinum, the highest recognition in the industry by a Yoga Organisation” (see note 5). Francesca, in turn, is also one of the 14th Yoga Alliance International Australia Master Yoga Platinum.⁶ Together with Roberto, “She has been teaching yoga and running teacher trainings for over 20 years in Europe, USA (United Nations, New York City), Australia, Japan” and has recently become the chief editor of “the world’s largest and most influential yoga brand” (see note 6), the Yoga Alliance International Online Journal.⁷ Moreover, Francesca is also involved in a number of other activities and projects. For instance, she “collaborates with the medical team of Mater Dei and Paideia (private clinics for pregnancy) to prepare the body and mind to labor, birth and motherhood”, and she “is member of the Board of European Movement for Yoga and Ayurveda and she is specialized in women self-defense training courses” (see note 6).

The philosophical and discursive roots of Odaka Yoga, aside from its more or less explicit references to yoga entrepreneurs and innovators such as Sivananda, Iyengar and Pattabhi Jois, lie in two martial arts systems developed by Milletti, *Shin Jitsu Ryu* and *Wi Yoga Wakan*, which emerged at the intersection of Roberto’s experience and experimentation with Karate Shotokan, Ju Jitsu, Zen, Hatha and Raja yoga, and offered already the philosophical and practical bases for what later on would develop and evolve into Odaka Yoga. Of course, Francesca was also instrumental in the development of Odaka Yoga through her extensive experience in the worlds of fitness and yoga and her martial arts apprenticeship under Roberto’s guidance. ‘*The Way of Warrior of Kindness*’ (2021) is their first book and is available both in Italian and in English.

The manual is composed of four parts. The first part dissects the philosophical roots of the school, with a particular emphasis on the martial arts references of the practice both at a historical and esoteric level. Here, the practice of yoga is reinterpreted in the light of Japanese and Chinese martial arts concepts and soteriology: *yo-shi*, translatable from Japanese as cadence or rhythm, is re-explained as that moment of suspension occurring in between postures; yoga as *do*, that is, spiritual search according to Daoism; *mu-shin*

or non-mind, reinterpreted as “the empty space that generates movement and exists in transition, in the present moment” (Cassia and Milletti 2021, p. 37); *zanshin* or perceptual awareness according to Zen and finally *hara tanden*. As argued elsewhere,

“Especially in the context of Japanese martial arts the *tanden* is closely related to another important energetic/anatomical center positioned in the lower abdomen, the *hara*, where the samurai believed their spirit resided. It is important to notice how the *tanden* and the *hara* [...] simultaneously function as a point of intersection between the physical body, one’s own psychological and emotional constitution, and the qualities of one’s own inner energies”. (Di Placido 2020, p. 11)

All these exotic martial arts elements are united here by a sensitivity towards personal experience and hybrid and syncretic logics.

The second part delves deeper into the fluid, rhythmic and biomechanical aspects of the practice, introducing different movement forms characteristic of this style (five types of waves and two types of tides). The wave movements are “roller”, or long wave, exemplified by balance poses and inversions; “ripples”, focused on hips opening; “vortex”, that is, torsions and rotations; “point break” or wave breaking point, which takes shape in backward extensions; and, finally, “backwash” or backwater, exemplified by forward bends (Cassia and Milletti 2021, pp. 104–9). The tides are, in turn, “low tide” and “high tide”. The former “is biomechanical and repositions the femoral head to the center of the coxofemoral joint, preventing stress or compression of the hip muscles and rotators, while simultaneously giving space to the lower part of the hip flexors” (Cassia and Milletti 2021, p. 110), while the latter “is a biomechanical opening and closing motion that brings the agonist and antagonist musculature into balance, allowing the scapulohumeral joint an optimal range of motion and joint centering” (Cassia and Milletti 2021, p. 111).

