

Transcending the Individual and Resisting Modernity: *Empowerment and Sacralization in Modern Postural Yoga*

This paper will attempt to account for the role played by so-called “spiritual” experience in Modern Yoga by using an embodiment-oriented and hermeneutically informed phenomenological approach. The paper discusses complex relations between materiality, sociality and emotionality, and how these are implicated in the experiences of devoted practitioners. It will be argued that the notion of *empowerment* is centrally important for understanding how practitioners deal with a variety of challenges in their lives. Specific practices offer ways of countering so-called hyper-detached modes of experience, whereas other aspects of teaching and learning Yoga involve ways of enabling the practitioner to develop his or her self-confidence and trust, and by legitimating and motivating particular social behaviours. These and similar forms of experience are often interpreted, by practitioners themselves, in terms of ‘spirituality’, and the reasons for this are discussed and problematized. The processes of re-habitation involved are socially dependent. That is, they depend on intersubjective relations and on a host of context-specific circumstances. For example, there are problematic issues connected to how the individual is talked about, particularly in terms of a Cartesianism that is influenced and shaped by interdependent processes of psychologization, medicalization, secularization and commodification. The various forms of empowerment are also intimately related to *sacralization*, i.e. ways of performing in particular situations that will involve feelings of “sacredness” and “purity”. These performances are specific ways of spatializing and temporalizing experience in relation to that which is deemed as being of “spiritual” value or nature, and are influenced and shaped by material and social environments.

Introduction

It has become an increasingly common claim that many styles of Modern Yoga are heavily dependent on and shaped by health-centered discourses that rely on an individualistic and psychologized view of the human being. This claim is often made by researchers, media, and popular opinion alike—even when the judgements as to whether it is a good or bad development might differ. Although I believe that this picture is true to a certain extent, I nevertheless want to challenge the level of generalization involved, and highlight the complex diversity of Modern Yoga that is hidden beneath it.

By the more critical-minded, the emphasis on health, when allowed to take centerstage in Yoga, is typically seen as establishing and reinforcing a problematic individualism that is symptomatic of life-stylization in modern societies. This individualism, some will continue, necessarily denounces—or at least compromises—the ethical and so-called ‘spiritual’ potentials of the original Yoga traditions. By contrast, to more religio-skeptical minds, for whom engagement with honorific notions of ‘spirituality’ is either irrelevant or suspicious, it may suggest other problems. Nevertheless, even these purportedly more ‘secularized’ verdicts often rely on a mainstream stock of ideas in the study of religion, especially regarding the ‘sacred’—although now understood as a de-ontologized ‘unreal’ which can only be understood, as some of them claim, in terms of a discursive or cognitive ordering by a projecting mind. The result of both these general approaches is often a rather derogatory picture painted which suggests that those Modern Yoga styles which claim to be more ‘spiritually’ oriented typically mix quasi-scientific humbug with misinterpretations and colonialist exploitation of classical high-religious traditions

from India. Quite often, this will also imply that Modern yoga is something *less* than religion proper; perhaps understood as New Agey ‘sacralization of self’, or something to that extent.

All these positions will generally depend on a view of the ‘sacred’ as having one or the other relation to so-called ‘reality’: as being *more* real, *less* real, or utterly *unreal*. Even if we disregard the fact that any notion of ‘reality’ is essentially and problematically contextual—as famously pointed out by philosopher John Austin—a narrow focus on *discourse* of the ‘sacred’ will make the Yoga researcher miss the importance of *practices* and *experiences* of ‘sacralization’. It will, moreover, give rise to a neglect of how these practices and experiences take a variety of forms in Modern Yoga. My research shows that there is a large diversity of practices and experiences involved that differ from person to person, and from situation to situation. Even if some level of generalization may be achieved regarding similarities between them—or alternatively of various types and styles among all those involved—I would argue that the personal differences are non-trivial. In fact, the often subtle variations between how various practitioners practice *and* experience Yoga tell us a lot about the nature of Modern Yoga in itself.

