

Decolonizing Yoga

**Integrating Decolonial Feminist Theories, Ancient Indian Wisdom,
and Contemporary Activist Works to Transform Cultural Appropriation
into Appreciation within the Western Yoga Community**

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“लोकः समस्ताः सुखिनो भवन्तु

Lokah Samastah Sukhino Bhavantu

*May all beings everywhere be happy and free,
and may the thoughts, words, and actions of my own life
contribute in some way to that happiness and to that freedom for all.”*

(Rig Veda 1500-1200 BCE, translated by Doniger 2005, p. 137)

May our world be just and equal for all.

Abstract

This thesis navigates the intricate landscape of decolonizing yoga within the Western yoga community by synthesising decolonial feminist theories, ancient Indian wisdom, and contemporary activist perspectives. Starting with a critical examination of the power dynamics, exclusionary practices, and commodification within the global yoga community as results of cultural appropriation, the subsequent analysis explores strategies for transforming appropriation into appreciation. Therefore, a multi-dimensional methodology, including thematic content analysis, semi-structured interviews, and the application of 'Two-Eyed Seeing' – a holistic approach bridging Indigenous and Western viewpoints – is employed, and results are analysed through the lens of intersectionality and decolonial feminist theories. By combining fundamental principles of yoga with strategies of present-day activists, the findings highlight the need for self-reflection, compassionate communication, and collective action to dismantle oppressive structures, amplify marginalised voices, and cultivate more authenticity, inclusivity, and equity within the Western yoga community.

Keywords: Cultural Appropriation, Yoga, Yogic Philosophy, Two-Eyed Seeing, Intersectionality, Decolonial Feminist Thoughts, Decolonization, Dewesternization

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Table of contents

1. Introduction	1
1.1 My own epistemological position	1
1.2 Research question.....	3
2. Problem description.....	4
2.1 The systems of capitalism, colonization, and heteropatriarchy.....	4
2.2 The history of yoga.....	5
2.3 Power and commodification in yoga.....	6
2.4 Cultural appropriation in yoga.....	7
2.5 Cultural appreciation	9
3. Previous research.....	10
3.1 Previous research of cultural appropriation in yoga.....	10
3.2 Employing decolonial feminist perspectives.....	13
4. Methodology	13
4.1 Thematic content analysis	14
4.2 Semi-structured interviews.....	14
4.3 Two-Eyed Seeing	15
4.4 Ethical considerations & methodological limitations.....	15
5. Theoretical framework	16
5.1 Intersectionality	16
5.2 Decolonial Feminist Theories.....	17
6. Analysis of ancient Indian texts	19
6.1 Self-inquiry.....	21
6.2 Communication	22
6.3 Compassionate action.....	24
6.4 Dharma	25
6.5 Concluding the analysis of ancient Indian texts	27
7. Analysis of contemporary material	27
7.1 Cultural appropriation in yoga.....	29
7.2 Cultural appreciation in yoga	31
7.3 Strategies for decolonizing and dewesternizing yoga	32
7.4 Drawing on yoga's core principles to decolonize it	33
7.5 Decolonial feminist theories and intersectionality	35
7.6 Concluding the analysis of contemporary material	36
8. Interweaving both analyses into strategies for decolonizing yoga	37
9. Conclusion.....	39
<i>References</i>	41
<i>Appendices</i>	47
<i>Appendix 1: Consent form</i>	47
<i>Appendix 2: Interview guide</i>	49

1. Introduction

Historically, yoga originated in ancient India thousands of years ago as a philosophical way of living. When we in the West envision yoga today, a picture of individuals wearing tight-fitting yoga clothes performing a sequence of gymnastics-like postures comes to our mind (Jain 2014), and yoga classes can be found in nearly every city of the Western world (Singleton 2010). How did yoga gain this worldwide popularity, or rather: at what price?

In this research I aim to explore how the notion and practice of yoga has been turned on its head over the last centuries, got appropriated by the Western consumer culture, and how we can decolonize yoga today to honour its roots and foster greater inclusivity and equity. By analysing power dynamics, privilege, and cultural appropriation within yoga, as well as extracting key principles from yogic philosophy and drawing on recommendations of contemporary decolonizing yoga activists, the study aims to address the gap in existing research by exploring solutions to transform appropriation into appreciation. Using thematic content analysis of texts, alongside expert interviews, the research is framed within intersectional and decolonial feminist theory.

The introduction of this thesis begins by establishing my own epistemological standpoint and introduces the research question. Following this, the problem statement delves into the interplay of colonisation and capitalism, contextualised within the history of yoga and the issue of cultural appropriation (chapter 2). Subsequently, I review existing literature on cultural appropriation in yoga and identify a research gap (chapter 3). Methodologically, the study presents thematic content analysis, semi-structured interviews, and the concept of ‘Two-Eyed-Seeing’ (Marshall 2009) (chapter 4), followed by the theoretical framework drawing upon intersectionality and decolonial feminist theories (chapter 5). The analysis encompasses both ancient Indian texts (chapter 6) and contemporary material (chapter 7), leading to a discussion interweaving both analyses into strategies for decolonizing yoga (chapter 8) by employing ‘Two-Eyed Seeing’. Finally, the thesis concludes by synthesising key findings and implications.

1.1 My own epistemological position

Following Haraway’s (1988) concept of ‘situated knowledge’, which challenges traditional notions of objectivity and universalism in knowledge production, arguing that knowledge is always situated within specific social, historical, and cultural contexts (Haraway 1988), I

describe my own epistemological position. I identify myself as a heterosexual cis-woman, born and raised in a German White middle-class family. As an adult I lived in many different places around the world, studied marketing and communication design, and became a yoga teacher. My spiritual journey brought me to India, where I lived for some time and immersed myself into the culture with special interest in the yogic philosophy and lifestyle, mindfulness practices, and meditation.

Therefore, I am part of the White dominant culture in the West and personally participated and benefitted in my own yoga teaching career from studying in India and taking these teachings back to the West. I soon realised that this feels somehow wrong – which motivated me to start this thesis with an autoethnographic introduction of my own journey.

Autoethnography is a qualitative research methodology that blends autobiography with ethnography to explore personal experiences within cultural contexts (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011). It involves researchers reflecting on their own lived experiences, emotions, and identities, and examining how these intersect with broader social and cultural phenomena (Denzin & Lincoln 2011).

After practicing yoga for over 7 years, I slowly started to learn that yoga might be more than movement aligned to the breath, and a bit of meditation. Going to India was truly eye-opening: Diving deep into the philosophy for months, living in ashrams, practicing the rituals, and most of all listening to teachings from Indian teachers gave me a glimpse of the wide knowledge system that yoga is, and gave me an idea of how little I know.

One thing I also learned that the word *Namasté*, which is in the West often said to signal the end of a yoga class, is actually a very formal greeting one would use to welcome, not to say goodbye. Moments like this made me wonder: *Is the way we teach yoga in the West authentic? Who introduced us to the knowledge? Did some of it get lost on the way? And do we actually have the permission to spread it?*

Since returning from India, I have been critically reflecting on my own position in the context of cultural appropriation, unsettled by questions from a personal perspective: *As a White person, should I teach yoga at all? Am I taking someone's place? Am I talking about a culture and philosophy that I don't know enough about? What is enough? Am I allowed to make mistakes?* Also questioning the global yoga

community as a whole: *Is the way we teach yoga in the West cultural appropriation? Is it authentic? Is it harmful? Who feels hurt? If yes, what can we do about it – in yoga classes, studios, events, trainings, and on a systemic level?*

Seeking guidance by reading books, listening to podcasts, and attending lectures and workshops of Indian advocates for decolonizing yoga supported me in the process of exploring these questions.

Out of this reflection and curiosity I chose to explore in this thesis the following research question.

1.2 Research question

This is the question I aim to address in this investigation: *How can the integration of decolonial feminist theories, ancient Indian wisdom, and contemporary activist works be employed to decolonize yoga and transform cultural appropriation into appreciation within the Western yoga community?*

The aim can be broken down into firstly understanding the problem by asking: *How do colonial power dynamics, privilege, and cultural appropriation manifest within the global yoga community?* Followed by exploring possible solutions by asking the two questions: *What key principles of ancient Indian wisdom, particularly within Hindu, Buddhist and yogic philosophy, can inform efforts to decolonize yoga and promote cultural appreciation?* and *What strategies and practices of decolonial feminist thoughts and contemporary yoga activists can be employed to decolonize and dewesternize yoga?*

However, my intention is not to provide a finished answer or a fixed one-fits-all solution. Rather, I wish to contribute to an ongoing conversation in which people of different backgrounds continuously question, create, and recreate knowledge according to their individual context. My role is that of an *ally*, driven by my intrinsically strong sense for social justice, but without focusing on my own position and rather giving the floor to those affected (Kivel 2006).

An *ally* is an individual who actively supports and advocates for marginalised communities, particularly those affected by racism and colonialism, by using their privilege and resources to challenge systemic injustices and promote equity and inclusion (Ahmed 2012). *Allyship*

involves ongoing self-education, self-reflection, and humility, as well as taking tangible actions to amplify marginalised voices, confront oppressive structures, and foster transformative change (Barkataki 2020).

2. Problem description

I start the dialogue about the issue of cultural appropriation in yoga by introducing the complexity of its layers and giving an overview of the long history of yoga.

2.1 The systems of capitalism, colonization, and heteropatriarchy

How do colonial power dynamics, privilege, and cultural appropriation manifest within the global yoga community?

“The systems of capitalism, colonization, racism and heteropatriarchy are not separate systems that collide or collude to produce the present moment; they are mutually interlocking and reciprocally constructive.” (Bohrer in: Vergès 2021, p. xiii). Therefore, keeping their interconnectedness in mind supports the aim of understanding how colonialism and capitalism shaped the matrix of power and privilege in the global yoga community.

Colonialization is an event or a period, while colonialism is a process or a movement (Ekeh 1983), both referring to the political, economic, and cultural domination of one territory or society by another more powerful one. Historically, European colonial ventures were driven by economic motives, seeking to exploit the abundant natural resources of colonized lands (Ekeh 1983). This endeavour necessitated the subjugation and exploitation of Indigenous populations through systems of forced labour, slavery, and land expropriation (Rodney 1972).

The foundation of global capitalism is rooted in this colonialization’s plunder of labour, land, and lives (Vergès 2021). It is built on the appropriation of land and resources, the enslavement of millions of racialised individuals and the establishment of a social order dominated by White Europeans (Gabriel & Todorova 2003). One can say that this leads to the Global North being basically a “creation of the South” (Vergès 2021, p. 9). To this day, capitalism perpetuates its growth by excessively exploiting racialised communities, seizing land and resources (Fraser 2018), enforcing individual and national debt burdens, exerting political control through capitalist institutions like the IMF and the World Bank (Oliveira 1997), and

economic control through large multinational corporations brutally taking advantage of human and non-human life with impunity.

