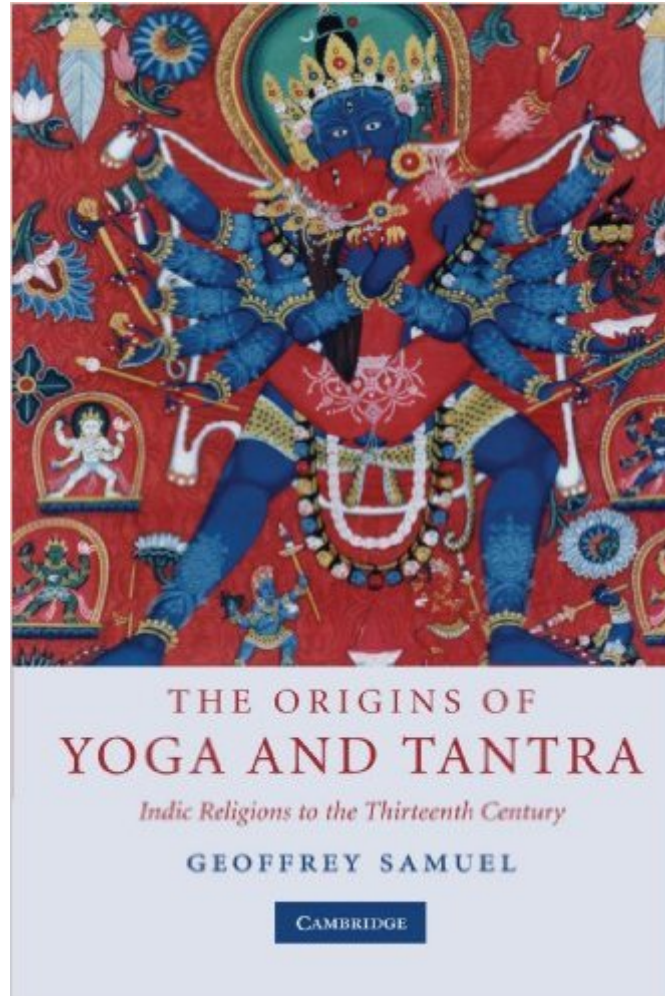


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The Origins Of Yoga And Tantra: Indic Religions To The Thirteenth Century



Synopsis

Yoga, tantra and other forms of Asian meditation are practised in modernized forms throughout the world today, but most introductions to Hinduism or Buddhism tell only part of the story of how they developed. This book is an interpretation of the history of Indic religions up to around 1200 CE, with particular focus on the development of yogic and tantric traditions. It assesses how much we really know about this period, and asks what sense we can make of the evolution of yogic and tantric practices, which were to become such central and important features of the Indic religious scene. Its originality lies in seeking to understand these traditions in terms of the total social and religious context of South Asian society during this period, including the religious practices of the general population with their close engagement with family, gender, economic life and other pragmatic concerns.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Rarely has a book so admirably met so compelling a need. Samuel provides a sweeping survey analyzing an incredible diversity of religious traditions, beliefs and practices over a great swath of time, and in so doing has produced the first inclusive general history of yogic and tantric traditions of India that I have yet seen, and I've been looking for a very long time. Samuel traces the evolution of the two dominant idioms of contemplative practice in India from their origins in the mid-first millennium BCE to around 1200 CE. He traces the evolution of Hindu, Buddhist and Jain meditation practice over that span of time, contextualizing them in terms of their social idioms. The reader will come away with a strong account of the evolution of solitary meditation schools out of the preceding

Vedic culture, the bifurcation of spiritual practice into counter-posed communities of households and monastic communities, and the relationship between various schools of practice to social elites and the general population at large. I benefited most from the terrific second half of the book which focuses on the history of tantra. Having reviewed an enormous literature on the subject, Samuel provides the first coherent and systematic account that I've seen of the entire phenomenon in all of its principle forms. He gives particular attention to the Saivite and Buddhist forms, but I came away with a deeply-enriched understanding of the whole picture, from the early days of cremation-ground practices and wild goddesses of the Deccan to the elaborate ritual forms encoded in the Kalachakra Tantra.

This book is without a doubt one of the top resource books on the history of these two phenomena and the historical context concerned. Geoffrey Samuel synthesizes from a VAST array of sources to provide a good history of these two traditions as well as the broader historical context. It must be said that this book is a scholarly account, drawing from scholarly sources. That might draw the ire of modern day Hindus who prefer to see their religious traditions as unchanging, eternal, supernaturally revealed doctrines exempt from historical analysis. If you are looking for a more revisionist work on "Hinduism", you would be better off going with Swami Bhaskarananda or David Frawley. Or you could go to India itself. While I was there I learned many dubious "facts" treated as axiomatic Truth, such as the "fact" that the ancient Hindus had rocket ships and nuclear weapons, all languages evolved from Sanskrit and thus all languages and cultures came from India, etc etc etc. However, if you are looking for an intelligent, informed review of Indic religions based on actual evidence, this is your book. From the "beginning" to the end of the "Medieval era", this book is a must. After having read it entirely once and specific sections multiple times, I use it as a sourcebook for further readings. While the previous cautions to Hindus might imply this book solely concerns the various and inter-related traditions comprising "Hinduism", it is also a great resource for Buddhist and Jain histories as well. This book starts off with a discussion of the usual assumed starting point of "Indian Religions", the Indus valley civilization.

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