I choose to view practices of sacralization as imaginative, aesthetic performances that have an empowering effect on Yoga practitioners, and that involve reflection and reflexivity in various context-specific ways rather than as persistent discursive structures. Moreover, the *purpose* of these performances is completely misunderstood if discussed solely in terms of discourse, text or narrative, thus escaping their experiential aspects. Moreover, when seen through a lens that is zoomed in on questions as to whether or not—or to what extent—practices of sacralization relate to some version of ‘reality’, this will typically, even if unwittingly and implicitly, establish belief-centered explanations of Modern Yoga. And such accounts, I believe, are off the mark.

This is not to say that the variety of performances and discourses involved in Modern Yoga cannot be problematized. In fact, I think that a more nuanced understanding of the complex relations between discourse and experience in Modern Yoga shows that we need to move beyond the stereotypical, generalizing and homogenizing accounts of this large field of practices; a field which is fast-growing and extremely popular in many Western settings. And when doing so, we will be in a better position to understand the attraction, effectiveness and purpose of Modern Yoga, as well as uncover the more problematic aspects, as related for example to the socio-political circumstances of late modernity.

In summary, then, the arguments involved in establishing a view of Modern Yoga as being medicalized or therapeuticized, typically rest on a presupposition that one should focus on more ‘public’ discourses and explanations as presented by teachers and practitioners— whether in ‘insider’ publications, quasi-academic apologesis, or in practitioners’ answers to direct questions

regarding the purpose and nature of Yoga practice. In other words, when asked questions such as “Why do you do Yoga?”, typical answers tend to involve some or other reference to health, individual well-being, and so on. *Ergo*, the verdict that “these practices are health-centered and individualistic”. And, as I have indicated, such a generalizing and simplistic view needs to be questioned.

There is, however, also a second problem, perhaps even more important than the over-emphasis on discourse. This is the fact that accusations about individualism and self-inflationism often imply, or explicitly draw upon, an analysis of the use of the body in Modern Yoga as being inherently anti-thetical to so-called ‘spiritual’ practices. These spiritual practices are then assumed to be about something more mental, contemplative, having to do with the ‘true self’, and so on. By contrast, uses of the body in Modern Yoga that aestheticize, that elaborate various forms of affectivity, that involve a partly novel form of so-called “movement studies”, and so on, are then seen as diverging from original forms of ‘spirituality’ in the history of Yoga. Yet, such views are not only problematically involved with normative frameworks (and rightly criticized, in my opinion, for being *religionist*), but they also patently disregard a long history of both somatic and aesthetic practices within the history of so-called religion, and which may be fruitfully compared to Modern Yoga.

In my forthcoming dissertation I argue that many generalizations of the nature and purposes of Modern Postural Yoga (i.e., a strand within Modern Yoga that has a comparatively stronger focus on the performance of postures and breathing exercises; MPY for short)¹ are too simplistic; and as such they miss the complex diversity of the practices involved. By contrast, I believe it is more fruitful to view them in terms of a spectrum of practices that, in specific situations for specific persons, may or may not be healthist, individualist, sacralizing, and so on. However, this diversity is only uncovered when we look more closely at the relatively *private* reflections involved with various persons, which in turn also requires a more complex view of how the body is involved within these practices, and then also how all this relates to so-called ‘spiritual’ experiences and practices of sacralization. In my dissertation, then, I devote considerable space to articulating an embodiment-oriented performance approach. This approach is primarily informed by embodiment-oriented work within various disciplines, including philosophy, anthropology, cultural geography, sociology, emotion studies, neurophenomenology, and movement studies.² I would specifically like to mention the recent important work of

¹ See Elizabeth de Michelis’ book *A History of Modern Yoga* (2004, New York & London: Continuum) for different strands of Modern Yoga.

² A few names deserve to be mentioned: anthropology (Thomas Csordas, Michael Jackson, Tim Ingold), cultural geography (Julian Holloway, Nigel Thrift), sociology (Nick Crossley, Ian Burkitt, Chris Shilling), emotion studies (Nico Frijda, Glen Mazis, Arlie Hochschild, Gillian Bendelow), and movement studies (Maxine Sheets-Johnstone,

philosophers Corey Anton on “selfhood and authenticity”, Drew Leder on “the absent body” and Richard Shusterman on “somaesthetics”. I have also benefited greatly from the work on hermeneutics by Eugene Gendlin and Mikhail Bakhtin. Many of the sources I use have been inspired by the French existentialist and embodiment-theorist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a major figure also in my work.