In the following sections, a brief overview of yoga's history is given first, followed by an examination of how the beforementioned concepts of colonialism and capitalism shape(d) the matrix of power and privilege within the community.

2.2 The history of yoga

The history of yoga traces back to the Indian subcontinent, where it originated as a spiritual practice aimed at the liberation from suffering and achieving enlightenment by following a path of self-discovery (Mallinson & Singleton 2017). Early yogic traditions focused on meditation and mantras emphasising the importance of internal exploration and self-realisation (Newcombe 2017).

Over time, the practice of yoga evolved, incorporating elements like physical postures, breath control, and energy flow (Mallinson & Singleton 2017). According to the books, the Hindu spiritual leader Swami Vivekananda was the first one to present yoga to a Western audience at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair (Askegaard & Eckhardt 2012) and has thus marked the beginning of popularising yoga as a means of spiritual and physical well-being in the West.

In the 20th century, the dissemination of yoga to Western societies split into two directions. One movement focused on scientific research validating the health benefits of yoga, such as stress reduction, improved flexibility, and mental well-being, and contributed to the mainstream acceptance of yoga as a holistic practice for physical and mental wellness (Antony 2014). Another movement involved the influence of the hippie counterculture in the 1960/70s, which embraced Indian spirituality and philosophies. Hippies promoted yoga as a means of self-exploration, inner peace, and connection to higher consciousness, blending Eastern spiritual traditions with Western ideals of freedom and self-expression (Strauss 2004).

At the same time in India, the image and influence of yoga changed and transformed profoundly throughout the 20th century. Gandhi based the Indian independence movement on yogic principles, such as '*ahimsa*' (non-violence), emphasising yoga's role in fostering national identity and cultural pride (Newcombe 2017), which helped to elevate yoga from a traditional spiritual discipline to a symbol of Indian resilience and resistance against colonial rule. Later, at the beginning of the second half of the century, yoga in India was often viewed as a traditional practice associated with older generations, particularly labelled as

“grandmothers' practice” (Askegaard & Eckhardt 2012, p. 48) and considered not suitably modern by the emerging urban middle classes (Alter 2004).

As the century progressed, there was a notable shift in this perception of yoga, influenced by Western approval and trends. Based on health and wellness trends and post-colonial authenticating acts, yoga in India has evolved to a trendy activity for the nouveau riche and a symbol of local pride in a globalised world (Askegaard & Eckhardt 2012), reflecting a blend of tradition and modernity and the complexities of global cultural exchanges.

2.3 Power and commodification in yoga

During the colonial period, the encounter between Eastern spiritual traditions like yoga and Western imperial powers led to a process of appropriation and reinterpretation. Colonizers often exoticized and romanticised yoga, presenting it as a mystical and ancient practice that appealed to Western audiences seeking spiritual enlightenment and alternative forms of knowledge (White 2012). This cultural appropriation not only distorted the original meanings and purposes of yoga but also reinforced power imbalances by positioning the colonizers as arbiters of spiritual wisdom and authority. From a Foucauldian perspective, this exercise of power operates through discursive practices that shape knowledge and truth, legitimising certain forms of knowledge while marginalising others (Foucault 1978).

The commodification of yoga in capitalist societies later on further reinforced hierarchies of power and privilege. As yoga became a lucrative industry driven by consumer demand, certain forms of yoga, often associated with affluent and predominantly White practitioners, gained prominence and visibility in media, while marginalised voices and traditions were overlooked (Barkataki 2020). This commercialisation of yoga not only perpetuated inequalities within the yoga community but also reinforced broader social hierarchies based on race, class, and gender.

In summary, the history of yoga reveals how colonialism and capitalism have influenced the development of power and privilege within the yoga community. By critically examining these intersecting dynamics, we can better understand the complexities of yoga's evolution and can now in the following section look closer at how cultural appropriation manifests in the global yoga community of today.

2.4 Cultural appropriation in yoga

Cultural appropriation refers to the adoption of elements from one culture by members of another culture (mostly Western appropriations of non-Western or non-white cultures) without proper acknowledgment or respect, and often involves exploiting marginalised cultures for profit, perpetuating stereotypes, and erasing the cultural significance of certain practices or symbols (Rogers 2006).

Cultural appropriation within the realm of yoga has become a contentious issue, highlighting a range of concerns from Orientalism and the misappropriation of symbols and deities, to the commercialisation of the practice and a lack of representation and authority of the Indian culture of origin.

Orientalism in the context of yoga refers to the Western construction and appropriation of yoga as a mystical, exotic practice disconnected from its cultural and historical roots. This phenomenon, popularised during the colonial era, perpetuates stereotypes and power imbalances between the East and the West by exoticizing Eastern cultures and reinforcing Western superiority (Said 1978). White (2012) argues that Orientalist interpretations of yoga have led to its commodification and commercialisation in Western societies, further distancing it from its authentic spiritual and cultural significance.

One glaring example is the misappropriation of sacred symbols like the syllable 'Om', which holds deep spiritual significance in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. In many Western yoga classes and studios, 'Om' has been reduced to a trendy accessory printed on walls, t-shirts, and yoga mats or a mere vocal exercise devoid of its profound cultural and religious context (Johnson 2017).

Moreover, the inappropriate use of Hindu gods and goddesses as decorative elements in yoga spaces further exacerbates the issue of cultural insensitivity. Statues and imagery of deities are often employed for aesthetic purposes without regard for their sacred meanings or the cultural traditions from which they originate (Johnson 2017). This commodification of religious symbols not only trivialises their significance but also perpetuates harmful stereotypes and exoticizes Indian culture.

The commercialisation of yoga has led to the commodification and distortion of its philosophical teachings, reducing it to a mere physical exercise devoid of its spiritual and ethical dimensions. This reductionism undermines the holistic nature of yoga, which encompasses not only physical postures (*asanas*) but also ethical principles, meditation, and

self-inquiry (Alter 2004) and thrives for genuine compassion and altruism, not profit. By divorcing yoga from its philosophical underpinnings, practitioners are deprived of its transformative potential beyond the physical. Variations such as beer yoga, paddleboard yoga, goat yoga, and others further exacerbates the issue by trivialising the practice. These trends not only distort the essence of yoga but also reinforce consumerist culture, turning a sacred tradition into a marketable commodity (Parikh & Patel 2019).

Another troubling aspect of cultural appropriation in yoga is the systemic exclusion of Indian and BIPoC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour) teachers and experts from mainstream yoga conferences, festivals, and events. Despite being the custodians of yoga's cultural heritage, individuals from these communities are often marginalised and overlooked in favour of White, Western teachers who appropriate and commercialise the practice (Barkataki 2020). The scholar Dalal (2023) sees this as the key problem of cultural appropriation in yoga:

“The issue is not just about essences and purity, or theft and credit, but about erasure of traditions and rendering real Hindus, Indigenous communities, etc. invisible in the process.” (Dalal 2023, p. 79).

This imbalance can also manifest in media representation. Analysing the covers of *Yoga Journal* (Wittich & McCartney 2020), a well-known magazine in the industry, scholars found that “yoga is now attached to an idealized yoga body, which is white, female, thin/muscular, and able to perform advanced yoga postures” (Wittich & McCartney 2020, p. 41).

In addition, when examining the current state of authority, Yoga Alliance, a prominent regulatory body in the yoga industry, has been criticised for its role in dictating what constitutes ‘authentic’ yoga, thereby exerting undue influence over the global yoga community. By imposing Western standards of accreditation and certification, the Yoga Alliance reinforces hegemonic power structures and marginalises alternative voices, particularly those of Indian origin (Parikh & Patel 2020).

This leads to the debate about cultural appropriation in yoga raising complex questions about ownership and intellectual property rights (Cantú 2021; Vats 2016). From a legal perspective, on the one side a copyright case in the U.S. justified the ownership of a yoga asana sequence to a single yoga teacher (Vats 2016), and on the other side the Indian government already responded in 2001 to “the continuing trend of patenting traditional knowledge [...] and created the Traditional Knowledge Digital Library (TKDL), a database designed to prevent

the ownership and commodification of yogic and medicinal knowledge” (Vats 2016, p. 2).

Both developments raise questions of authority and gate-keeping.

Some argue that yoga belongs to humanity as a whole and should be shared and practiced by people of all backgrounds, while others advocate for greater respect for its cultural origins and the rights of Indian communities to safeguard and preserve the heritage (Dalal 2023). But: *Who can speak for yoga?* A discussion around authority bears the dangers of exclusion when creating in-groups and out-groups, but the non-essentialist view of deconstructing ownership completely would result into the non-existence of harmful cultural appropriation on the other hand, which ignores problems of representation and marginalisation, and White ownership emerging from Orientalism and neo-colonial extraction (Dalal 2023).

Another complexity of the issue is, that Hindu nationalists employ yoga for their purposes by promoting it as a symbol of Hindu identity and cultural heritage, often emphasising its ancient roots in Indian civilisation. They use yoga as a tool for cultural nationalism, seeking to assert Hindu dominance and marginalise religious and cultural minorities (Lakshmi 2020).

These varied experiences, diverse intentions, and resulting conflicting repercussions contribute to the intricate and nuanced nature of cultural appropriation, rendering it a complex and multifaceted issue. Nonetheless: *Is there no ethical obligation to reverse cultural appropriation and decolonize yoga?* Dalal suggests that “to move forward towards dismantling appropriation, we need to deepen the discourse in order to hold its complexities.” (Dalal 2023, p. 80). Therefore, we will dive deeper into the nuances of cultural appropriation and the possible strategies for dismantling it in the analysis and discussion part of this thesis. But before going there, we examine: *If cultural appropriation is harmful, what does the opposite look like?*

2.5 Cultural appreciation

Cultural appreciation is a multifaceted concept that embodies the recognition, understanding, and respectful engagement with diverse cultural practices, beliefs, and expressions without exploiting or claiming ownership over its elements (Cattien & Stopford 2022). Rooted in the acknowledgment of an intrinsic value of cultural diversity, cultural appreciation transcends mere tolerance and calls for active participation in learning about, valuing, and celebrating different cultural perspectives. It entails approaching cultural differences with humility, openness, and a willingness to listen and learn from diverse voices, engaging with members

of the culture in a respectful and collaborative manner based on empathy and the recognition that one's understanding may be limited and that there is always more to learn (Cruz, Seo, & Scaraboto 2023).

One key aspect of cultural appreciation is the recognition of the historical and social contexts that shape cultural practices and identities. This involves critically examining power dynamics, colonial legacies, and systems of oppression that influence how cultures are perceived and represented (Said 1978).