The third part further explores the nexus between esoteric and biomechanical aspects of the practice, showing how *prāna* (the subtle energy moving in the subtle body) can be mobilized and activated through the work on one’s own body, and in particular in reference to the three layers of the muscular “fascia” (superficial, deep and intermediate). Finally, the fourth part provides a series of suggestions for the practice, offering a general template to teachers for a yoga class and a categorization of *āsana* as follows: 1. forward bending; 2. opening of the hips; 3. standing; 4. balancing; 5. twisting; 6. backward extension and 7. balancing on arms. Accounting for this manual, it is possible to appreciate its hybrid cultural pragmatics, that is, scripted performances developed at the intersection of several Asian resources and forms of knowledge, Western science (most notably biomechanics) and where the water element plays an extremely important symbolic function. Among the three manuals analyzed, this is certainly the one that deviates the most from the majority of yoga manuals currently available. This innovative character, however, is in line with its eclectic practical–discursive repertoire, where yoga theories and practices are only one among a plethora of other sources.

Nevertheless, these three manuals, accounted for as a “discursive formation” (Foucault [1971] 1972), an ensemble of texts constituting—or contributing to the constitution of—a specific object of analysis, share at least three important elements: 1. a sensitivity towards an experiential interpretation of yoga practice, that is, the continuous call for the primacy of experience over tradition; 2. similar pedagogical strategies in the presentation and representations of their different scripted performances where visual and written descriptions intertwine and 3. a focus on a practitioner’s body (both in its physical and subtle reading), which emerges as the absolute protagonist of these manuals, confirming that “The yogic body is therefore the principal object of contemplation, practice and study of all schools and styles of yoga in both Eastern and Western cosmologies” (Mora et al. 2018, p. 178).⁸ Importantly, I contend that these three elements, that is, the primacy of experience, specific instruction methods and a focus on the body, are transversally present in virtually all the yoga manuals currently available, as previous research on other lineages confirms (e.g., Ciołkosz 2022; Goldberg 2016; Singleton 2010).

Despite these important overlaps, these manuals also suggest three different cultural pragmatics of yoga: *'Yoga and Health'* (Cella Al-Chamali [1992] 2011) advances purely a cultural pragmatics of health, although Cella's vision of yoga extends beyond this dimension; *'The Gift of Yoga'* (Nuzzo 2019) is a cultural pragmatics of (immanent) spiritual liberation and *'The Way of Warrior of Kindness'* (Cassia and Milletti 2021) is a hybrid cultural pragmatics based on the merging and bricolage of different Asian and Western concepts and practices in the name of *prāṇa* circulation and effective body movements. Although I claim that these cultural pragmatics are expressions of the broader socio-cultural climate in which yoga is adopted, adapted and developed in contemporary Italy, it is certainly possible that the analysis of different manuals may bring to the light other cultural pragmatics, thus contributing to exploring and discussing how yoga is socially and discursively constructed in a plurality of ways according to the tradition of reference, the purpose ascribed to the practice and the target audience of different manuals.

4. The Health and Spiritual Imaginaries of Yoga in Italy

The health and spiritual imaginaries of yoga are, building from Taylor's (2004) seminal concept of "social imaginaries", the expression of practitioners' positioning and relationship with the health-based and spiritual cultural pragmatics surrounding yoga discourses and practices as interiorized, embodied and socially reproduced by practitioners themselves on and away from the yoga mat. Beatrix Hauser (2021, p. 297) proposes a similar conceptualization, addressing the "health imaginary" of modern yoga "as an analytic lens for considering yoga discourses in late modern times, where personal health care and spiritual ambitions are once again becoming blurred". Although, as we will see in this section, the health and spiritual registers are, in some cases, largely overlapping (see also; Mossière 2022), I prefer, for analytical purposes, targeting the health and spiritual imaginaries separately and in so doing appreciate the impact of both registers in delineating practitioners' experiences.

All the practitioners interviewed underline that they either started yoga because of a physical or a psychological ailment: "A lot of people start almost any kind of practice like this because they're, you know, recognizing some kind of suffering, right. Mental, physical, and so that's the common thing" (Isa, 46 years old, Hatha Yoga teacher), or, furthermore, "The greatest majority of those that approach yoga has something to heal" (Giada, 40 years old, Odaka Yoga teacher). Similarly, another practitioner mentions her "empiricist approach" in picking up the practice of yoga and in continuing it on the grounds of the health benefits it has granted her:

"I started to do yoga because I had backpain. So a rather simple need and as such I really had an absolutely empiricist approach "It hurts!", and I started to see that this thing started by accident, dragged by other people, was good in the sense that I started to have some benefits and I did not have backpain any longer. So I kept going like that for many years". (Daria, 45 years old, Acroyoga teacher)