In my embodiment-oriented performance approach, sacralization is approached in terms of a complex overlapping between materiality, sociality, emotionality, reflexivity, and so on. One aspect of this more multidimensional approach is to see how lived experience and reflection interact in complex ways—using notions such as framing and gestalting. In this view, so-called “spiritual experience” is seen neither as a complete construction (in the mind’s eye as it were, then somehow projected on ‘reality’, perhaps in the form of a misperception), nor as a purportedly more ‘accurate’ perception or insight, relating perhaps to a more ‘real’ or ‘deeper’ reality (as the essentialist would claim). To balance between these polarized positions (reminiscent of what Merleau-Ponty termed the fallacies of intellectualism and empiricism), requires a more intricate understanding of the phenomenological notion of intentionality, which is fruitfully elaborated within later works on existential phenomenology (here I would recommend the work of Corey Anton) as well as how this involves our bodies (Drew Leder and Richard Shusterman). This work attempts to overcome problematic separations of subject and object, and mind and body, as it turns up in most accounts of perception, and that social constructionism, empiricism, and essentialism all ultimately rely upon—although admittedly in different ways. (Even if this separation often takes the form of a theoretical gap rather than outright dualism.) Most importantly, this approach also differs significantly from traditional accounts within Phenomenology and Psychology of Religion. My embodiment-oriented approach thus attempts to take heed of Yoga practitioners’ experiences—on the premise that they are crucially important for a more complete understanding of what practitioners are in fact doing, and why. I must stress, though, that my dissertation goes to some length to avoid the kind of misunderstanding that arises within the study of religion when attempting to deal with experience. It also attempts to deal with the methodological challenges that all this involves.

The title of this paper, “Transcending the individual and resisting modernity”, is a polemical statement that wants to point attention to the fact that *some* Modern Yoga practitioners in important ways can be said to resist certain existential challenges associated with modernity (or

Irmgard Bartenieff). In addition, I have benefited from research within *neurophenomenology* and so-called *embodied cognition approaches* (Shaun Gallagher, Anthony Marcel, Antonio Damasio, Alva Noë), which generally hold that cognitive processes are deeply rooted in the body’s interactions with the world, thus foregrounding agency and environmental interaction over internal symbol manipulation.

late modernity), as well as being engaged in practices that in various ways both empower their sense of individuality and simultaneously make possible modes of experiencing that invite for more relational and emotionally connected modes of being. As such, large parts of the field of Modern Yoga can be seen as part of a growing alternative movement that open up new spaces in which alternative ideologies and practices of the body can be explored. However, and this is an important point, most of the time the majority of Modern Yoga practitioners are indeed involved with individualistic and psychologized discourses that play into the hands of consumerist attitudes toward life-stylization, and that reinforce a commodification of the ‘body’ as well as an unhealthy focus on the individual’s health.

Practices of sacralization and ‘spirituality talk’

Notions of health and sacralization are complexly intertwined in Modern Yoga practices. In a previously published article I have argued that medicalized discourses in Modern Yoga often involve the notion of ‘health’ as a polyvalent metaphor to efficiently summarize the purposes and methods of yogic practice.³ Unfortunately, this will often result in a medicalization of the individual’s life-style, even to the extent of establishing individualistic attitudes that impede commitment to social and political change. However, notwithstanding these discursive structures, there are various practices and experiences which point in other directions, even if to some extent shaped and affected by, yet not fully determined by, these discourses.

One example is what I call *practices of sacralization*. There is an important yet often neglected devotional strand within Modern Yoga that is derived to a significant degree from Śrī Vaiṣṇavism. In another recently published article I have shown how Tirumalai Krishnamacharya, one of the founding fathers of Modern Yoga, introduced partly novel ways of integrating Vaishnava-inspired devotion with postural practice, movement, chanting, and so on.⁴ There are many other examples of practices of sacralization that are, for various reasons, typically not highlighted—often giving way to more health-centred views by both Yoga teachers and Yoga researchers alike.