Moreover, cultural appreciation necessitates reflexivity and self-awareness on the part of the observer. As hooks (1992) argues, genuine appreciation of other cultures requires interrogating one's own biases, assumptions, and privileges. This process of self-examination enables individuals to engage with cultural differences in a more authentic and ethical manner, avoiding the pitfalls of cultural appropriation or exoticisation.

From here, let us move towards the research that has already been done on cultural appropriation in yoga to deepen our understanding of the academic landscape.

3. Previous research

3.1 Previous research of cultural appropriation in yoga

To explore the academic landscape in this field and get inspired by it, in this subsection I give a brief overview of the research done by Indian and Western scholars which is most relevant to my study. Critical yoga studies raise questions of identity, access, and ownership, and various scholars have looked at the topic of cultural appropriation in yoga from different perspectives over the years.

Askegaard and Eckhardt (2012) did an influential study in this field exploring the re-appropriation of yoga in India through qualitative interviews with yoga studio owners in Nepal and middle to upper-middle-class yoga consumers in India. Findings revealed diverse interpretations of yoga in India, reflecting negotiations between traditional yoga practices and contemporary discourses on body and health in modern lifestyle and science contexts. Also, they observed yoga being reimagined as a post-colonial validation process, where Indian consumers strive to reconnect with their cultural roots and embrace their authentic selves through the practice (Askegaard & Eckhardt 2012). The study's engagement with theories of globalisation, cultural authenticity, and post-colonial perspectives to understand the

complexity of power dynamics and cultural influences at play in the global yoga community were very insightful for my own approach.

Antony (2014, 2018) considered yoga as a commodity articulated through globalisation, capitalism, and transculturation, the product of cultural appropriation (Rogers 2006) and symbolic displacement (Wilson 2012), and carried out an interpretive analysis on “the extent to which cultural appropriation compromises yoga’s original philosophy” by examining “how non-Indian yoga instructors negotiate religion and spirituality in their classrooms and daily lives” (Antony 2014, p. 1). Later she discussed “the extent to which the appropriation of yoga complicates conceptualizations of cultural ownership and indigeneity” (Antony 2018, p. 1). Her qualitative studies employing discourse analysis of in-depth interviews (Antony 2014) and media artifacts (Antony 2018) are a great source of inspiration for my study. Antony’s findings underline the necessity to research this topic as she concludes that yoga got detached from its religious origins and core principles, as the interviewed Western teachers stated “you can make yoga what you want to make it” (Antony 2014, p. 72).

Strauss (2004) investigated in her critical ethnographic inquiry the globalisation and transformation of yoga, probing its journey from its Indian origins to its widespread practice worldwide, and its impact on yoga in India today. Employing ethnographic methods and drawing on critical cultural studies, postcolonial theory, and philosophical perspectives of yoga, the study examines how transnationally produced yoga has influenced values, practices, and meanings within specific historical and cultural contexts. Through reflections on personal experiences and examinations of yoga practices in India, the research uncovers significant shifts in yoga’s essence and its alignment with modernity’s values of health and freedom (Strauss 2004). Therefore, Strauss’ research serves as a role model for the methods and theory of my own study, as Strauss also employs a multi-disciplinary approach to examine the various dimensions of yoga’s evolution, including analysing texts of ancient Indian wisdom, and drawing on Said’s (1978) theories of Orientalism.

Vats (2016) aimed to explore anticolonial praxis within the context of Bikram Choudhury’s copyright claims over a specific yoga sequence and delved into the intersections of intellectual property rights, cultural appropriation, and decolonization in the realm of yoga. While employing critical cultural studies and postcolonial theory to analyse the power dynamics at play in the yoga discussions, she focused on the implications of Western commodification of yoga and the resistance strategies employed by various stakeholders. The study draws on legal scholarship to examine the complexities of intellectual property regimes

and their impact on cultural practices. Through a critical analysis of case studies and legal battles surrounding Bikram Choudhury's yoga sequence, Vats (2016) uncovers the nuances of anticolonial resistance and decolonial vernacular in challenging Western hegemony in the yoga industry. The findings highlight the importance of recognising and respecting diverse knowledge systems, resisting cultural appropriation, and promoting inclusivity and equity in the practice and dissemination of yoga. Therefore, this study can be regarded as a significant example for my own attempt to employ decolonial theories on the cultural appropriation of yoga, even though Vats looks at cultural appropriation through the legal lens, which differs from my approach.

Thompson-Ochoa (2019) did a critical analysis of different research on the cultural appropriation of yoga in Western society, examining its historical roots, evolution, and the shift towards a more physical-focused practice detached from its spiritual origins. Thompson-Ochoa's work does not explicitly employ decolonial feminist theories. However, the underlying themes in her analysis, such as cultural appropriation, the impact of Western influence on traditional practices, and the need to preserve the spiritual and philosophical essence of yoga (Thompson-Ochoa 2019), resonate with key principles of them.

Bartholomew (2020) did a qualitative primary study on the relations between Western societies and India through the topic of yoga and interviewed nine yoga teachers in the West asking the question "Is Western yoga cultural appropriation of traditional yoga?" (Bartholomew 2020, p. 2). This approach accentuates the Western perspective on the issue without including any Indian voices, and is therefore due to ethical concerns not relevant for my research. But it underscores the importance of dealing with the problem of cultural appropriation in yoga, as eight out of nine Western teachers stated that there is no cultural appropriation in yoga, even though they acknowledge "Anything that is culturally, spiritually, and philosophically significant about the practice has been stripped from it and it is being used as a purely physical vehicle for stretching." (Bartholomew 2020, p. 12).

Dalal (2023) investigates the cultural appropriation of the *Gāyatrī* mantra in modern North American yoga, employing critical interdisciplinary methods rooted in decolonial feminist theories and ancient Indian wisdom. His methods involve a deep dive into historical texts, cultural practices, and contemporary manifestations of the *Gāyatrī* mantra to uncover power dynamics and exclusionary practices associated with its appropriation. His auto-ethnographic approach provides a personal lens to explore the complexities of cultural exchange, power dynamics, and appropriation in modern yoga practices and serves as great inspiration for my

own approach. Dalal's work underscores the importance of cultural sensitivity and ethical engagement, advocating for the centring of marginalised voices and promoting appreciation for diverse traditions within the Western yoga community (Dalal 2023).

3.2 Employing decolonial feminist perspectives

Notwithstanding these valuable contributions, there is a continued need for feminist analyses, especially analyses that recognise the complexity of power dynamics in play during (de)colonialization. Employing feminist decolonial theories in future research on cultural appropriation in yoga is helpful for understanding and addressing the complex intersections of power, identity, and cultural exchange in the yoga community, as demonstrated by the multifaceted analyses presented in the literature. Furthermore, drawing on the core principles and practices of the philosophy of yoga itself to work towards decolonizing yoga, and integrating them with contemporary work in that field, is a research approach which not has been done before. Therefore, this combination of material and its analysis through a decolonial feminist lens is the research gap I identified, and I aim to fill.

Building upon the insights gained from Antony (2014), Strauss (2004), and Dalal (2023), which delve into the commodification and cultural appropriation of yoga, as well as power dynamics and exclusionary practices associated with its appropriation, I aim to adopt a feminist decolonial lens in my research. Antony's (2014) works provide a comprehensive understanding of how yoga's detachment from its religious origins intersects with broader issues of cultural ownership and indigeneity, while Dalal's (2023) approaches offers a nuanced exploration of power dynamics and exclusionary practices, offering valuable methodological and theoretical frameworks for my own investigation into decolonizing yoga and promoting cultural appreciation. Lastly, my research follows Strauss (2004) and other scholars who included and accentuated Indian perspectives in their works, and thereby contrast Bartholomew (2020) who only interviewed Westerners on the topic.

4. Methodology

In the following the methods of thematic content analysis, semi-structured interviews, and Two-Eyed Seeing are theoretically described and critically reflected in preparation for their application later on.

4.1 Thematic content analysis

Thematic content analysis is a systematic method used to analyse textual data and identify recurring themes or patterns within the content (Boréus & Bergström 2017). The process begins by familiarising oneself with the data, then generating initial codes to label relevant segments of text. These codes are then organised into broader themes through a process of comparison and grouping, ranging from quick counts to in-depth scrutiny, to provide a structured way to organise the data (Ryan & Bernhard 2003). Finally, the themes are interpreted according to their significance within the context of the research question, analysing how the themes relate to each other and what insights they provide. Thematic content analysis provides a flexible and rigorous method for analysing texts, offering insights into the meanings and patterns embedded within the content (Boréus & Bergström 2017). This method is applied to analyse the selected material for answering the question: *What key principles of ancient Indian wisdom, particularly within Hindu, Buddhist and yogic philosophy, can inform efforts to decolonize yoga and promote cultural appreciation?* as well as to analyse the selected material of contemporary activists with the same aim.

4.2 Semi-structured interviews

The interviews in this study aim to embody feminist, postmodern, and social constructionist perspectives (Brinkmann 2013). They are semi-structured to enhance reflexivity and interaction, aiming to mitigate hierarchical research approaches (DeShong 2013) recognising that complete avoidance of power differentials may be unattainable (Ramazanoglu & Holland 2002). To minimise them, building rapport is a crucial aspect of qualitative research. A positive rapport fosters a more open, honest, and comfortable interaction, thereby facilitating a meaningful data collection. Consequently, the objective when doing feminist interviews is to foster an environment characterised by “mutual sharing, minimal power hierarchies, and a feeling of genuine trust between interviewer and interviewee” (Thwaites 2017, p. 1).

In this study, two qualitative interviews were conducted in April 2024 in Berlin, Germany, which lasted between one hour and one hour and a half. The interviewees were Priya and Rahul (names changed for anonymisation), two yoga teachers who come from India but now live in Berlin and who are both involved in activism for decolonizing yoga in the form of organizing events, teaching workshops, and being vocal on social media – all of this being the reason for their selection as suitable interview partners. The questions asked during these semi-structured interviews can be found in the interview guide in Appendix 2.

4.3 Two-Eyed Seeing

Two-Eyed Seeing, as articulated by Mi'kmaw elder Dr. Marshall (Marshall 2009), is a framework for understanding and addressing complex issues by integrating Indigenous and Western perspectives. It emphasises the importance of viewing the world through both Indigenous and Western 'eyes' simultaneously, recognising the strengths and limitations of each worldview (Marshall 2009).

In essence, Two-Eyed Seeing acknowledges that both Indigenous knowledge systems and Western scientific methods offer valuable insights, and by combining them, a more comprehensive understanding of phenomena can be achieved. This approach encourages collaboration and mutual respect between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, fostering cross-cultural dialogue and learning (Marshall 2009).

