

Yoga in Khmer, Thai, Lao and Cham Traditional Art

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For well over 2000 years, Mainland Southeast Asia has been at the crossroads of vast systems of trade between India, East Asia and within Southeast Asia itself. Precious metals, ivory, wood, textiles, rice, spices and medicines were all traded. There is evidence from 300BC of contact with India. Many aspects of Indian culture: including language, law, political theory, science, medicine, art, dance, literature, mythology, religion, tantra and yoga were adopted by indigenous peoples giving rise to new hybrid cultures which were unique combinations of Indian and native Southeast Asian cultures. Artists created monuments and artwork drawing upon Indian ideas with forms and styles unique to Southeast Asia. Gods, Goddesses, Apsaras, Demons and Buddhas, can all be seen. There are also numerous images of Yogis known as *Rishi* in India, *Tusi* in Vietnam, *Eysey* in Cambodia, *Risi* in Laos and *Reusi* in Thailand.



Statues depicting Traditional Thai Yoga or *Reusi Dat Ton* Poses on the large Rishi's Mountain or *Khao Mor* at *Phachetuphon* Temple (*Wat Po*) Bangkok, Thailand. Circa 1836AD. (Photo by David Wells)

Ancient Khmer (Cambodian) mythology tells of an Indian named Kaundinya, who, after a dream, traveled to Southeast Asia and married Soma, a local Naga or Serpent princess. Their son founded the first Kaundinya Dynasty of the Funan Kingdom. Funan flourished from around 100-500AD and encompassed modern day Cambodia, some of modern day Thailand and Southern Vietnam.

Around 500 AD, Chenla, a tributary state of Funan centered near Champasak in modern day Southern Laos, attacked and ultimately absorbed the Funan Kingdom, creating an early precursor of the Khmer Kingdom which ultimately encompassed modern day Cambodia, and much of Thailand, Laos and Southern Vietnam. (Albanese, 54) In 663AD, the rulers of Chenla invited the Indian monk, Punyodaya, to study the medicinal herbs of Chenla. During multiple visits to Chenla, Punyodaya shared his knowledge of herbal medicine, Sanskrit and Tantric Buddhism. (Chhem)

An early Khmer King, Yashovarman, who ruled between 889-907AD, “ordered the construction of about 100 monasteries or ashrams throughout his kingdom where ascetics could live and practice.” (Coedes, 111-112) In Kandal Province, in Southeastern Cambodia near the modern Buddhist Monastery of Vat Sithor, there is a column which bears an inscription from 968AD in which the Khmer King, Jayavarman V, praises the monk Kirtipandita for practicing and teaching Yoga. (Green, 17)

In the later days of the Khmer Kingdom, Thai people migrated from southern China into Mainland Southeast Asia, ultimately conquering large parts of the Khmer Kingdom and adopting many aspects of the Khmer culture.

The Lao Kingdom of Lan Xang flourished from the 14th century until the late 18th century when it was conquered by the Thais and later colonized by the French in 1893AD.

In modern day Central and Southern Vietnam and parts of Southern Laos, the Champa Kingdom flourished from 400-1700AD. The Champa culture also created temples, sculpture, dance and music which were a unique combination of Indian and indigenous styles. (Trần, Kỳ Phương, Văn Thắng Võ and Peter D. Sharrock)

I first traveled to Southeast Asia in 1990 to serve as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Thailand. While studying Traditional Thai Massage or *Nuad Boran* at Wat Po Temple in Bangkok, I saw the Traditional Thai Yoga, *Reusi Dat Ton* statues on the two Rishi's Mountains on the temple grounds and became fascinated with *Reusi Dat Ton*. I have now been a student of Thai *Reusi Dat Ton* and Indian *Hatha Yoga* for over 30 years. I have traveled throughout Thailand, Mainland Southeast Asia and South Asia researching and studying with dozens of teachers at various temples, ashrams, schools and institutes. In addition, I visited numerous universities, libraries, museums, temples, caves and ancient archaeological sites looking for evidence of Yoga poses in traditional texts, iconography and artwork.

The earliest artistic depiction of a Yoga pose I found in Southeast Asia is at Sambor Prei Kuk in Kampong Thom, Cambodia, Circa 600AD. Sambor Prei Kuk was a Capitol city of the pre-Angkorian Chenla Empire and is one of the oldest surviving temple complexes in Cambodia. On an outside wall of a Yogi's Tower or *Prasat Asram* in Sambor Prei Kuk, one can still discern a Yogi in what is known in Indian Yoga as *Sopāśrayāsana* pose.



