

Panel: **“Tibetan Yoga:” Lost and Found in Translation**

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Call for Papers

Now a fashionable label on the global yoga scene and a central feature of contemporary neurosciences and contemplative studies, “Tibetan yoga” has undergone a long and complex development throughout both ancient and modern times. This panel aims less to forge connections between Tibetan yoga and contemporary research on the mind-body complex, and more to delve into the history of Tibetan yoga as a process of translation—both in its ancient transmission from India to Tibet and in its modern inception. It also seeks to explore lesser-known and undocumented manifestations of “Tibetan yoga.”

Unlike concepts such as “magic” (Bailey and Wenta 2024) or “mysticism” (Komarovski 2015), which carry histories specific to Western cultures, the Sanskrit terms *yoga*, *yogī* and *yoginī* were directly inherited by Tibet from India and have received precise and standardized equivalents in Tibetan: *rnal ’byor*, *rnal ’byor pa*, *rnal ’byor ma* (Worth 2020). While much of the scholarship on Tibetan religious history and “Indo-Tibetan Buddhism” engages with these terms and their associated texts and practices/practitioners, only a handful of (relatively recent) studies employ the label “Tibetan yoga”, capitalizing on the boom of yoga studies. Interestingly, the term “yoga” often does not directly translate to *rnal ’byor* itself but rather refers to more specific notions such as *’phrul* (sometimes *’khrul*) *’khor*, along with other liberal or poetic translations like “magical movements” or “turning around illusions.” The study of Tibetan yoga often presents unique challenges compared to its Indian counterpart due to the intricate interplay of cultural, philosophical, and linguistic nuances. Rooted in a distinct Buddhist context, Tibetan yoga practices frequently employ terminology and concepts that defy direct comparison to those of Indian yoga traditions.

In particular, the term *’phrul ’khor* is often seen as equivalent to the Indian haṭhayoga. Recent scholarship on haṭhayoga suggests that practices incorporating non-seated postural yoga, as depicted in the murals of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, incorporate elements of ancient Indian ascetic tradition of tapas. This raises a compelling question: Could Tibetan yoga practices, developed in the peripheral regions of the Indic world, have preserved ancient traditions, largely lost from medieval textual records of the subcontinent?

In terms of 20th century developments, modern yoga studies—a thriving interdisciplinary field over the past two decades—have examined the construction of global yoga and the dynamic interactions between Indian and Western actors. These studies challenge the

notion of linear transmission of Indian traditions as well as purely imperialist appropriation. The modern understanding of “yoga”, primarily associated with physical practice conducted with or without spiritual or soteriological concerns, often obscures the term’s varied historical meanings in the global history of yoga. It also masks the complex cultural, political, and religious dynamics at play on both local and global levels, affecting individuals and communities alike. Yet, within the modern yoga studies field, Tibetan yoga has received comparatively little attention.

To address this gap, the panel proposes to place Tibetan yoga at the center of its exploration. We invite panelists who may wish to engage with the following questions:

1. How do various schools of Tibetan Buddhism conceptualize and approach “yoga”?
2. What definitions of “yoga” emerge from the exegetical literature within the Tibetan Buddhist canon?
3. Which core principles and practices are shared between Tibetan and Indian yoga traditions, and what elements are distinctively Tibetan features, differing from its Indian counterpart?
4. What yogic frameworks or models emerge from studying the life stories of great Tibetan yogis?
5. What textual sources in Tibetan languages can be classified as yoga manuals?
6. What are the living yoga traditions in Tibetan communities, and to what extent do they rely on or diverge from canonical texts?
7. What insights can art-historical material, such as murals in Tibetan Buddhist monasteries of Ladakh, Zanskar, and other regions, depicting mahāsiddhas in physical yoga postures, teach us about the history of Tibetan yoga?
8. How and when did the category of Tibetan yoga first emerge in European and American scholarly, esoteric, and popular literature?
9. Which aspects of Tibetan spiritual practices have been identified as Tibetan yoga? Conversely, which aspects of Tibetan yoga have been highlighted without being recognized as or referred to Tibetan yoga as a coherent “system” or a set of teachings and practices?
10. Who were the key Western and Asian figures instrumental in the translation and construction of Tibetan yoga, at least since the early 20th century? What mediums and conduits were considered suitable in this process?
11. How important was and continues to be Indian, Euro-American “yoga” as part of the intellectual/experiential background, and “cultural equipment” of scholars, practitioners, and interpreters of Tibetan yoga? In parallel, how has yoga been developing in the Tibetan exile community?
12. How can scholarly studies address the semantically complex and historically fluctuating relationship between “yoga” and “meditation,” alongside their ties to the concepts of body and mind, within a global and transhistorical framework of Tibetan yoga?