Within the context of research, Two-Eyed Seeing involves incorporating Indigenous ways of knowing alongside Western research methodologies. It involves actively seeking out Indigenous perspectives, knowledge, and methodologies, and integrating them into the research process in a respectful and meaningful way. This can lead to more holistic and culturally relevant research outcomes that benefit both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities (Cirkony, Kenny & Zandvliet 2023). In this study, the method is employed to discuss decolonizing yoga by combining the two perspectives of ancient Indian wisdom and contemporary activist knowledge.

4.4 Ethical considerations & methodological limitations

While thematic content analysis, semi-structured interviews, and Two-Eyed Seeing offer valuable insights into qualitative research, as researcher I must remain vigilant in addressing ethical considerations and methodological limitations to uphold the integrity and validity of my findings.

The methodological limitations of thematic content analysis include the possibility of overlooking nuances in the data due to predetermined coding schemes and the challenge of capturing the complexity of human experiences within predefined themes (Ryan & Bernhard 2003). Also, thematic content analysis, while offering a systematic approach to analyse textual data, always brings in the interpretation and subjectivity of the researcher (Boréus & Bergström 2017). Here I agree with Haraway (1988), who argues that knowledge is always situated within a specific context and shaped by the perspectives and experiences of those

producing it. By acknowledging and embracing the partial, situated, and embodied nature of knowledge, the absence of objectivity in research becomes an advantage to better understand the actual lived realities of people (Haraway 1988), not a limitation.

Semi-structured interviews, characterised by their reflexivity and interactive nature, present ethical considerations related to power dynamics between interviewer and interviewee. To guarantee that both are equally informed about the ethics, a consent form is signed (see Appendix 1). Despite efforts to minimise hierarchical approaches, power differentials may still influence the interview process and data collection (DeShong 2013; Ramazanoglu & Holland 2002). So, when carrying out the interviews, ethical conduct necessitates establishing rapport and trust with participants to facilitate open communication (Thwaites 2017).

Ethical considerations in the application of Two-Eyed Seeing include the importance of obtaining informed consent and ensuring Indigenous communities' self-determination and ownership over their knowledge and cultural practices (Cirkony, Kenny & Zandvliet 2023). I must also be mindful of power dynamics and potential tokenization or exploitation of Indigenous knowledge holders, and instead strive for respectful collaborative and reciprocal relationships (Datta 2023). Methodological limitations may arise from the challenge of reconciling differing epistemologies and methodologies, as well as the risk of essentialising or homogenising Indigenous perspectives (Krahn 2015). Furthermore, I may encounter resistance or scepticism from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, requiring patience, humility, and cultural sensitivity in navigating these tensions (Krahn 2015).

5. Theoretical framework

In this chapter I introduce the theoretical concepts of intersectionality and decolonial feminist theories to prepare for their application in the analyses later on.

5.1 Intersectionality

“Feminism involves so much more than gender equality. And it involves so much more than gender.” (Davis & West 2016, p. 137).

Intersectionality represents a more nuanced understanding of identity, recognising that individuals can face multiple forms of oppression and privilege simultaneously based on various social factors like race, gender, sexuality, and class (Davis 2014). Crenshaw coined

the term in 1989 comparing multiple oppressions to traffic in an intersection where discrimination can flow from different directions causing harm because of multiple factors. This analogy underscores the necessity of acknowledging and addressing the unique challenges faced by individuals at the intersections of their identities, in Crenshaw's case focused on race and gender.

Over time, the concept has expanded to encompass a broader spectrum of intersecting identities that influence one's experiences and necessitate consideration in combating injustices. More recently, Lykke (2010) defines intersectionality as a tool to analyse power differentials and societal inequalities arising from various sociocultural categorisations like gender, race, class, sexuality, age, dis/ability, nationality, mother tongue, and more.

Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1983) emphasise the fluidity and interconnectedness of various forms of discrimination, cautioning against prioritising one over the other. They argue that gender, ethnicity, and class divisions mutually influence and are influenced by economic, political, and ideological structures. Each division operates within the context of the others, demanding a holistic approach in analysis (Anthias & Yuval-Davis 1983).

In this study, I explore how the intersecting power dynamics of colonialism and capitalism influenced the global yoga community, and how they shape the experiences of oppression and marginalisation of South Asian yoga teachers until today.

5.2 Decolonial Feminist Theories

Decolonial feminism constitutes a critical framework aimed at interrogating and dismantling the intricate systems of oppression ingrained within colonial, imperialist, and patriarchal structures (Lugones 2008; Vergès 2021). Central to this approach is an acknowledgement of the multifaceted nature of oppression, encapsulated by the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989).

At the heart of decolonial feminism lies a profound scrutiny of the enduring legacies of colonialism. This entails confronting the enduring impacts of colonial violence, including land dispossession, cultural erasure, and the imposition of Western norms and values (Anzaldúa 1987; Fanon 1963). Moreover, decolonial feminism asserts the imperative of challenging Eurocentric epistemologies, advocating for the elevation of marginalised ways of knowing, such as Indigenous knowledge systems and spirituality (Smith 1999). Through this process,

colonial narratives are deconstructed, Indigenous histories are reclaimed, and alternative modes of understanding the world are centred.

Decolonial feminism does not limit its critique to systems of oppression but extends to the economic structures underpinning them, in particular capitalism: “Capital is a colonizer” (Vergès 2021, p. 15). Critiquing capitalism as a system that exacerbates inequality and exploitation, particularly in post-colonial contexts, decolonial feminists advocate for economic justice and the redistribution of resources (hooks 2000). This entails interrogating the intersections of capitalist, colonial, and patriarchal systems that further marginalise certain groups, such as women of colour and Indigenous communities.

In her work, Lugones (2008) critiques the narrow scope of the coloniality of gender, highlighting how it fails to fully address the erasure of colonized women from various aspects of social life and perpetuates gender domination. She argues for a broader understanding of gender that goes beyond traditional frameworks that presuppose sexual dimorphism, heterosexuality, and patriarchal power structures (Lugones 2008). She emphasises the importance of recognising the indifference towards violence inflicted upon women of colour and the barriers it creates for their struggles for freedom and wellbeing.

Vergès (2021) criticises what she calls ‘civilizational feminism’ for overlooking the impact of postcolonial policies on women, highlighting the complexities of colonial legacies on gender issues. She seeks to decentre Western-centric perspectives and to prioritise the voices and experiences of marginalised peoples, particularly women of colour, Indigenous women, and those from the Global South. Decolonial feminists aim to deconstruct racism, fear and violence, contemporary colonial capitalism, and cultural and economic imperialism and instead strive for social justice, dignity, respect and living in peace (Vergès 2021).

In practical terms, decolonial feminism calls for a re-evaluation of feminist praxis. It urges feminist activists and scholars to centre the voices and experiences of marginalised women, challenge dominant narratives, and engage in decolonizing practices that promote social justice and collective liberation (Collins 1990).

Furthermore, decolonial feminism underscores the importance of solidarity and alliance-building in the pursuit of collective liberation. Recognising the interconnectedness of struggles against oppression, decolonial feminists advocate for alliances across diverse social movements, including feminist, anti-racist, and anti-colonial movements (Lorde 1984).

Through solidarity, shared struggles are acknowledged, and efforts are mobilised towards challenging entrenched systems of power and privilege.

Moving deeper into the practical terms on ‘*How to decolonize cultural intangible artifacts?*’, Mignolo speaks about decolonialization as the “delinking from coloniality, or the colonial matrix of power” (Mignolo 2011, p. xxvii) which includes questioning and subverting the hierarchies of knowledge that have marginalised non-Western perspectives and experiences, and empowering these voices. Dewesternization, on the other hand, is according to him about shifting the locus of power and influence completely away from Western institutions and actors, advocating for a more pluralistic and diverse approach to knowledge production, as he states “dewesternization means, within the capitalist economy, that the rules of the game and the shots are no longer called by Western players and institutions” (Mignolo 2009, p. 161).

An example for dewesternization is India’s creation of the TKDL database and its acknowledgement by the European Patent Office and U.S. authorities, which challenges the Western hegemony of patent classification and results in giving the authority back to India while positioning “often objectified marginalized subjects as active agents with inventional authority and the innovators of increasingly valuable commodity forms” (Vats 2016, p. 14).

In the following chapters of the analyses, the selected material will be analysed regarding the concept of decolonialization (Lorde 1984; Collins 1990; Smith 1999; Lugones 2008; Mignolo 2011; Vergès 2021) and the concept of dewesternization (Mignolo 2009).

6. Analysis of ancient Indian texts

After having reflected on the causes of cultural appropriation in the yoga world, and how colonial and capitalist power imbalances cause suffering today, I now turn towards exploring possible solutions aiming to turn cultural appropriation into appreciation. This chapter applies the method of thematic content analysis and the theory of decolonial feminist thought. It examines the question of strategies for decolonizing yoga by drawing on Indigenous knowledge from the ancient Indian schools of thought of Hinduism, Buddhism, and yogic philosophy. Therefore, an introduction into the key texts and their relevance for the history of yoga is given first, followed by their analysis regarding my specific research question.

The history of yoga is deeply rooted in ancient Indian texts and traditions. The Vedas, the oldest sacred scriptures of Hinduism, contain hymns and rituals that are believed to have influenced the early development of yoga practices (White 2012). Within the Vedas,

particularly in the Rigveda, there are references to spiritual concepts and practices that resonate with the essence of yoga, such as the union of the individual soul with the universal consciousness. These early Vedic teachings laid the foundation for the evolution of yoga as a spiritual and philosophical discipline (White 2012).

Historically, Buddhism and yoga evolved alongside each other in ancient India, influencing each other's philosophical and spiritual development. Buddhism's emphasis on mindfulness, meditation, karma, and non-attachment deeply influenced the foundational principles and practices of yoga, leading to significant cross-pollination between the two traditions (Mallinson & Singleton 2017).

As yoga continued to evolve over the centuries, texts like the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, and the Hatha Yoga Pradipika further enriched and diversified the practice of yoga, incorporating elements of meditation, ethical principles, physical postures, breath control, and energy work. The Bhagavad Gita, a sacred Hindu scripture estimated to have been composed between 200 BCE to 200 CE, delves into the concept of dharma and the path of selfless action, providing philosophical insights into the practice of yoga (Satchidananda 1997). On the other hand, the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali outline the foundational principles of classical yoga, emphasising meditation and the attainment of spiritual liberation through mental discipline (Bryant 2009).

By acknowledging the influence of the key texts in the history of yoga, we gain a deeper appreciation of the interconnectedness of ancient Indian wisdom traditions and their enduring impact on the practice and philosophy of yoga as it is known today, which may also serve as inspiration to draw on for finding strategies to decolonize yoga. Therefore, the following analysis studies three important texts of Indian philosophies to examine the question:

What key principles of ancient Indian wisdom, particularly within Hindu, Buddhist and yogic philosophy, can inform efforts to decolonize yoga and promote cultural appreciation?