Another practitioner clarifies in some detail some of the health benefits of yoga, with a special emphasis on the vertebral column and the surrounding muscular structure as the main objects of yoga's body work, thus echoing the cultural pragmatics promoted by Cella's and Cassia and Milletti's manuals:

"If we simply stop at the physical practice, surely there is a big part of therapy within it. First of all, all the positions are studied to give health and extension to the vertebral column. And so it all starts from there, the torso and many branches that go in all the peripheries. Make the vertebral column healthy, well aligned with the vertebrae well distanced one from the other, really elastic, and as a consequence able to move but with a healthy musculature structure as a support. And so the spinal erectors, the intervertebral muscles, very strong and able to respond. Therefore, we are speaking of deep muscles. From there then starts a series of inputs for the rest of the body, inputs that bring health and well-being,

really well-being. That for sure. The ancient yogi measured the longevity of the student in reference to the elasticity of the vertebral column. If a vertebral column was rigid then the student was old. But old in the body. Young is good flexibility, young and nicely elastic, and so healthier. In a nutshell. And so from here you understand already the importance of the work of the practice, properly done, with awareness, being careful and respecting your own body, your possibilities, this always. (Sofia 47 years old, Odaka Yoga teacher)

Aside from the centrality of physical issues, such as back pain, and the importance of cultivating an elastic, healthy and flexible body, Marco, a newly trained teacher and personnel manager of a hip Milanese yoga school, mentions that “I see that many people come here and say “I went to the psychologist because I had anxiety attacks and they told me to do yoga”” (Marco, 40 years old, Hatha Yoga teacher). This conflation of yoga with a therapeutic answer to psychological distress, already central to social and discursive constructions of modern forms of yoga since the beginning of their transnational development (e.g., [Alter 2004](#); [Hauser 2021](#); [Newcombe 2021](#)), is based on the idea that, through yoga practice and the work on the body that it fosters, people can heal from a variety of ailments ([Cella Al-Chamali \[1992\] 2011](#)). Other teachers, however, are skeptical of the therapeutic role and potential of yoga, especially in relation to the care of psychological issues, thus also aligning with the critique of yoga qua therapy advanced by [Nuzzo \(2019\)](#):

“When they [students] tell me that the psychologist suggested them to practice yoga I am always a bit scared. If you want to free your head for one hour, then poor psychologist! Do something else, do pilates. Because yoga does not come through. I mean, the psychologist that suggests yoga didn’t do yoga. I have many psychologists that practice with me, but they know who to refer to me. Or they in turn are studying some courses in yoga and trauma, beautiful, and so they use yoga to manage the trauma”. (Tina, 48 years old, Odaka Yoga teacher)

According to this view, yoga practice is seen, at least in some cases, as potentially leading to some health hazards and unleashing of traumatic memories, thus complicating the practitioner’s situation further rather than alleviating her distress. On the contrary, as Tina discusses, when teachers specifically train to work with and support clients with traumatic experiences, then yoga can be a useful resource and an added value in one’s path of recovery and distress management.

Nevertheless, whether it is undertaken to overcome physical or psychological struggles, yoga practice requires constant and disciplined work on one’s own body in order to yield tangible results: “After months that you do it for two, three times a week you notice that something has changed. . .so to say, gradually. It didn’t happen in one day. It is not like you do one thing and it gives you the result immediately. But yeah, after a few months everything was different” (Giada), and, furthermore, “It is not sudden, I mean. . .it is something that happened gradually and of which I became aware slowly, slowly” (Daria). This emphasis on discipline and constant practice is also pivotal in the approaches to yoga fostered by the three manuals reviewed in the previous section and their centrality regarding the body as well as in terms of broader discourses surrounding yoga in contemporary societies, as epitomized by Pattabhi Jois’ famous injunction “practice and all is coming”.

