

Yoga: the challenge of a discipline

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The words I am going to pronounce in the next few minutes should be understood as a humble contribution to reflection on the expansion process of yoga and its consequences, not only for European but also for Indian culture. Having practiced yoga and meditation for more than twenty-five years, I have been reflecting upon the yoga tradition on a scholarly level for over ten years. I should like to take a middle position (if that is possible) and attempt some constructive critical distance with regard to both cultures in order to offer you my thoughts on what I consider the challenge of this new century: Yoga in a post-modern, post-atheistic, post-colonial world, a world that is trying to leave the “post-“ element behind and define itself in a positive way as something other than its own crisis.

Yoga today seems absolutely integrated into our modern Western society. It is true that some still think of it as something exotic, and others see it even as a potential threat. This is one of the reasons why some Indian yoga masters adapt their messages increasingly to the cultural frame and needs of the target society. The imperative seems to be: a portable practice and a transposable message. If we take a look at the related cultural dynamics, it is interesting to see that Westernized forms of yoga are even being re-exported to India and some Indians think that Westernized methods have something to do with the origins of Yoga practice. There is no denying that history is a catalyst for changes, and while the term “discipline” has to do with “learning” (*discere*), the main challenge is to understand the transcultural relevancy of this process and also the motivation of practitioners according to time and place.

There is also another sense of the word “discipline” when related to yoga; a sense that is inherent in its method and philosophy and is at the same time mindful of the reverse (and complementary) side of learning: transmission. Yoga is (among other things) a tradition. If we take the Sanskrit word *paramparā*, we see that it refers to an uninterrupted chain between guru and *śiṣya*. This chain assumes a certain qualification [*adhikāra*], not only on the part of the one transmitting the contents, but also on the part of those receiving them. The *guru-śiṣya* relationship dates back to the period of the Upaniṣads¹, which saw the transformation of the former *ācārya-brahmacārin* relationship characteristic of the Vedic period: whereas in the Vedas the nexus between cosmos and ritual takes pride of place, the

¹ This relationship can already be seen in the term itself: *upa* = near, *ni* = down, *sad* = sit. It indicates sitting-down at the feet of a master in order to receive secret doctrine.

philosophy of the Upaniṣads emphasizes the essential connection between microcosm and macrocosm (individual and universe) through theory and praxis leading to the realization of metaphysical equivalence. Whichever layer of meaning of the term *mokṣa* is emphasized: the Vedantic and Buddhist *duḥkhānta* (end of suffering), the Yogic *kaivalya* (isolation), or the Tantric *siddhi* (perfection), it is clear that the path leading to this final liberation or release is very special and requires both a selection of disciples and, for the ones practicing it, a deviation from any ordinary way of life. Such a deviation consists of an effort to transform oneself. Not only does the word *sādhanā* account for such an effort (the verbal root of which, *sādh-*, means “to exert oneself”), but also the term *tapas*. This term, which has its origin in the Vedic context of sacrifice, is usually associated with “ascetic practice” because of its later development, but it is important to note that its root means to “to heat” or “to be hot” and gives the idea of an emission of heat as the result of an effort. But most important of all: the significance of this transmission process becomes clear with the idea of initiation [*dīkṣā*], because such a ritual testifies not only to a change of life and identity, but also to a transformation of the level of existence as a result of interiorizing knowledge and practice. If we don’t find any description of yoga methods in some of the Upaniṣads considered as the precursors of Yoga philosophy, it is because transmission was oral and confined to a small group selected on the criterion of rational eligibility. In the *Maitrī Upaniṣad* VI, 29, we read: “Let no one declare this most secret doctrine to the one who is not a son, who is not a pupil, who is not peaceful in mind. To one who is devoted to none other than his guru, to one endowed with all qualities, one may give it” [*etaḍ guhyatamam nāputrāya nāśiṣyāya nāśāntāya kīrtayed iti, ananya-bhaktāya sarva-guṇa-sampannāya dadyāt*]. No deep psychological insight is required to see that some of the dominant phenomena occurring at yoga institutions today are the absolute opposite of what I have tried to describe as Yoga tradition. The mere fact of this is not a problem. As I said, human beings are historical by nature and as such subject to change and transformation. The problem is how this transformation takes place. If I were to use a metaphor related to Indian religion, I would say that in the transmigration of the Yoga method from the Indian to the Western body (in practice and doctrine), there is almost no visibility of the transmigrating soul. The kind of dissociation in the Western body of Yoga can be summarized as follows: On the one hand Yoga has been the victim of different market strategies such as fitness programs, recipes for bodily well-being and external beauty, and even for improving sexual potency. On the other hand, the existence of sectarian groups affirming an Oriental truth beyond the miseries of our “drifting society” leads many people to the worst forms of psychological

and spiritual slavery. The existence of these two extremes forms a real challenge for those who have undertaken to follow a serious path of self-inquiry, self-knowledge and self-realization, because such phenomena are part of the cultural determinants of our time, and no one is absolutely free from them (let alone those who affirm that they are spiritually “elsewhere”).

A partial solution to this problem is profound reflection on transmission and a very carefully monitored and fully unbiased practice of Yoga. The main weapon in gaining terrain in this sense is to bridge the ostensible gap between scholarship and practice. Personally I always experience problems in mentioning my background when practicing Yoga: I am automatically defined as “irrational”, “mystic” or “naive” by academic colleagues and, at the same time, when some Yoga practitioner hears about my scholarly background, I become suspicious of abstract thinking that deviates from the main goal. Personally, I think both reactions are feeble attempts to legitimize partial positions on the level of what we may call “the small ego”. One of the challenges of the coming century is to build a real bridge, with serious thinking and sincere practice going hand in hand, open to the intervention of critique and the affirmation of differences. This is not only a challenge for the West but also for India, especially when we speak of a discipline with such high human and spiritual standards as Yoga.

I should like to conclude by providing an example of someone whom I feel might offer an alternative to rethinking the status of the situation and the challenges to come: Alain Daniélou. He spent more than twenty years in India, studying its culture, religion and philosophy from the inside, and was initiated in the 1940s (at a time when that ritual was far from being a fashion in the Western world). He returned to Europe to continue a kind of transmission adapted both to his own human limitations and to the people he found in Europe. His book *Yoga Method of Reintegration* (1949) is a synthesis of this discipline covering many branches and based on Indian sources in their original language. However, it is neither a scholarly nor a prophetic book. Daniélou tried to emphasize the place that yoga had in the very complex context of what is called “Hinduism”, a context he tries to understand from different points of view and without dogmatic limitations. Apart from this necessary contextualization, he never considered himself a guru. Far from it, he affirmed the value of a true disciple (better a good disciple than a fake guru) and even warned against the fetishism of initiation (something very “healthy” in our own context, in which many spiritual seekers run after swamis and sadhus in order to get their names changed: what’s in a name?). But, most important of all: when Daniélou came back to Europe, he

tried to recover the ancient roots of Western religiosity (long before Christianity), which for him were much closer to what he had experienced in India than people might think. He left this kind of “trace”, also found in other authors, which might inspire us to venture beyond codified norms of social acceptance, psychological ambitions disguised as spiritual ideals and the terrible identity crisis affecting our culture today.