When I speak about Hindu and Buddhist wisdom in this context, I refer to the philosophy, not the religion. Mainly drawing from the books *The Living Gita* (Satchidananda 1997) for Hindu philosophy, *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching* (Hanh 1998) for Buddhist philosophy, and *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* (Bryant 2009) for yogic philosophy, this exploration does not aim to present the full spectrum of thoughts transmitted over centuries within these traditions,

but focuses on the research aim of finding strategies for decolonizing yoga within these schools of thought.

The thematic analysis identified the following five themes as most salient in the beforementioned material, following Ryan and Bernhard (2003) that “the importance of any theme is related to how often it appears and how pervasive it is across different types of cultural ideas and practices” (Ryan & Bernhard 2003, p. 87). The identified themes are employed as a guiding structure within the in-depth analysis, as suggested by Boréus and Bergström: “The results of thematic content analysis are typically reported in a structured format, highlighting the key themes, supporting evidence from the data, and the implications of the findings.” (Boréus & Bergström 2017, p. 41). The themes are:

1. Self-inquiry
2. Communication
3. Compassionate action
4. Dharma

6.1 Self-inquiry

Self-inquiry is mentioned in Buddhist, Hindu, and yogic philosophy but seen from slightly different angles in them.

While Buddhism doesn't use the term ‘self-inquiry’ in the same way as Hinduism and yogic philosophy do, the essence of investigating the status of the self is also central to Buddhist practice. In Buddhism, the fundamental teaching of *anatta* (no-self) suggests that there is no permanent, unchanging self or soul. Instead, the self is seen as a dynamic and ever-changing process, composed of various mental and physical elements (Dalai Lama 2001). Practices such as mindfulness meditation encourage practitioners to observe the arising and passing away of thoughts, feelings, sensations, and perceptions without clinging to them or identifying with them as ‘self’. Through this observation, one can develop insight into the nature of reality and the illusory nature of the self (Hanh 1998).

In Hindu philosophy, the existence of the self (*atman*) is recognised, but with varying interpretations of the nature of the self and its relationship to the universal consciousness. The fundamental principle of *viveka* deals with this question and can be translated to the practice of ‘self-inquiry’ and ‘introspection’, wherein individuals question the nature of their existence

and seek to discern the underlying truth beyond superficial appearances (Radhakrishnan 1992).

Self-inquiry is considered crucial for spiritual growth in yogic philosophy as well. Here, the yogic concept of *svadhyaya*, the practice of ‘self-study’ or ‘self-reflection’, invites individuals to explore their inner landscapes and deepen their understanding of themselves and the world around them. Patanjali explains the aim of self-inquiry as:

“कृतार्थं प्रतिनष्टं तदन्य साधारणत्वात्

kr̥tārtham pratinaṣṭam-apy-anaṣṭam tadanya sādharmaṇatvāt

Freedom arises when we see things as they are and can remain at ease and calm with what is.” (Bryant 2009, p. 226).

The strategic application of self-inquiry as a tool for decolonizing yoga involves critical self-reflection, examining one’s own biases and privileges, and challenging dominant narratives in both practice and discourse. Self-inquiry encourages practitioners to examine their own beliefs, assumptions, and identities, including how they relate to cultural narratives and power dynamics. By cultivating a reflective and introspective practice, individuals can begin to unravel the layers of conditioning and socialisation that influence their perspectives on yoga and its cultural heritage. This process involves questioning one’s own positionality within systems of power and privilege, as well as seeking to confront unconscious biases or prejudices that may shape their engagement with the practice.

Furthermore, self-inquiry fosters a sense of accountability and responsibility among practitioners, encouraging them to actively engage in efforts to dismantle systems of oppression and promote social justice within the yoga community and beyond. By interrogating their own complicity in perpetuating colonial narratives and structures, individuals can work towards creating more inclusive, equitable, and anti-racist yoga spaces.

6.2 Communication

Communication is one theme to be found in yogic, Buddhist, and Hindu philosophy where the discussion of all aligns, and centres around compassion.

In the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, the sage offers profound insights into effective communication, guiding practitioners to maintain peace and clarity in their minds through appropriate reactions (Bryant 2009). Patanjali teaches that when one is faced with another’s

success, jealousy may cloud one's heart. This emotion stems from a fear of inadequacy, threatening our serenity. Similarly, when someone shares their suffering, one's tendency to judge only compounds their pain. Embracing the virtuous talents of others, without diminishing them, allows to rise together, find equanimity in the face of negativity, and choose compassion over anger. This approach, rooted in understanding rather than condemnation, preserves peace (Bryant 2009).

Thich Nath Hanh also says that words carry the power to nourish or poison (Hanh 1998). A mindful approach to communication ensures imbuing interactions with love and compassion, offering sustenance, active listening, and mindful responses to oneself and others. In the silent spaces between words, wisdom takes root. It is here that one sees reality unfiltered, untainted by preconceptions. By cultivating this clarity, one liberates oneself from the shackles of fear-induced misunderstanding (Hanh 1998).

Drawing upon the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita (Satchidananda 1997), one finds further wisdom in the concept of detached action and balanced communication. The verses encourage to be equal-minded in success and failure, in gain and loss, in victory and defeat. When applied to communication, it suggests striving for equanimity in the face of different responses and reactions. This balanced approach frees from the fear of rejection or judgment, allowing for more effective and authentic exchanges grounded in a sense of duty rather than personal attachment to outcomes. Ultimately, this approach promotes understanding and harmony in interactions (Satchidananda 1997).

In conclusion, the teachings of Patanjali, Thich Nath Hanh and the Bhagavad Gita offer valuable insights into the art of communication, guiding practitioners to cultivate friendliness, compassion and equanimity in their interactions with others and themselves. They agree that through mindfulness, faith, and detached action, one could navigate the complexities of human relationships with clarity, integrity, and grace.

Compassionate communication serves as a powerful strategy for decolonizing yoga by fostering understanding, respect, and inclusivity within the yoga community. Firstly, it involves acknowledging the historical context of yoga's origins in Hindu and South Asian traditions and recognising the impact of colonialism on its dissemination and interpretation. Practitioners engage in open and honest dialogue about the complexities of yoga's history, including issues of cultural appropriation and the marginalisation of South Asian voices within the yoga community.

Moreover, compassionate communication entails listening with empathy, actively seeking to understand the perspectives and experiences of those who have been marginalised or excluded from mainstream representations of yoga. This involves creating space for diverse voices to be heard and validated, including South Asian practitioners, scholars, and community leaders.

Addressing power dynamics within the yoga community is another aspect where compassionate communication is helpful. Challenging hierarchies and systems of oppression and actively working to dismantle structures that privilege certain voices and experiences over others can be approached in a mindful, respectful, and open way. Practitioners acknowledge their own biases and privilege, actively seeking to unlearn harmful patterns of thought and behaviour.

6.3 Compassionate action

Compassionate action in Sanskrit is *seva*, a term that translates to ‘selfless service’ or ‘volunteer work.’ It embodies the principle of serving others without expecting anything in return, motivated by compassion, generosity, and a sense of duty (Radhakrishnan 1992). *Seva* is a core tenet of various spiritual traditions, including Hinduism, Sikhism, and Buddhism, where it is regarded as a means of cultivating humility, compassion, and spiritual growth (Radhakrishnan 1992). In the context of yoga, *seva* is often practiced as a form of karma yoga, where practitioners offer their time, skills, and resources to benefit others and contribute to the well-being of their communities (Gramly 2021). *Seva* may take various forms, such as volunteering at a local charity, helping those in need, or supporting social justice causes, and is considered an essential aspect of the yogic path towards self-realisation and liberation (Gramly 2021).

In Buddhism, *maitri*, translated as ‘loving-kindness’ or ‘friendliness’, is a fundamental concept in Buddhist teachings (Dalai Lama 2001). It emphasises the cultivation of an attitude of friendliness, compassion, and goodwill towards oneself and others. In Buddhist tradition, *maitri* is considered one of the four *Brahmaviharas* or ‘Divine Abodes’, along with *karuna*, *mudita*, and *upekkha* (Dalai Lama 2001). In Buddhist practice, cultivating *karuna*, translated as ‘compassion’ or ‘empathy’, involves developing sensitivity to the suffering of oneself and others, fostering a sense of interconnectedness, and engaging in acts of kindness and service (Hanh 1998).

Compassionate action is particularly relevant in the context of decolonizing yoga as it emphasises the importance of serving others and uplifting marginalised communities. Practicing *seva* within the yoga community involves actively engaging in efforts to address social inequalities, promote cultural diversity, and create more accessible and welcoming yoga spaces for all individuals, regardless of their background or identity. This may involve volunteering time and resources to support initiatives that provide yoga instruction to underserved populations, advocating for the inclusion of diverse perspectives and practices within curriculums and teacher training programs, and supporting organisations that work towards social justice and equity within the broader community.

6.4 Dharma

Dharma is a concept that originates from Hinduism, but it also plays a significant role in Buddhism. In Hinduism, *dharma* encompasses various meanings, including duty, righteousness, moral law, and cosmic order. It is central to Hindu philosophy and is believed to govern individual conduct, social harmony, and the cosmic balance (Radhakrishnan 1992).

In Buddhism, *dharma* takes on a slightly different meaning. It refers to the teachings of the Buddha, encompassing the path to enlightenment, the nature of reality, and the principles of ethical conduct. The Buddhist concept of *dharma* emphasises the universal truths taught by the Buddha, which guide practitioners on the path to liberation from suffering (Hanh 1998).

While the concept of *dharma* has distinct interpretations in Hinduism and Buddhism, it remains a fundamental aspect of both traditions, shaping ethical behaviour, spiritual practice, and philosophical understanding. *Dharma* can serve as ethical framework for navigating the complexities of cultural appropriation and colonial influences within the practice of yoga.

In the context of yogic philosophy, *dharma* encompasses the moral and ethical principles that guide one's actions and conduct in the world. *Dharma* helps practitioners navigate the complexities of life and relationships with clarity, integrity, and purpose. In the Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna instructs Arjuna to fulfil his *dharma* as a warrior by engaging in the battle, while also emphasising the importance of performing one's duty without attachment to the fruits of one's actions (Satchidananda 1997).

Applying the concept of *dharma* as a strategy to decolonize yoga involves recognising its universal ethical principles and integrating them into the practice and teaching of yoga.

Dharma guides practitioners to fulfil their duties and responsibilities with a sense of

righteousness and moral integrity. In the context of decolonizing yoga, this may involve advocating for social justice, equity, and inclusivity within yoga spaces, and actively working to address systemic inequalities and injustices.