For most practitioners, yoga, besides being framed in therapeutic terms, is also presented as an ethical path of self-conduct or as a spiritual journey despite the different motivations that practitioners may have had in approaching the practice in the first place. For example, Sofia mentions that “yoga is a philosophy of life”, “to grow, to have a wiser stance in life as years go by. For me yoga is this”; Aurora echoes this position saying that “yoga is awareness. . .yoga is a strong personal growth that not everybody does” (Aurora, 30 years old, Trauma-informed Yoga Therapy teacher); Sarah says that “yoga is a way of living” (Sarah 45 years old, YogaFit teacher) and Viola says that yoga is “a work on myself” (Viola 29 years old, Odaka Yoga teacher with no experience of teaching), while, for Tina,

“yoga is an experience for the soul”, or, as she elaborates, “yoga is exactly the possibility to seek. And to do this as a job is really a fantastic opportunity”. In this sense, practitioners seem to clearly reproduce a certain cultural pragmatics of spiritual liberation, as explicitly advocated for by [Nuzzo \(2019\)](#) and more implicitly also by the other manuals discussed.

As Sofia clarifies, however, the introduction of religious elements during classes is somehow a contested aspect of yoga pedagogy as it may endanger practitioners’ participation rather than fostering it:

“I always avoid to introduce something religious during a class, I try to remain on this level [physical and energetic], very clear, very neat, because if you enter into religious scopes you begin a discussion on faith and that could be sharable or not and also it could be a mistake because you may have a person that has her own thought and it is not right to go and say things that could be invasive. While if you stay at this level [physical and energetic] you are sure that what you transmit is acceptable, it can be welcomed”. (Sofia)

Interestingly, however, even if the religious register is feared and avoided (something that [Cella Al-Chamali \(\[1992\] 2011\)](#) also mentions with a certain sense of caution and that [Newcombe \(2019\)](#) underlines in relation to the institutionalization of yoga in Great Britain), Sofia, as other teachers, seems keen to work with and share esoteric and spiritual dimensions of yoga practice, most notably in relation to *chakras* and the subtle body model of yoga:

“I work a lot with the chakras. Chakras are identifiable as energetic centers within the body, that roughly corresponds to the important glands of the body. A series of channels called nadis pass through these energy centers. We have tree main nadis. . .in yoga there are a series of specific poses that go to stimulate these chakras. How? Through the same blood circulation and so the oxygenation of that zone...that’s how, working on one chakra you work on the physical level and on the mental level simultaneously”. (Sofia)

According to this narrative, the “body work” fostered by yoga practice is simultaneously physical, emotional and spiritual, as also exemplified by [Cassia and Milletti’s](#) extensive discussion of *prāṇa* but also by [Cella’s](#) and [Nuzzo’s](#) continuous references to the *chakra* system. This multilayered exploration of one’s own self, in line with the contemporary theorization of spirituality previously discussed, is, in fact, centered on practitioners’ ability to tune in and invert the direction of their attention from the outside world to their inner landscape:

“What is yoga? Yoga is nothing but a discipline, it is not the only one of course, that fundamentally aims to bring you into true contact with yourself. It is as if it wanted to bring you from outside to inside, right? Not so much from inside to outside as the rest of our society is organized. And so, we are a bit, actually a lot, how could I say, totally involved in external values that we have understood not to be those that make us really happy, right? Because we can have all the comforts, all the things we want, all the things we desire, all the external things that can enrich us from a practical, physical, logistic point of view, and so on, but anyway our misery remains still there. And so, at this point let me say that the invitation is exactly to find something that could instead create a balance between what is my external world and also my inner world”. (Lea, 50 years old, Ashtanga Yoga teacher)

This process, akin to an actual conversion, resonates with what [Winchester and Pagis \(2022, p. 21\)](#) call “somatic inversion”, that is, the conceptualization of spiritual experience as originating from the “highly perceptible distinctions between subjects’ familiar experiences of reality and the uncommon sensory perceptions they encounter while engaged in their respective practices”. As a consequence, this process of somatic inversion, which

makes practitioners' inner life its privileged concern, may also have an impact in terms of transforming practitioners' stance in relation to several aspects of their life:

"Yoga changed me in the sense that it forced me, let me say, to take off the armour. To not necessarily laugh in the group because the group laughs. To not necessarily having to go out because otherwise I was home alone on a Saturday night. To not necessarily have to go on vacation in August to show off that I have been in vacation. To not appear too much on the social networks to show that I exist. To not only accept the working place in engineering because I have something else to give to people. Yoga has been this. . .How did I arrive here? Through an intense practice but especially through an intense meditation. Or better, an intense reflection upon myself. And to reflect on oneself means already action". (Fedro, 35 years old, Hatha Yoga teacher)