Talk about ‘spirituality’ is nevertheless often present, more so in face-to-face interactions in various Yoga environments. However, this talk will then often serve many different purposes. For example, one use of the notion of ‘spirituality’ is to claim status and authority, thereby legitimating a particular position—as lineage holder, teacher, and so on. At other times it is used to articulate experience, deepening and changing its emotional impact in various ways, as well as

³ Nevrin, Klas 2004: ”Från frälsning till kroppsligt välbefinnande – Medikalisering av modern hathayoga” in *Chakra: Tidskrift för Indiska Religjoner*, nr 2, Lund: Lunds Universitet, s. 70-84.

⁴ Nevrin, Klas 2005: ”Krishnamacharya’s Viniyoga: On Modern Yoga and Sri Vaisnavism” in *Journal of Vaishnava Studies*, nr14:1, New York: Folk Books, s. 65-94.

changing the performative nature of one's acting. This overlaps to some extent with motivational incentives. That is, when something (a behaviour, an experience, and so on) is termed 'spiritual', it often means that the person in question wants to claim its importance, to one's own life as well as in relation to others' lives. All these uses need to be analyzed, and they do not necessarily come together in a straight-forward manner. Moreover, uses of the word 'spiritual' ultimately depend on specific cultural-historical backgrounds in which the words 'religion' and 'spirituality' have a particular relevance and meaning. My point is that 'sacralization' not only entails that particular practices and experiences are *interpreted* in and through discourses that involve 'religion' and/or 'spirituality', but also that when being 'framed' and 'performed' in relation to some notion of the 'spiritual', this also entails specific ways of employing imagination and emotion.

Empowerment

I believe that the notion of *empowerment* is centrally important for understanding how MPY practitioners, in different ways, deal with existential and social challenges of their lives. First, specific body techniques offer ways of countering more detached modes of experience; i.e., habits of experiencing that involve a reduced bodily presence and a detached stance to one's emotions. To transform these habits is to be *existentially empowered*, as a form of enhanced self-expression, and may involve the rise of more spontaneous and complex ways of experiencing, only sometimes interpreted by practitioners themselves in terms of 'spirituality'. I refer to these practices as forms of *immersion* that typically produce a heightened sense of involvement with the body. Second, MPY also offer ways of increasing self-confidence by *socially empowering* the individual. This may serve to establish attitudes and choices vis-à-vis some issue that is of concern to the individual. These changes are typically initiated by the ways in which a particular style of MPY may offer collective emotional support, but also by encouraging specific forms of behaviour understood to be "yogic" (as opposed to, say, "egoistic", "weak", "addicted", or "unhealthy"). Sonoral, architectural, natural and iconographical environments play a crucially important role in that they inspire, affect and make possible both forms of empowerment. Moreover, both forms of empowerment involves processes of *re-habitation*: experience is *changed* when practitioners learn new ways of making sense of life situations and of relating to their bodies. This re-habitation is accomplished by using a variety of body techniques, but their effectiveness also depends on intersubjective relations and on a host of context-specific circumstances, including of course reflection. Individuals can learn to do, think and imagine differently, which also means they will *feel* differently.

Existential empowerment and sacralization. As already stated, practices that counter tendencies towards hyper-detachment offer a means of empowerment that is sometimes

interpreted by practitioners in terms of ‘spiritual experience’. However, it is important to note that certain styles will not be talking about ‘spiritual experience’ at all. Indeed, highly competitive environments will encourage cultivation of quite different modes of experience. The crucial difference will lie both in the specific nature of the practice—*how* the body is attended, which techniques are used—as well as the settings and pedagogies involved.

Yet, both forms of empowerment are often related to *sacralization*, i.e. ways of performing in particular situations that will involve affective states such as “sacredness” and “purity”, and which are influenced and shaped by material and social environments. When practices are framed and reflexively engaged with as being ‘spiritual’ they can be seen as *ways of performing that involve the practitioner in experiencing a situation, or a variety of situations, as being imbued with a particular significance*. This significance is often expressed in terms such as “meaningfulness”, “wholeness” and “trust”. It is a modulation of experience that attunes the practitioner to a significance made present through specific ways of performing, which in turn depend on the use of particular artifacts in a particular environment. That is to say, objects, material environments and imagery are utilized in ways that establish an imaginative-affective poise which qualitatively differs, for the one involved, from the way certain situations are otherwise (or have hitherto been) experienced. The specific ‘significance’ involved is of course dependent on a particular cultural habitus. Yet it is nevertheless *experienced* in some way; it is not simply ‘believed in’ or ‘projected on the world’.