Furthermore, in the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, *dharma* is considered one of the *yamas* and *niyamas*, the ten ethical guidelines of moral restraints and personal observances of the yogic path (Bryant 2009). Practitioners are encouraged to live in alignment with their *dharma*, or inherent nature, by cultivating virtues such as honesty, integrity, and compassion (Bryant 2009). Due to their relevance for the aim of decolonizing yoga, three more of these *yamas* and *niyamas* are looked at in the following paragraphs.

Ahimsa, one of the foundational principles of yoga, emphasises ‘non-violence’ and compassion towards oneself and others (Iyengar 1995). In the context of decolonizing yoga, *ahimsa* guides practitioners to acknowledge and dismantle the violence perpetuated by colonialism and cultural appropriation, and urges not to continue this power imbalance and exploitation. By practicing *ahimsa*, individuals can call for change in a peaceful way, inspired by Gandhi’s independent movement which he also based, amongst other principles, on *ahimsa* (Newcombe 2017).

Asteya, the principle of ‘non-stealing’, extends beyond material possessions to encompass intellectual property and cultural heritage (Iyengar 1995). When aiming to decolonize yoga, *asteya* calls practitioners to refrain from appropriating and exploiting the knowledge and traditions of marginalised communities. That means acknowledging and rectifying historical injustices, such as the erasure of Indigenous and Eastern contributions to yoga, and ensuring that proper credit and recognition are given to these sources. By practicing *asteya*, individuals can uphold the integrity of yoga as a practice rooted in diverse cultural lineages.

Satya, or ‘truthfulness’, encourages individuals to align their thoughts, words, and actions with honesty and integrity (Iyengar 1995). In the context of decolonizing yoga, *satya* asks practitioners to critically examine the narratives and power dynamics that have shaped the mainstream perception of yoga, especially the role of colonization but also translation played in this. Practicing *satya* requires acknowledging the complexities of yoga’s evolution and the diverse perspectives within the global yoga community.

6.5 Concluding the analysis of ancient Indian texts

In essence, the journey of decolonizing yoga is a collective endeavour that requires ongoing self-reflection, dialogue, and action. By thematically analysing the wisdom of ancient Indian philosophies, particularly three important texts within Hindu, Buddhist, and yogic traditions, these themes emerged as potential strategies for decolonizing yoga.

Self-inquiry serves as a foundational practice that invites practitioners to critically examine their own beliefs, biases, and privileges, thereby fostering a deeper understanding of the complexities of cultural appropriation and colonial influences within the yoga community. Compassionate communication facilitates meaningful dialogue and collaboration within the yoga community, while mindful listening creates space for diverse voices to be heard and valued. Compassionate action inspires practitioners to serve others selflessly and to actively work towards social justice and equity within the yoga community, making it more accessible, welcoming, and culturally sensitive.

Finally, *dharma* provides an ethical framework for guiding practitioners to fulfil their duties and responsibilities with righteousness and moral integrity. By aligning their actions with universal ethical principles such as non-violence, non-stealing, and truthfulness, individuals can uphold the integrity of yoga as a practice rooted in respect, authenticity, and inclusivity.

These four principles are part of the history of yoga and deeply engraved into its tradition, and therefore essential to understand what yoga is. Leaving them out of the way in which yoga is practiced and taught in the West today shows how yoga got appropriated at the cost of honouring its roots. The commodification and simplification of yoga resulted in an inconsistency in continuing this lineage of teachings. Thankfully, we can address this by remembering these core principles and actively implementing them as strategies for decolonialization, as presented in this chapter.

The following chapter looks at the same question of decolonizing yoga from a contemporary perspective. Afterwards, both perspectives will be woven together into a rich tapestry of strategies for turning cultural appropriation into appreciation in yoga.

7. Analysis of contemporary material

This chapter continues to apply the method of thematic content analysis, but now turns from ancient wisdom towards hearing contemporary voices. Employing the theories of decolonial

feminist thought and intersectionality, I analyse contemporary material to explore the following question:

What strategies and practices of decolonial feminist thoughts and contemporary yoga activists can be employed to decolonize and dewesternize yoga?

Combining the opinions of the authors of the books *Skill in Action* (Johnson 2017) and *Embrace Yoga's Roots* (Barkataki 2020) with the two qualitative interviews with Priya and Rahul, which were conducted for the sake of my study, this thematic content analysis delves into the multifaceted dimensions of the activist movement of decolonizing yoga within the present-day global yoga community. This approach was selected to give voice directly to members of the affected and marginalised community (Harding 1986) within the issue of cultural appropriation in yoga. Firstly, the chosen material is presented, followed by its thematic analysis, and finished by a comparison and conclusion.

Johnson (2017) urges the yoga community in her book *Skill in Action: Radicalizing Your Yoga Practice to Create a Just World* to engage in social justice activism as an integral part of their yoga practice. Johnson (2017) combines the core principles of yoga with useful reflection questions and tools for yoga practitioners, teachers and studio owners, and encourages readers to use the practice of yoga to create a more just and equitable world.

Barkataki (2020) provides in her book *Embrace Yoga's Roots: Courageous Ways to Deepen Your Yoga Practice* an exploration of yoga's origins and offers practical ways for practitioners to deepen their understanding and practice of yoga while honouring its cultural heritage to cultivate a more authentic and inclusive practice.

Priya is an Indian yoga teacher that moved to Berlin 11 years ago. She works at the intersection of social activism and yoga, teaching regular yoga classes as well as workshops and trainings on cultural appropriation in yoga.

Rahul is a yoga teacher who grew up in India and in England and has been now living in Berlin for 10 years, teaching yoga classes specified on decolonizing yoga, and as an activist and speaker bringing social activism into the wellness industry.

The thematic analysis identified the following six themes as reoccurring in all the beforementioned material, which is therefore employed as a guiding structure within the in-depth analysis:

1. Cultural appropriation in yoga
2. Cultural appreciation in yoga
3. Strategies for decolonizing and dewesternizing yoga
4. Drawing on yoga's core principles to decolonize it
5. Decolonial feminist theories and intersectionality

The content is analysed in chronological order, from the older books to the recent interviews.

7.1 Cultural appropriation in yoga

Aiming to hear voices of those affected by cultural appropriation in yoga, I start the study with presenting their views on the problem. According to Johnson (2017), cultural appropriation in yoga is a multifaceted phenomenon, characterised by the appropriation and commodification of yoga practices and traditions, without proper acknowledgement of their cultural origins. Johnson highlights the marginalisation of certain groups such as BIPOC individuals and LGBTQIA+ communities, due to a lack of representation and recognition not only in the media, conferences and events, but also in yoga classes, studios and trainings (Johnson 2017). This erasure of marginalised voices perpetuates appropriation by allowing dominant voices to control and define the narrative of yoga. “The manifestation of how power moves in dominant culture is reflected within the industry of yoga through who is teaching the class or owns the studio, the demographics of the class, the location of the studio, the décor in the studio, and the values expressed by the studio.” (Johnson 2017, p. 61). “As we consider institutional power within the industry of yoga, consider who has the power to set up credentialing for yoga – who can certify teachers or deny teachers certification? Who decides who can teach in a prime-time slot?” (Johnson 2017, p. 128).

In *Embrace Yoga's Roots*, Barkataki (2020) defines cultural appropriation by the two criteria of “power imbalance and causing harm” (p. 145), and cultural appreciation in contrast by the two criteria of “power balancing and non-harm (*ahimsa*)” (p. 145). Power balancing means “sharing power or using privilege to uplift or support” (Barkataki 2020, p. 145) a marginalised group of people. The second one means “reducing or mitigating harm, or actively uplifting the source culture and its people, which can include financial, social, political, emotional, and cultural care and support.” (Barkataki 2020, p. 145). Barkataki (2020) operates with this contrast of cultural appropriation and appreciation in her strategies for decolonizing yoga, which is also central for my discussion here and will be examined in greater detail in subsection 7.2.

Barkataki (2020) further speaks about cultural appropriation in yoga as manifesting when practices, symbols, or teachings are divorced from their cultural roots, commodified, and misrepresented. She emphasises the perpetuation of stereotypes through Orientalism and the erasure of Indian and Indigenous individuals in public representation and positions of power.

Now moving to the recent conversations, one prominent theme in Priya's interview is her critique of the cultural appropriation of yoga, where she criticises the Western commodification of yoga which often involves the misrepresentation or oversimplification of yoga's spiritual and philosophical aspects, reducing it to a marketable product rather than a holistic practice – which resonates strongly with the principles of capitalism critiqued in decolonial feminist theories. In line with decolonial feminism's view of capitalism as a colonizer, Priya highlights how the commercialisation of yoga perpetuates systems of inequality and exploitation, particularly within post-colonial contexts. The appropriation and monetisation of yoga by Western entities not only erode its cultural roots but also contribute to the marginalisation of certain groups, such as women of Colour and Indigenous communities. By framing capitalism as a system that exacerbates oppression and economic disparity, Priya's critique aligns with decolonial feminist perspectives that advocate for economic justice and the redistribution of resources. Her emphasis on interrogating the intersections of capitalist, colonial, and patriarchal systems underscores the interconnectedness of these structures in perpetuating inequality, and calls for a more holistic approach to addressing the economic exploitation inherent in the commodification of yoga.

When talking about cultural appropriation in yoga, Priya's other strong critique is about the disparity in how Indian teachers are treated compared to their White counterparts. She is pointing out that Indian teachers often do not receive the same level of recognition or opportunities within the industry.

Rahul takes a similar approach and defines cultural appropriation in yoga as the inappropriate adoption, exploitation, and misrepresentation of yoga practices, symbols, or language without proper understanding, respect, or acknowledgment of their cultural origins. He provides examples such as chanting in Sanskrit without comprehension, the commercialisation of yoga through expensive merchandise, and the upholding of colonial power dynamics by expensive teacher trainings catered towards privileged individuals. He highlights as main concern “the dominance of Western voices and perspectives, the perpetuation of stereotypes and exoticisation of Eastern cultures, and the marginalisation of Indian and Indigenous voices within the yoga community”.

7.2 Cultural appreciation in yoga

In contrast to the problem definition before, according to Johnson (2017) cultural appreciation in yoga entails acknowledging and respecting the diverse cultural origins and meanings of yoga practices. She emphasises the importance of allyship, representation, and actively including diverse experts and perspectives, and calls the Western yoga community to act, not only to apologise (Johnson 2017). Additionally, an intersectional approach to yoga recognising the interconnectedness of various social identities and experiences is essential for her to foster greater equity and inclusivity, as she says: “It is important to focus on differences to not only see the fullness of who someone is but also understand more deeply how our lived experience doesn’t match everyone else’s lived experience.” (Johnson 2017, p. 59).