Yogi's Tower or *Prasat Asram*
Sambor Prei Kuk, Kampong Thom,
Cambodia, Circa 600AD. (Photo by
David Wells)



Yogi in Sopāśrayāsana pose at. Yogi's Tower or
Prasat Asram . Sambor Prei Kuk, Kampong Thom,
Cambodia. Circa 600AD. (Photo by David Wells)

“Sopāśrayāsana is squatting tying the back and the two legs with a piece of cloth called ‘Yoga-pattaka’ ”

Swami Hariharananda Aranya in his commentary on the Patanjali Yoga Aphorisms 2.46 with Commentary of Vyasa. (Āraṇya, 228 and Powell, 11)

At Yasodharapura, an early Capital of the Khmer Empire, in Roluos, Cambodia, Yogis in Sopāśrayāsana pose can also be seen on the outside walls of the Lolei Temple. Circa 893AD.



Yogi in Sopāśrayāsana pose on outside
wall of Lolei Temple, *Yasodharapura*,
Roluos, Cambodia. Circa 893AD.
(Photo by David Wells)



Yogis in Sopāśrayāsana pose on outside wall of Lolei Temple, *Yasodharapura*, Roluos, Cambodia. Circa 893AD. (Photo by David Wells)

According to Amara Srisuchat, in ancient Mainland Southeast Asia “*The Yoga Tradition came from two main sources, Pasupata Saivism and Tantric Vajrayana Buddhism.*” (Srisuchat, 237) Indeed, during my journeys across Southeast Asia, I found images of Yogis and Gods in various Yoga poses carved into stone at several ancient temples dedicated to Siva.

In Southern Laos, in Champasak Province at the base of Lingaparvata Mountain is the vast *Vat Phu* Temple complex, Circa 500-1100AD. Also known as “The Mountain Temple” *Vat Phu* has traditionally been a special site for asceticism since ancient times. It was originally occupied by the Chams, then the Chenla and finally the Classical Khmer who all continued the traditional worship of Siva at the site. (Albanese p 283). Outside and behind the central shrine carved into a rock face at the base of a cliff are the three Gods of the Hindu Trimurti one of whom is performing a seated twisting pose similar to techniques practiced today in Traditional Thai Yoga, *Reusi Dat Ton*. In addition, numerous Yogis in squatting poses, including Sopāśrayāsana, are carved into stone on the base colonettes of doorways of numerous buildings throughout the *Vat Phu* Temple complex.



Closeup of a Hindu God carved into the rock face at the base of a cliff behind the central shrine at *Vat Phu*, Champasak, Laos. Circa 1100AD. (Photo by David Wells)

In Northeast Thailand, in Buriram, Province, atop an extinct volcano sits *Prasat Phanom Rung* “Big Mountain Temple” (Circa 1100AD.) *Prasat Phanom Rung* is a classical Khmer Temple which represents the God Siva’s home on Mount Kailasa. The temple is dedicated to the Pasupata sect of Hinduism and it’s concept of “*Formless Yoga.*” (Srisuchat, 148) According to an information display at the Phnom Rung Museum, The Pasupata “...sect emphasized Yoga practices, used skulls as vessels... used alcohol in their rituals, worshiped fires in the nude, believed that the Gods had consorts in the feminine form of the creative force (*shakti*). Sexual activities were considered as a part of religious rituals.” (Information Display at Phnom Rung Museum. Buriram, Thailand)

On the pediment above the doorway of the Eastern gallery at *Prasat Phanom Rung* is a carving of “...*Yoga-Daksinamurti, who is Siva in the form of Supreme Ascetic, or Reusi...who gives and maintains wisdom, perception, concentration, asceticism, philosophy, music and the ability to heal disease with sacred chants*” seated in “...*Lalitasana, posture of ease with one leg folded and one leg pendant...*” (Information Display at Phnom Rung Museum. Buriram, Thailand)
Above Siva’s Left Shoulder is a flying being in the pose typically assumed when flying.