Sacralization is of course articulated through and associated with existing ‘religious’ discourses to some extent, for example in relation to a notion of ‘the sacred’. However, in order to avoid both an *essentialist* understanding of these practices, as in traditional phenomenology of religion, as well as a social-constructionist overemphasis on discourse, we have to recognize how experiences and places are *sacralized*. In this view, practices of sacralization are not responses to ‘the sacred’ but involve, as Kim Knott puts it, a “creative process whereby people make a meaningful world that they can inhabit”.⁵ However, this also challenges us to take into account how people are perceptually and emotionally involved, and not just discursively or cognitively. This means that ‘sacredness’, say, is always *experienced*, corporeally enacted and physically sensed as sacred, and this will typically also involve socio-political dimensions.

Cognitively oriented views typically claim that fundamental conceptual structures are responsible for the production of the ‘sacred’, thus organising certain domains of experience. However, it might be argued, as I do, that cognitivist views ultimately rely on an empiricist understanding that misrecognizes the ways in which experience is multi-dimensional, dialogical and performative. By contrast, we need to recognize how environments, actions and objects are

⁵ Knott, Kim 2005: “Spatial Theory and Method for the Study of Religion” in *Temenos: Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion*. Vol. 41:2, pp. 153-184.

always already significant, due to inherited body schemas, cultural conditioning, perceptual patterns, kinetic qualities, and so on. And these significances can be elaborated, not least through learning new imaginative, reflective and affective skills.

For example, the French existentialist Gaston Bachelard talked about how space is made ‘intimate’ when seized upon by the imagination.⁶ Through imagination we can involve ourselves in ‘spaces of belonging’; living images of protected intimacy and secure openness. In an embodiment-oriented view, these are kinesthetically dependent images that can be drawn upon in various ways, and which under certain circumstances will be designated and enacted as ‘spiritual’. This is, then, an imaginative act which re-inforces and synthesizes certain emotions, not least with the help of particular memories, narratives, and so on. As such, practices of sacralization rely on both culturally and bodily dependent images. In other words, I argue that so-called ‘spiritual’ experiences and practices of sacralization, involved in Modern Yoga, are never simply a matter of *belief*, but can be understood as habit-dependent skills of imagination, emotion and reflection, and that involve the body in various ways.

There are many examples of sacralization in Modern Yoga. As already mentioned, the use of chant and mantra is becoming increasingly common. This will typically instill certain responses, as a bodily sense of participation, a patterning of ‘lived time’ and ‘lived space’. The use of modal music and mantra recitation, for example, typically involve practitioners in experiences of stillness or calm (though not necessarily so, of course; depending on the person in question), which may in turn be articulated and reflected upon in terms of, say, ‘spiritual calm’. It is not that the music is objectively ‘spiritual’, but it has certain properties that may involve the listener in culturally acquired and skill-dependent emotional responses. And these will be *further* elaborated when framed and reflexively constituted as ‘spiritual’.

Another example is that one typically is expected to ‘de-stress’, to leave work and other things behind when one enters the yoga mat, to experience time differently; to ‘take one’s time’. Moreover, this is habituated through repetition; ideally daily. One might begin practice with sitting silently, or chanting mantras, and there is often a tendency to ‘slow down’, to ‘speak more silently’. Sometimes there might be open encouragement from a teacher to feel ‘the room’ and the duration of the practice *differently* from ‘ordinary’ space and time. These orientations will also be influenced and re-inforced by the use of iconographical and other material aspects of the environment, such as particular lighting, icons of Hindu deities, or by bodily practices that are conducted with a specific style. For example, sometimes sun salutations and chanting are performed in a devotional style, directed towards an imagined ‘other’, such as the sun or God.