In summary, what the imaginaries of health and spirituality share, despite their different concerns, is peculiar attention to one's own experiential realm and in particular to one's body, the source, locus and means (Shilling [1993] 2012) to experience health and/or spiritual insights. However, such an embodied and experiential epistemology does not happen in a social vacuum, and it is highly influenced by philosophical and textual references and the mediation of teachers' verbal instruction (Hauser 2013). As Erin Johnstone rightly argues, in fact, "The teacher's verbal instructions direct students' attention to specific parts of their bodies and particular embodied experiences. In doing so, the verbal [as well as the written] instructions facilitate a particular embodied experience and provide a shared interpretive lens through which to interpret its meaning" (Johnston 2023, p. 25). Nevertheless, I agree with Winchester and Pagis' (2022, p. 16) claim that

"Participants' sensory experiences [. . .] are neither [fully] determined by nor wholly determinative of the religious significance attributed to them in discourse. Rather, they serve as vital ingredients or "building blocks" (Taves 2009) in the construction of religious experience and so their social production, cultivation, and negotiation are worthy of more sustained study than they have traditionally received".

In this sense, the spiritual and health imaginaries of yoga discussed here are not merely the expression of practitioners' narratives of self-actualization but pinpoints to the ways in which everyday religious and spiritual practices and discourses are always nested within specific *disciplining backstages*—in a dramaturgical sense—in the shape of textual references and spiritual guidance. In other words, although the concept of spiritualities of the body refers to practitioners' 'unmediated' relationship with the sacred and the cultivation of well-being through "body work", it does not imply the erasure of those processes of apprenticeship or power relationship that guide practitioners in making their own bodies the privileged sources, loci and means for the experience of their health and well-being and relationship with the sacred.

5. Conclusions

This article, through the discussion regarding the cultural pragmatics of three yoga manuals and practitioners' imaginaries of health and spirituality, advanced a theorization of the spiritualities of the body of yoga in contemporary Italy. It emphasized three interrelated sociological axes: first, the importance of accounting, simultaneously for the discursive and practical dimensions of spirituality, often tackled only individually by the current scholarship; second, the centrality of the body in the study of contemporary spiritualities, especially those spiritualities that make the body their privileged source, locus and means of practitioners' relationship and experience of well-being and of the sacred; and, third, the nexus between the care of the body and the care of the spirit in today's yoga practice in Italy. Moreover, I contend that these axes could also be of interest for scholars outside the yoga studies and news spiritualities field as they relate with broader issues regarding the

theory–practice divide, embodiment and search for meaning in contemporary societies and issues regarding transversal interests among social science’s disciplines and approaches.

As sociologist of religion Matthew Wood (2010) aptly argues, a sociology of spirituality may appear as an inherently problematic endeavor if and when it fails to account for the social contexts in—and the power relationships through—which spiritual practices unfold, focusing instead only on the postulated freedom of its practitioners and their selves (see also Altglas 2014; Di Placido 2022b; Steensland et al. 2022). Sharing his concern, I would like to devote the last part of the article to a short discussion on the conceptualizations of health and spirituality promoted, transmitted and in turn embodied through yoga practice, also emphasizing the role of health discourses and pedagogies in the professionalization of yoga and the growing practical–discursive construction of the yoga teacher as a spiritual director and health expert as important lines for future research.