Closeup of Siva in *Lalitasana* pose in the form of *Yoga-Daksinamurti*, the Supreme Ascetic, *Maha Yogi* and Healer at home on Mount Kailash. (Above Siva’s Left Shoulder is a flying being in the pose typically assumed when flying.) Pediment above Eastern Entrance at *Prasat Phanom Rung* “Big Mountain Temple.” Buriram, Thailand. Circa 1100AD. (Photo by David Wells)

At base of the Principal Tower at *Prasat Phanom Rung*, carved into two stone colonettes at the bases of doorways are images of Yogis practicing poses including “*Utkutikasana*, the tight squatting pose.” (Srisuchat, 154) Both these poses are similar to techniques still practiced today in Thai *Reusi Dat Ton*.



Yogis at base colonettes of Main Tower at *Prasat Phanom Rung* “Big Mountain Temple.”Buriram, Thailand. Circa 1100AD. (Photos by David Wells)

In the late 12th century, near Siam Reap, Cambodia at Angkor Thom “The Royal City,” the Khmer King Jayavarman VII constructed his state temple known as The Bayon or Mountain Temple, *Prasat Bayon*, Circa late 1100s AD. The Bayon was a Buddhist Temple famous for it’s numerous faces of Buddhas gazing outward in all directions across the kingdom. In the upper level of the temple, carved into a stone wall are three Yogis squatting and performing mudras or hand gestures.



Squatting Yogis with Mudras, *Prasat Bayon* or “Mountain Temple” (Upper Level) at the center of *Angkor Thom* “The Royal Capital” Angkor, Cambodia. Circa late 1100s AD. (Photo by David Wells)

Advanced Yoga practitioners are said to be able to develop various supernatural powers known as “*Siddhi*,” in Sanskrit and “*Iddhi*” in Pali. Among these powers are “*Laghima*,” the ability to become weightless and fly. An example of this can be seen in Siam Reap, Cambodia at the Buddhist Temple, *Wat Bo*. Inside the central shrine room high up on the inside walls are murals painted approximately 1800AD which depict scenes from the Indian epic “The Ramayana”, known in Cambodia as the “*Reamker*.” One scene depicts four Yogis flying thru the sky. The abbot of the temple told me that the pose these Yogis are using is a special pose specifically used for flying. Indeed, during my travels throughout South and Southeast Asia, when I saw flying beings depicted in traditional artwork, they were almost invariably in an identical or very similar pose.



Flying Yogis (detail from a mural depicting scenes from the Indian epic the Ramayana, known in Cambodia as the “*Reamker*”) Main Temple at *Wat Bo*, Siam Reap, Cambodia. Circa 1800AD. (Photo by David Wells)

“...by meditation on cotton wool or other light things down to atoms, Yogin becomes light. By becoming light he can walk on water and then on cobwebs and on rays of light. Thereafter he can move to the sky at will.”

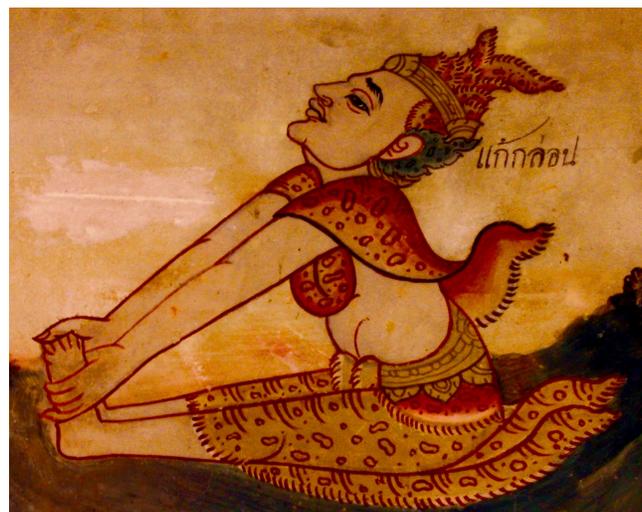
Vyasa in his commentary on the Patanjali Yoga Aphorisms 3.44 (Āraṇya,318)

In 1836, the Thai King, Rama III, commissioned the creation of 80 statues depicting some of the techniques of Thai *Reusi Dat Ton*. About 20 of the original statues have survived and can be seen on the two Hermit's Mountains or *Khao Mor*, at *Wat Phra Chetupon* or "*Wat Po*," Bangkok, Thailand. (Circa 1836AD.) Inscriptions describe the statues as "...postures of Yogic exercise invented by siddhas for remedy of illness...due to the malfunctioning of internal Air or Wind." (Srisuchat, 172) Along with each statue there was also an accompanying tablet upon which was etched a poem describing the technique and it's therapeutic effect.