According to Barkataki, cultural appreciation can include supporting South Asian yoga teachers, attending their classes and events, and hiring them as studio owners as a means of increasing their representation, and financially contributing to organisations that work towards social justice and humanitarian causes in India (Barkataki 2020). The latter would then raise questions around harm and repair, asking who is owed compensation and on the basis of which principle, leading to the discussion around ownership of intangible cultural artifacts like yoga again, which could be explored in future research.

In her discussion, Priya addresses the concept of cultural appreciation within the context of decolonizing yoga, emphasising the importance of respectful engagement with diverse cultural practices and traditions. She underscores the need for practitioners to approach yoga with humility, openness, and a willingness to learn from different cultural perspectives. And she demands from yoga teachers to see yoga not as a way to make money, but as an altruistic service to the community motivated by compassion and not profit, as she stated: “In India, nobody sees yoga as a career. Everybody does it as a service. I don't see myself as a yoga teacher. I see myself as a social worker.”

When it comes to turning appropriation into appreciation, Rahul emphasises the importance of practicing and teaching yoga with humility, respect, and awareness of its cultural context. He suggests that yoga should be accessible to all, and underscores the need to recognise and appreciate the contributions of various cultures to the evolution of yoga.

7.3 Strategies for decolonizing and dewesternizing yoga

Moving into practical terms on how to transform cultural appropriation into appreciation, the various strategies for decolonizing yoga presented by the four activists will be analysed now.

Johnson's (2017) approach involves consciousness-raising, self-reflection, and collective action. Consciousness-raising about systems of dominance, power, and oppression is crucial for challenging dominant narratives and power structures within yoga communities (Johnson 2017). Self-reflection allows individuals to recognise their own privilege and biases, developing the ability to hold multiple truths and perspectives simultaneously, which facilitates communication and understanding in spaces where discomfort may arise (Johnson 2017). Community building, allyship, and collective action are essential for effecting change within the yoga industry, promoting solidarity and collective liberation (Johnson 2017):

“Being an accomplice or comrade means being willing to risk something for our collective liberation, not on behalf of others, but in relationship with others.” (Johnson 2017, p. 25).

Barkataki's (2020) strategies for decolonization start with educating oneself about the nuances, concepts and causes of the problem, as she states: “In order to heal and transform, we need to understand the systems in which we are participating.” (Barkataki 2020, p. 61). Then she presents strategies which promote diversity and inclusivity in yoga spaces, elevate marginalised voices, and actively work to address the historical and ongoing impacts of colonisation and cultural appropriation. She suggests that decolonialization involves “reclaiming and centering the cultural practices, values, and perspectives of yoga's origins, while challenging the dominance of Western narratives and norms” (Barkataki 2020, p. 41).

Barkataki (2020) furthermore emphasises the importance of indigenising yoga by elevating and embracing the cultural elements Indigenous to its original practice. This entails returning power and control to the communities from which yoga originated, actively incorporating Indigenous perspectives, values, and practices into the modern yoga landscape as well as diversifying the public representation and leadership positions (Barkataki 2020).

Priya proposes several strategies for decolonizing yoga, including the importance of the collective and the need for White allies in the fight against racism within yoga spaces, stressing that addressing systemic issues necessitates collaboration rather than individualistic approaches. She also discusses her role in bridging Indian and Western yoga communities, aiming to create networks that prioritise mutual respect and understanding. She emphasises the need for platforms that validate and promote authentic voices from India, challenging the

dominance of white voices in shaping yoga discourse in the West. By advocating for diverse representation and challenging existing power dynamics, Priya offers strategies that foster alliances across diverse social movements to challenge colonial and Western-centric paradigms in yoga. She stated:

“I'm tired of seeing White men embody philosophy, all these kinds of online schools and platforms where they teach Bhagavad Gita and Yoga Sutra and chanting and this and that. And I questioned myself: How can that be that there is no platform where there's representation of a majority of people from where the practice and philosophy come from? From India?”

Priya's discussion on the lack of representation of South Asian yoga teachers and her suggestion to create a platform to bring authority back to them aligns with the concept of dewesternization as defined by Mignolo (2009). Dewesternization, as Mignolo (2009) describes it, involves shifting the locus of power and influence away from Western institutions and actors, and back to the culture of origin. This strategy reflects a broader commitment to the empowerment of marginalised voices within the global yoga community.

Rahul proposes several strategies for decolonizing yoga, starting with educating oneself, then supporting diverse voices within the community and engaging in respectful dialogue with Indigenous communities. He advocates for offering free community classes to underprivileged populations and organising classes to raise money for social justice causes, thereby shifting the power within the industry, as he stated:

“Decolonizing yoga involves acknowledging and addressing the historical and ongoing colonization, and marginalisation within the yoga community. This includes amplifying diverse voices and perspectives, and challenging systems of privilege and power within the practice.”

7.4 Drawing on yoga's core principles to decolonize it

One reoccurring theme in all analysed material was the call for remembering the core principles of yoga and employing them in developing strategies for decolonizing it.

Johnson (2017) underscores this approach, as she highlights that yoga's original principles and values are deeply rooted in ancient Indian traditions and philosophies. According to her, by revisiting the foundational teachings, Western teachers and practitioners can gain a deeper

understanding and find tools to decolonize yoga, as guidelines like the *yamas* and *nyamas* provide a framework for ethical engagement with oneself and community. Johnson (2017) emphasises to embody the *yamas* principles of *ahimsa* (non-harming), *satya* (truthfulness), and *asteya* (non-stealing), and the *nyamas* principle of *svadhyaya* (self-study) to foster a more inclusive and socially just yoga culture that respects diverse cultural perspectives.

As Johnson advocates for self-reflection in the process of decolonizing yoga, she suggests critical reflective questions for each of the principles, e.g., for *ahimsa*: “*What is one step you can take to interrupt, disrupt, or intervene when you notice injustice occurring to yourself or others?*” (Johnson 2017, p. 42), for *satya*: “*How have you noticed dominant culture perpetuating the idea that there is only one truth?*” (Johnson 2017, p. 44), for *asteya*: “*How does your social location intersect with the reason you might be taking more than you need, and what is the impact on yourself and others?*” (Johnson 2017, p. 42), and for *svadhyaya* “*What triggers or grabs you the most when you are in conversations about power and oppression across lines of difference?*” (Johnson 2017, p. 45).

Barkataki (2020) posits that the true essence of yoga lies in fostering unity and interconnectedness, suggesting that “anything not leading towards unity is not yoga” (Barkataki, 2020, p. 5). According to her, this foundational understanding serves as a guiding principle for decolonizing yoga by centering the practice on its core values: “Yoga is unity. But it is not a unity that denies differences.” (Barkataki 2020, p. 123).

The word ‘yoga’ derives from the Sanskrit root ‘yuj,’ meaning to yoke, unite or join. Its etymology reflects its ancient Indian origins and its conceptualisation as a practice aimed at freeing oneself from suffering and achieving union or harmony with a divine or universal consciousness (Mallinson & Singleton 2017).

When advocating for employing yoga’s core values to navigate the decolonization process, Barkataki (2020) also mentions the principles of *ahimsa*, *satya* and *svadhyaya*, alongside with *vichara* (self-knowledge), as essential elements of yoga philosophy to draw on. Rahul suggests that these principles can inform the approach to decolonizing yoga as well.

Drawing on yoga’s core principles, Priya adds another layer and mentions the importance of self-care practices within the yoga community, recognising the role of meditation and mindfulness in sustaining long-term activism efforts. She advocates for a return to the core principles and practices of yoga as tools to decolonize the practice by emphasising the need to recognise the wisdom inherent in ancient texts such as the Bhagavad Gita and Yoga Sutras.

By reframing yoga within its original philosophical context, according to her practitioners can move away from superficial interpretations and commercialisation towards a deeper understanding of its transformative potential.

7.5 Decolonial feminist theories and intersectionality

Decolonial feminist theories and intersectionality play a central role in the discourse surrounding yoga and social justice. Johnson (2017) agrees to that by highlighting that intersectionality is important to understand the intersecting power dynamics resulting from colonialism and racism which shape experiences of oppression and marginalisation within the yoga community today, as she says: “We tend to think of privilege as one dimensional – either you have it or you don’t. But privilege is actually multi-dimensional. You can have it in one area of your life (ex. education) and not have in another (ex. socioeconomic background).” (Johnson 2017, p. 57). Additionally, she underscores that criticising neutrality and spiritual bypassing are essential for addressing systemic injustices and promoting active engagement with social and political issues within the yoga community (Johnson 2017).

Spiritual bypassing refers to the tendency to use spiritual beliefs or practices to avoid uncomfortable emotions, unresolved psychological issues or social injustices (Welwood 1983, as cited in Masters 2010). This phenomenon can manifest as an attempt to transcend or deny personal suffering or societal problems through a superficial emphasis on positivity, enlightenment, or spiritual superiority, thereby undermining authentic healing and social change efforts (Johnson 2017).

“Intersectionality acknowledges the intersecting identities and experiences of individuals, including race, gender, class, and sexuality, and how these intersecting axes of identity influence their access to resources and opportunities within the yoga community” (Barkataki, p. 42). By saying this, Barkataki adeptly integrates decolonial feminist theories and intersectionality to illuminate the interconnected systems of power, privilege, and oppression within the yoga community. She actively critiques colonial hierarchies and power structures within the yoga industry and advocates for the dismantling of systems of oppression and the redistribution of resources, calling for diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion.

While not explicitly addressed in the interviews, Priya’s and Rahul’s emphasis on amplifying diverse voices and perspectives within the yoga community aligns with decolonial feminist theories and intersectionality.

7.6 Concluding the analysis of contemporary material

The analysis of contemporary material reveals diverse voices and approaches to address the question: ‘*What strategies and practices of decolonial feminist thoughts and contemporary yoga activists can be employed to decolonize and dewesternize yoga?*’, all demonstrating a shared commitment to challenging cultural appropriation and promoting equity and inclusivity within the Western yoga community.

In conclusion, Johnson (2017) emphasises the urgent need for social justice within the yoga community. Central to her approach are strategies for consciousness-raising, self-reflection, and collective action, guided by principles rooted in yoga’s core values, such as the *yamas* and *niyamas*. Johnson advocates for a transformative approach to yoga – one that acknowledges and addresses the complex intersections of spirituality, social justice, and embodied liberation.

Barkataki’s (2020) work underscores the significance of remembering yoga’s roots and core principles as a fundamental aspect of decolonizing the practice. By centering yoga on its foundational values of unity, non-harm, truthfulness, and self-inquiry, practitioners can engage in a transformative process of reclaiming, indigenising, and decolonizing yoga to foster a more equitable, authentic, and culturally respectful practice.

In summary, Priya advocates for strategies to decolonize yoga, including challenging dominant Western narratives and creating platforms that validate authentic voices from India. Priya underscores the importance of returning to core principles of yoga, such as self-care practices and mindfulness, to sustain activism efforts and promote a deeper understanding of yoga’s transformative potential. She emphasises respectful engagement with diverse cultural practices and traditions, urging practitioners to approach yoga with humility and compassion rather than profit-driven motives.