The conceptualizations of health promoted by the three manuals discussed, and in turn partly echoed by practitioners’ imaginaries, revolve around a therapeutic rendition of yoga where Western medical insights merge and dialogue with the subtle body model and its energetic and esoteric functioning. In other words, the health and spiritual imaginaries of yoga converge in highlighting a hybrid conception of health developed at the intersection of biomedical, New Age and South Asian (read yogic) models of the body. More precisely, in the current convergence of health and salvation, the reinterpretation of concepts such as *prāṇa*, *chakras* and “subtle body” is crucial. They often mobilize within a scientific idiom and elide the distance between the organic and anatomical structure of the body, of primary interest to Western medicine, and the universe of the sacred. Regarding the current use of these concepts within contemporary yoga circles, the physical and mental state of individuals, and thus their health, is primarily determined by their “energetic” or “subtle” health (Di Placido 2020; Johnston and Barcan 2006; Lea 2019). According to this view, imbalances at the energetic level, when chronicled, lead to the onset of disease. Consequently, the spirit is here no longer an epiphenomenon of health or disease but its constitutive reality. The nexus of health and salvation thus becomes an essential object of study for a deeper understanding of those fields of knowledge, such as yoga, that develop at the intersection of the care of the body and the care of the spirit.

Here, holistic health discourses are particularly effective in contributing to the social and discursive construction of yoga as a therapeutic path, leaving, nonetheless, on the background its religious elements, but not, as already argued, its spiritual and esoteric idioms. In this context, yoga teachers progressively embody the role of health experts in guiding and directing practitioners to the care of a variety of physical and psychological issues, remaining, however, also important figures in the process of spiritual direction and spiritual subjectivation of practitioners themselves.

Finally, it is the centrality of the body, whether framed in physical, spiritual and/or hybrid terms, that unites the practical–discursive constructions of yoga qua health and spiritual path analyzed here. As McGuire correctly argued already over three decades ago, “As social scientists of religion, we could greatly expand the depth of our understanding of society if we were to “re-materialize” the human body” (McGuire 1990, 284). Concepts such as spiritualities of the body, I argue, offer exactly the possibility for this re-materialization of the human body. Moreover, this concept invites one to further explore, both through macro- and micro-sociological axes, the ways in which practitioners’ bodies are simultaneously 1. the battlefield for establishing their health and satisfying their spiritual quests and 2. for assessing if and how the texts that yoga teachers rely on in the transmission of their specific conceptions of yoga are in turn interiorized, embodied and socially reproduced by practitioners in their everyday life on and away from the yoga mat. Importantly, however, as physical cultural studies scholars Giardina and Donnelly (2018, p. 3, emphasis in original) underline, “it is not so much that bodies simply matter but *which* bodies have come to matter, and to what extent”, and this ought to alert social science scholars. In this regard, future studies may further explore if and how questions of class, gender, ethnicity and ableism are grappled with or conversely excluded in the current yoga manuals, in

practitioners' experiences and in the contexts of practices, such as yoga studios and teacher training courses.

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Notes

- ¹ According to De Michelis' (2004) seminal typology, modern yoga is branched into different types (Modern Psychosomatic Yoga, Modern Postural Yoga, Modern Meditational Yoga and Modern Denominational Yoga), each one with its unique features and approach to yoga practice. In this article, I am primarily concerned with what De Michelis (2004, p. 187) addresses as "Modern Postural Yoga (MPY)", that is, a style of modern yoga with "a stronger focus on the performance of āsana (yogic postures) and prāṇāyāma (yogic breathing)". Incidentally, this is also the most widespread form of modern yoga in Italy and the world, today usually referred to simply as "yoga" in common parlance.
- ² For a few notable exceptions, see Bertolo (2013); Bertolo and Giordan (2016); Di Placido (2022a); Di Placido and Palmisano (2023); Mangiarotti (2022) and, of course, the pioneering work of Squarcini (2006) and Squarcini and Mori (2008).
- ³ La maestra | Yoga Ratna accessed 27 September 2023.
- ⁴ Yoga Ratna | Yoga Ratna accessed 27 September 2023.
- ⁵ <https://odakayoga.com/en/roberto-milletti/> (accessed on 11 May 2023).
- ⁶ <https://odakayoga.com/en/francesca-cassia/> (accessed on 11 May 2023).
- ⁷ <https://www.yogajournal.com/page/about-us> (accessed on 11 May 2023).
- ⁸ Naturally, this claim ought to be softened in relation to meditational and denominational forms of yoga whose aims are exactly those of transcendence and bodily detachment in an attempt to reach enlightenment or spiritual liberation. However, even within the practical–discursive universe of these less heavily bodily focused forms of yoga, the body still plays a prominent role even if solely as an object of analysis alienated (read other) from practitioners' 'true' spiritual identity.

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