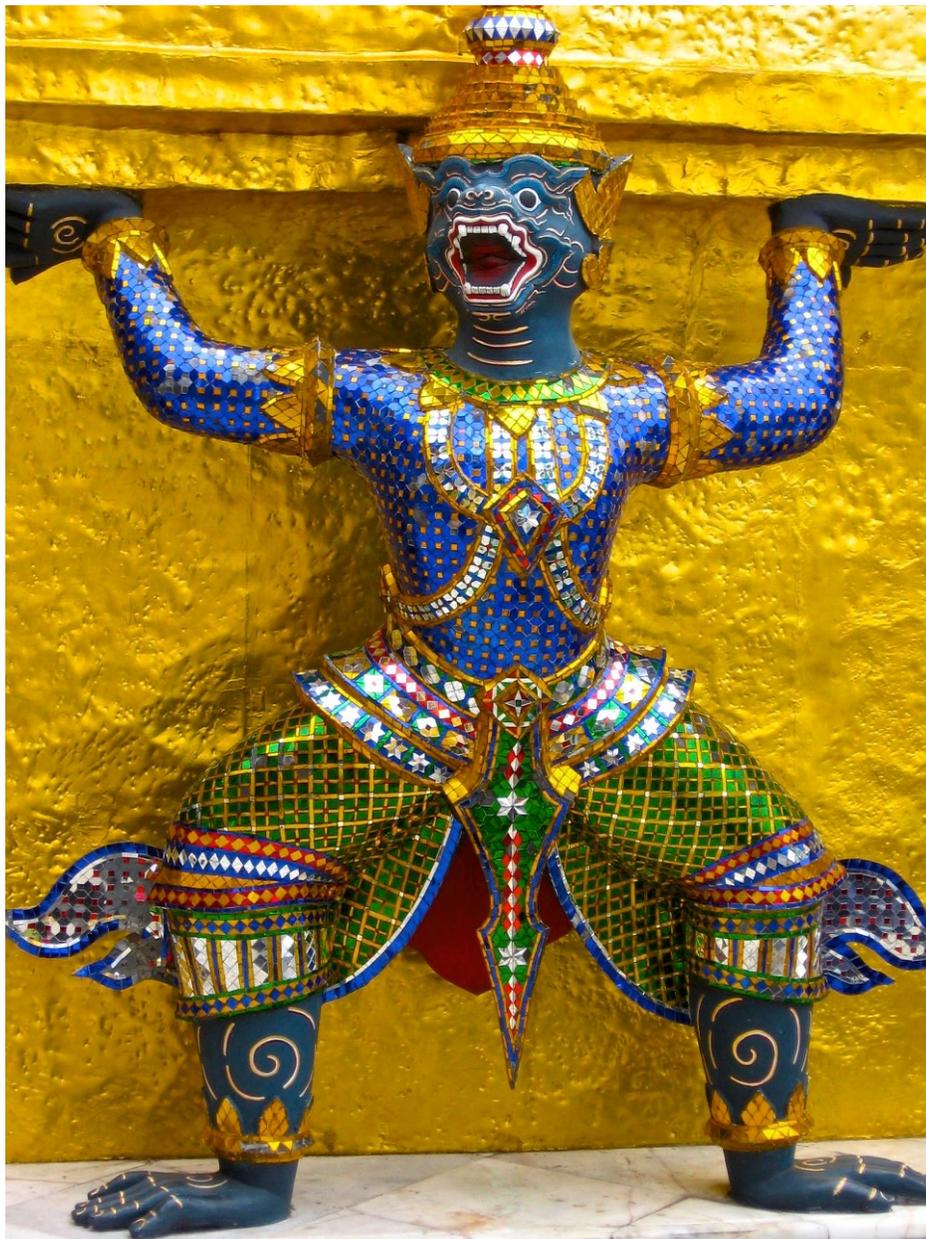
Statues depicting Traditional Thai *Reusi Dat Ton* Poses on the small Rishi's Mountain or *Khao Mor* at *Phachetuphon* Temple (*Wat Po*) Bangkok, Thailand. Circa 1836AD. (Photo by David Wells)