Rahul advocates for decolonizing yoga by addressing cultural appropriation and amplifying diverse voices within the yoga community. He emphasises the importance of practicing yoga with humility, respect, and awareness of its cultural context, while also advocating for education, supporting marginalised voices, and engaging in dialogue with Indigenous communities as key strategies for decolonization.

8. Interweaving both analyses into strategies for decolonizing yoga

Now, both parts of the analysis are discussed together to answer the overall research question of this study: *How can the integration of decolonial feminist theories, ancient Indian wisdom, and contemporary activist works be employed to decolonize yoga and transform cultural appropriation into appreciation within the Western yoga community?* To weave both strands of the analysis together, the ancient Indian wisdom and the contemporary knowledge of decolonize yoga activists, the method of Two-Eyed-Seeing is employed. Two-Eyed Seeing (Marshall 2009) is a concept that encourages the integration of Indigenous and Western knowledge systems in a way that honours both perspectives.

Adopting a Two-Eyed-Seeing approach allows to navigate the complexities of decolonizing yoga by integrating Indigenous Indian wisdom with contemporary activists' knowledge. Indigenous Indian knowledge provides a foundational framework for understanding yoga's spiritual roots and interconnectedness, while contemporary perspectives offer critical analyses of power dynamics and cultural appropriation within the modern yoga industry. By combining these with insights from decolonial feminist theories, a holistic strategy can be developed.

The tool of critical self-reflection is mentioned by all analysed parts of Indian wisdom: Hindu, Buddhist, and yogic philosophy, as well as by all contemporary activists: Johnson, Barkataki, Priya and Rahul. Therefore, this serves as a great starting point for decolonizing yoga.

Drawing from decolonial feminist theories (Mignolo 2011), practitioners engage in critical self-reflection to recognise and challenge existing power structures and narratives within the yoga community. By acknowledging their own privileges and biases, individuals can develop a deeper understanding of how cultural appropriation and colonial influences have shaped mainstream perceptions of yoga. This process of self-inquiry aligns with the concept of *svadhyaya* (self-reflection) in ancient yogic philosophy, encouraging practitioners to deepen their understanding of themselves and the world around them (Bryant 2009), which all contemporary activists also mentioned in this context. This in turn corresponds with what hooks (1992) calls self-examination and describes as important aspect of practicing cultural appreciation.

The principles of compassionate communication, as promoted by all three strands of ancient Indian wisdom, encourages practitioners to foster meaningful dialogue within the yoga community. By actively listening to diverse voices and valuing different perspectives, individuals create a space where marginalised voices are heard and valued. This aligns with

the concept of *satya* (truthfulness) in ancient yogic philosophy, encouraging practitioners to express their thoughts, words, and actions with openness and honesty, which all contemporary activists also mentioned in this context.

Building on honest communication, the next step would be to turn intent into impact and take compassionate action. In ancient Indian philosophies, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, practitioners are engaged to serve others selflessly. This means in the context of decolonizing yoga to collaborate for critiquing colonial hierarchies and power structures within the yoga industry. It also means to build strong alliances to advocate for the dismantling of oppressive systems and the redistribution of resources, which is also promoted by decolonial feminist scholars like Smith (1999), Lugones (2008), and Vergès (2021). In this strategy, the concept of *dharma* provides an ethical framework for guiding practitioners to fulfil their duties with righteousness and moral integrity.

Compassionate actions, as next step, include challenging neutrality and spiritual bypassing, where individuals actively engage with social and political issues and address systemic injustices. Here, Priya stresses the importance of the collective and the need for White allies to reach that goal, which aligns with the call of decolonial feminist scholars for shared solidarity (Lorde 1984). All contemporary activists align that the actions to be taken should be increasing the representation of South Asian teachers and experts in the Western yoga community, which corresponds with the call for centering and elevating the voices of marginalised members of the discussion by decolonial feminist scholars (Collins 1990; Vergès 2021). Furthermore, the activists' suggested actions include honouring the roots of yoga in practice and teachings and seeing yoga as an altruistic service to the community motivated by compassion and not profit.

In summary, the process of decolonizing yoga involves self-reflection, compassionate communication, and collective action. Self-reflection enables practitioners to recognise their privileges and biases, fostering a deeper understanding of cultural appropriation and colonial influences. By raising awareness about systems of dominance and oppression, individuals can challenge existing narratives and power dynamics within yoga communities. Collective action, including increasing representation, and honouring yoga's roots, is crucial for effecting meaningful change within the Western yoga community and promoting equality and cultural appreciation.

This approach acknowledges the importance of decolonial feminist theories, ancient Indian wisdom and contemporary activist works in turning cultural appropriation into appreciation. It

shapes the future of yoga as a practice rooted in authenticity, respect, and unity, finding a 'middle way'. *The Middle Way* is a fundamental concept in various philosophical and spiritual traditions, referring to a balanced and moderate approach to life, avoiding extremes of behaviour, thought, or emotion. *The Middle Way* encourages practitioners to navigate between opposite poles or dualities, such as pleasure and pain, attachment and aversion, or self-indulgence and self-denial, choosing a balanced path that transcends both extremes.

9. Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis has shed light on the complex intersections of colonialism and capitalism within the global yoga community. Through a critical analysis of cultural appropriation and appreciation in yoga, it has become evident that power dynamics and commodification play significant roles in shaping the practice and perception of yoga in Western societies.

Drawing on ancient Indian texts, this research has highlighted the importance of self-inquiry, communication, compassionate action, and *dharma* in reimagining a more inclusive and respectful approach to yoga. By centering on the core principles of yoga and embracing intersectionality and decolonial feminist theories, there is a potential to decolonize and dewesternize the practice, fostering a more equitable and culturally sensitive environment for all practitioners.

Furthermore, the utilisation of thematic content analysis and semi-structured interviews has provided valuable insights into the current state of cultural appropriation in yoga and the strategies for promoting cultural appreciation. By incorporating Two-Eyed Seeing, a holistic and pluralistic approach that integrates Indigenous and Western perspectives, this study has emphasised the need for diverse voices and experiences to inform the decolonization process effectively.

Therefore, taking a multifaced approach by integrating ancient Indian wisdom and contemporary activist works to explore strategies for decolonizing yoga, and analysing the material through a decolonial feminist lens, filled the research gap I identified.

In moving forward, it is essential for practitioners, teachers, and stakeholders in the yoga community to engage in critical reflections on their practices, challenge exclusionary norms, and actively work towards decolonizing yoga. In essence, the journey towards decolonizing yoga is ongoing and requires a collective effort to dismantle oppressive structures, amplify

marginalised voices, and cultivate a more authentic and respectful relationship with the practice. By embracing decolonial feminist theories, intersectionality, the wisdom of ancient Indian texts, and the knowledge of contemporary activists, there is a transformative potential to reclaim the essence of yoga as a tool for personal and collective liberation.

Nevertheless, dismantling systems of oppression and aiming for collective liberation may seem like goals too profound to achieve in the present-day society, and therefore raise questions of practicability. In my view, starting points could be to take the authority of crediting yoga teachers away from the U.S. American *Yoga Alliance* and give it back to an Indian organisation, to introduce policies that ensure a more diverse representation of teachers in yoga studios, schools and events, or the mandatory integration of yogic philosophy in yoga classes. However, these are ideas – concrete possibilities and limitations of implementing the presented strategy could be explored in future research.

Overall, when weaving together the different strands in this thesis, a multifaceted strategy emerged that underscores the importance of continuous dialogue, reflection, and action in the pursuit of decolonizing yoga – which also helps me personally to navigate my own path of practicing and teaching yoga. In motivation to keep traveling on this journey, I end with the words of Vergès:

“We must hold together past, present and future, but without foreclosing the possibility of a better future.” (Vergès 2021, p. ix).

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Consent form

Consent to data processing form

I hereby consent that Linköping University processes my personal data in the form of the audio recording and the transcript of the interview with Linda Schleier, master student in Gender Studies, Intersectionality & Change for the purpose of research within her master thesis which aims to explore the problem of cultural appropriation within the yoga community.

Information:

Your personal data will be processed in the following way: the interview will be audio recorded and transcribed, your name will be made anonymous with a code referring to you which is only known by Linda. Both the recording and the transcript will be stored digitally on LiU's internal servers until the master thesis is graded. No one except for Linda has access to the storage.

Personal data controller is Linköping University, 581 83 Linköping, corporate identification number 202100-3096.

Contact:

Linda Schleier, Wriezener Str. 30, 13359 Berlin, Germany.

Legal basis for the data processing: Consent.

Withdrawal of consent/questions/complaints: If you want withdraw your consent, please contact: Linda Schleier, linda.schleier@web.de

A simple email stating that you would like to withdraw your consent is enough.

Your consent will be valid until the master thesis is grade, probably in June 2024. You may withdraw your consent at any time without giving a reason. We will in that case stop using your personal data that we have collected based on your consent. You may request to have your personal data erased, and if you do so, we will erase information about you wherever possible. You have the right to obtain information about your personal data that are processed by Linköping University. You may request this in writing by contacting the registrar's office at Linköping University, either by email or letter. You also have the right to request that the use of certain of your personal data be limited.

If you want to know how your personal data are used, or you believe that we have used your personal data in a way that violates the agreement or current legislation, please contact Linköping University's data protection officer at dataskyddsbud@liu.se. If you have complaints regarding the way in which Linköping University processes your personal data, you are always entitled to contact the relevant inspection authority, which in this case is the Swedish Data Protection Authority.

I hereby consent that Linköping University processes my personal data according to the information above.

Place	Signature
Date	Name

Appendix 2: Interview guide

Introduction

1. How do you feel today?
2. What do you need to feel safe and brave to answer my questions?

Permission to record: anonymity, transcription, and consent.

Duration of the interview.

You can always say that you would not like to answer a question without the need to share your reasons for it.

Context and aim of my study.

Cultural appropriation

3. From your perspective and expertise, how do you define cultural appropriation within the context of yoga?
4. Can you give me some examples?
5. What are your personal experiences with it?

Colonialization

6. In your own view, what are some prevalent manifestations of colonial power dynamics and privilege within the global yoga community?
7. What is your personal experience as Indian yoga teacher in Germany?

Decolonize yoga

8. Moving forward from here, how would decolonizing yoga look like from your perspective?
9. What strategies and practices have you personally employed or observed that effectively address cultural appropriation in yoga?
10. Are there any concepts from yogic philosophy that you would draw onto in this context?
11. What is your personal role in decolonizing yoga?
12. What are some challenges or barriers you have encountered in your work towards decolonizing yoga?