⁶ Bachelard, Gaston 1994 (1964): *The Poetics of Space*. Boston: Beacon Press.

These are important differences, because the re-habituating process will be very different for two persons that conduct similar body practices in different ways. For example, when postural practice includes the use of specific breathing techniques (such as *ujjayi prāṇāyāma*), this will influence the quality of attention and the imaginative processes involved, perhaps somewhat differently if compared to when the very same postures are performed in a devotional style, perhaps with the use of mantras, or compared to when they are executed in a more athletic and competitive setting.

In other words, whatever the nature of the particular practice at a school of MPY, the situation will also be crucially important. Particular teaching and practice situations will involve a learning of local rules and norms, differing between pedagogies and individual teachers. The resources involved will supply practitioners with concepts and images useful for interpreting and articulating one's experiences, as well as providing for future reference. For example, some teachers will encourage an atmosphere that is conducive for specific emotional repertoires and introspective moods, perhaps openly encouraging specific forms of behavior that are understood to be 'spiritual'. Others will, by contrast, emphasize a more athletic style of practice, perhaps by encouraging more competitive attitudes, avoiding the word 'spiritual' altogether.

Social empowerment and sacralization. As mentioned, some MPY schools offer ways of supplying for self-confidence, trust and solidarity, as forms of *social empowerment*. To understand this exclusively in therapeutic terms, however, is to misrecognize that some practitioners *actively* resist the use of control and stress in ways that may have social repercussions. For example, when the individual is socially empowered this may serve to establish attitudes and choices vis-à-vis some issue that is of concern to the individual. Through various social interactions taking place at a Yoga school one might be encouraged to "be oneself", to avoid drugs and other bad habits, such as unhealthy diets or relationships, but also, on occasion, to resist consumerist attitudes. Moreover, to relax into an emotionally supportive atmosphere may enable one to learn to more openly express emotion, thus counteracting what is sometimes called 'dramaturgical stress'. Some styles of MPY will establish a particular 'emotional rapport' between teacher and student—or between practitioners. This can create an atmosphere of intimacy and trust (or competitiveness, depending on the style of practice). When these events are framed in terms of spirituality, this will typically heighten the potential for emotional energy that can be achieved by the group, not rarely by centering practice around a socio-metric star (the 'great Yogi') that focuses and further enhances this emotional energy (this is a term used in *emotion studies*; e.g., as developed by Randall Collins). It will also attach a sense of urgency and importance to the activities and attitudes which

one chooses to adhere to. Thus, the use of the word ‘spiritual’ will make Yoga practice seem more serious and important, supplying it with a degree of significance that the less existentially charged notion of ‘health’ typically cannot.

Practices of sacralization are often involved with various forms of symbolic capital, the ‘micro-political’ dimensions that include struggles for authority and status within the social field of Yoga. Especially important, in this particular field, is *physical* capital, a notion developed by sociologist Chris Shilling,⁷ drawing on Bourdieu, to acknowledge the increasing commodification of the body and the important links between identities and the social values accorded to bodies. Aspects of ‘the body’ can become objectified and constituted with a specific ‘spiritual’ value within the field of Yoga. This may involve various aesthetic qualities of the body, or more athletic qualities such as fitness, strength and stamina.⁸ Even specific behaviours can be sacralized in similar ways, attached with a symbolic significance and thus *felt* as ‘yogic’.

‘Health’ and sacralization

Especially interesting, for our purposes, is the complex ways in which notions of ‘health’ and ‘spirituality’ interact with each other. For example, the use of the notion of ‘healthiness’ is prevalent for indicating status and achievement. Health is then typically used as an all-inclusive and vague catch-word, ranging in meaning from fitness to self-realization. Many practitioners also tend to assume that everything that has do with health is somehow good. However, uncritically using the notion of ‘health’ may have dire consequences; for example by disguising the impact of unjust social hierarchies, or resulting in a normalization that rejects physically and socially divergent features. Moreover, when every-day life is increasingly interpreted in terms of health, then issues that perhaps should concern personality and taste are attributed moral significance. In MPY, normativity will occasionally involve the naturalization of an idealized, aestheticized body—the so-called ‘body beautiful’.