In the Southern Thai provincial capital of Songkhla, there is a temple known as *Wat Machimawat*. On the temple grounds is the “Reusi Dat Ton Pavilion”, *Sala Reusi Dat Ton*. High up on the inside walls of the pavilion are two murals originally painted in 1863AD, which depict 40 different *Reusi Dat Ton*, techniques along with the accompanying poems which describe the therapeutic benefit of each technique. I had seen photos of this mural in an old book in The National Library in Bangkok. In the book the mural looked to be considerably damaged and many of the images were fading. When I arrived at the temple, the abbot informed me that my timing was excellent as just the week before a team from The Thai Fine Arts Department had finished repairing and touching up sections of the murals. I was able to borrow a ladder and spent the next day photographing the two newly restored *Reusi Dat Don* murals.



Reusi Dat Ton Murals, *Wat Machimawat*, Songkhla, Thailand, Circa 1863AD, Restored 2009AD (Photos by David Wells)

In Thai *Reusi Dat Ton*, there is a series of six poses based upon the temple guardians, known as *Yakshas*. One of these poses, known as “*The Giant Holding up the Roof*” can be seen at the base of the *Phra Suvarnachedi* tower on the grounds of The Temple of The Emerald Buddha, *Wat Phra Kaew* in Bangkok, Thailand. The temple was constructed circa 1783AD and the guardian giants were added sometime during the Reign of King Rama V (1868-1919AD) (A similar pose is also found in Indian *Hatha Yoga* where it is known as “*The Goddess*.”)



Temple Guardian or Yaksha, “*Holding up the Roof*” at *Phra Suvarnachedi*, *Wat Phra Kaew*, The Temple of The Emerald Buddha, Bangkok, Thailand. (Temple Circa 1783AD, Statue Circa 1868-1919AD. (Photo by David Wells)

In Vientiane, Laos at *Vat Haw Phra Kaew* Temple or “The Temple of The Emerald Buddha,” on the veranda, numerous bronze Buddha images from the 18th century are on display. Many of the Buddha Images are seated in the classic Yogic “Half Lotus Pose.”



Bronze Buddha at *Vat Haw Phra Kaew* “The Temple of The Emerald Buddha ,” Vientiane, Laos. Circa 18th Century (Photo by David Wells)

In Luang Prabang, Northern Laos at *Vat Wisunalat* Temple, the front entrance to the temple is protected by two *Yakshas*, temple guardians. One of the *Yakshas* is performing another of the techniques from the *Yaksha* series of poses in Thai *Reusi Dat Ton*.



Temple Guardian outside entrance to *Vat Wisunalat* Temple, Luang Prabang, Laos. Date Unknown.
(Photo by David Wells)

Inside Vat Wisunalat, at the base of the main shrine is a figure in an advanced seated Yoga pose.



Image at base of main shrine inside *Vat Wisunalat* Temple, Luang Prabang, Laos. Date Unknown. (Photo by David Wells)

The Museum of Cham Sculpture in Danang, Vietnam houses a fabulous collection of stone sculptures recovered from various ancient Cham archaeological sites in Southern and Central Vietnam. One of the highlights of the museum's collection is a sculpture of an Apsara, a mythological celestial dancer "...in the graceful three-bends posture (*tribhanga*.)" (Information Display at The Museum of Cham Sculpture in Danang, Vietnam) This pose is nearly identical to a technique in Thai *Reusi Dat Ton* known as "Gazing at the Stars". This statue, Circa 1000AD, was originally from Tra Kieu, Simhapura, the first Capitol of the Hindu Cham Kingdom.



Apsara, mythological celestial dancer or heavenly nymph. Originally from Tra Kieu, Simhapura, Quang Nam, Vietnam, Circa 1000AD, currently on display at The Museum of Cham Sculpture, Danang, Vietnam. (Photo copyright *Danang Fantastic City*: The Danang Center for Tourism Promotion)

The earliest artistic depictions of Yoga techniques I was able to find in Mainland Southeast Asia are primarily squatting, seated and meditation poses. In later centuries, there appear a increasing number of complex non seated poses, culminating in the 19th century with a sudden and vast proliferation in the sculpture and murals depicting Thai *Reusi Dat Ton* poses and exercises.

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