As Yoga researcher Sarah Strauss has argued,⁹ the strongly therapeutic ethos engaged in by many Yoga practitioners has blind faith in Yoga’s potential for the individual to take control over her health, and this ‘utopianism’ is often claimed without jeopardizing the individual’s conventional status in society. Indeed, it will often re-inforce highly questionable norms. Interestingly, one way this happens in Modern Yoga is by associating so-called ‘spiritual progress’ with certain skills—such as being ‘balanced’, ‘strong’, ‘independent’, ‘flexible’ and ‘successful’.

⁷ Shilling, Chris 1993. *The body and social theory*. London : Sage Publ.

⁸ See Nick Crossley’s 2001: *The Social Body: habit, identity, and desire*. London: Sage Publ.

⁹ Strauss, Sarah 1997: *Re-orienting Yoga: Transnational Flows from an Indian Center*. Unpublished dissertation, University of Pennsylvania. (UMI 9814918)

These are norms that re-inforce individualistic attitudes and which are quasi-scientifically legitimated when connected to healthist rhetorics.

Admittedly, some styles of Modern Yoga work contrary to this, for example when certain teachers *explicitly* emphasize the uniqueness of one's body over and against idealized bodies. Nevertheless, the general tendency is to be influenced by largely unconscious ideals concerning the individual's possibility of living a healthy life without addressing socio-political issues. Moreover, because the precise meaning of being healthy is rarely discussed explicitly by Yoga practitioners, it is simply assumed what it means. In practice it seems that most important is to *feel* healthy. Those who *feel* 'strong', 'pure' and 'energized', and look accordingly, are simply assumed to be healthy, thus receiving a fair amount of status and recognition.

The problem is of course not that someone feels strong and confident, but when associated with 'spiritual' progress it attributes unquestionable status and legitimacy to certain normative ideals. For example, the epithet 'spiritual' will typically be used in ways that conflate the difference between, on the one hand, the sense of 'self-ease' that can arise due to postural and breathing practices, and, on the other hand, the self-confidence that arises due to accumulation of symbolic and physical capital.

Individualism and psychologization

Now, let us return to the issue of Modern Yoga being dismissed as an individualist re-interpretation of traditional forms of Yoga practice: This is certainly true to the extent that one has turned away from renunciatory ideals and ascetic practices, and away from a particular 'tradition' which mediates specific social and ethical objectives. Yet, we should not underestimate the manifold ways in which Modern Yoga is received, meant and experienced by individual practitioners. Indeed, an analysis that takes into account imagination and emotional engagement will recognize that there are practices which attenuate ego-centric structurings of experience by offering a heightened sense of involvement with the body. The crucial problem, it seems to me, concerns how we are to understand the precise nature and influence of psychologization, often being referred to as an exclusively individualist re-orientation. We also have to challenge highly generalized accounts of 'individualism', thus looking closer at the often very diverse meanings and applications of this notion, particularly its rhetorical nature in the study of modern religion.

Indeed, it seems perfectly possible that de-traditionalized practices, arising in part due to modernity, attend to and develop "individualities" in a variety of ways, sometimes actively resisting egocentrism. Thus I would argue that 'getting in touch with one's feelings', say, does not necessarily mean to indulge in desires. Moreover, self-assertion can be combined with an emphasis on relationality rather than on self-indulgence. In dealing with questions like these,

however, we have to be able to account for how individuality is *experienced* and *intersubjectively performed*, rather than simply conceived or talked about.

In summary, I think we should indeed take a critical position against the ways in which many MPY schools resort to psychologized and health-centered models of the human being. In general, the assumptions that such models rely upon are rarely acknowledged or critically discussed by practitioners themselves; particularly the ways in which the person is regarded as a “distinct unit” or “isolated self”, in effect offering an ideology of separation, as Jeremy Carrette and Richard King have argued.¹⁰ However, we also have to take into account that there are many styles and schools. Similar ideas and concepts may serve very different *practical* purposes in different settings, and are heavily dependent on the particular experiential processes that are involved.

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¹⁰ Carrette, Jeremy & Richard King 2005: *Selling Spirituality. The Silent Takeover of Religion*. London & New York: Routledge.