

PERFORMING THE YOGASUTRA - TOWARDS A METHODOLOGY FOR STUDYING RECITATION IN MODERN HATHA YOGA

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INTRODUCTION

In the following I will explore various methodological approaches to studying recitation and chant, with particular focus on recitation of the *Yogasutra* in the context of modern yoga and the schools often grouped under the heading of *Viniyoga*. *Viniyoga* are the teachings and practices primarily associated with the South Indian Brahmin Tirumalai Krishnamacharya (1888-1989) and his son T.K.V. Desikachar (b. 1938). Although the epithet has lately been abandoned by Desikachar it is still in use by many of his students. For our purposes, suffice it to say that I take “*Viniyoga*” to be an appropriate name for a family of schools descending from Krishnamacharya and Desikachar, which are growing rapidly in popularity. It is one of the styles of modern yoga in which the use of the *Yogasutra* (YS) is of central importance, being employed as a constant reference for practices and various forms of intellectual guidance. In *Viniyoga*, the YS is recited using techniques of Vedic chant common in the South Indian environment, which considerably elevates the status of the YS vis-à-vis the Vedas.⁽¹⁾ The historical background to this has to do with Krishnamacharya’s and Desikachar’s own affiliation with *Sri Vaisnavism*. Traditionally, this form of devotionalism (the lineage being traced to Nathamuni, claimed ancestor by Krishnamacharya, via Ramanuja to Vedantadesika) has neither regarded YS as being of central importance, nor has it engaged with practices typically associated as a whole with the YS, i.e. Patañjali’s “Ashtanga Yoga”, or eightfold practice. On many accounts, then, are we witnessing innovation, both in terms of the role played by reciting YS (using Vedic chanting techniques), as well as the way in which the devotionalism of *Sri Vaisnavism* (i.e. *bhakti-yoga*) is coupled with an unprecedented emphasis on practicing Ashtanga Yoga (Nevrin 2005), and then as influenced by the developments of Hatha Yoga, i.e. extended use of postures (*asana*) and breath control (*pranayama*). Also, the use of chant and recitation is apparently becoming more and more common in contemporary religious settings, and thus a theoretical and methodological framework would perhaps prove useful to other contexts and studies than my own.

CHANT AND RECITATION

Before turning to methodological issues I will present a few examples of the popularity of chant and recitation in modern settings, and a more detailed example of how it is approached within Viniyoga. Krishnamacharya regarded chant as being of central importance, even as a universal tool to spiritual growth that transcends the barriers of religion, gender, social structure, caste and age (Desikachar 1998). Srivatsa Ramaswami, a Yoga teacher and student of Krishnamacharya, notes: “My impression is that the number of people who take to bhakti yoga through chanting, meditation, worship, and study are increasing much faster than those who take to physical yoga alone”.(2) Several centers for studying “Vedic Chant” are being established, primarily in England and the USA, many of whose founders have been taught by Krishnamacharya’s son Desikachar. Even within the globally successful “athletic” styles of *Iyengar Yoga* and *Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga* one encounters practices that involve chanting. Several prominent teachers mix these styles with other forms of bodily and mental training, and use chanting and music as a significant part of their practice. There is also a growing number of “chant artists”, most famous being perhaps Jai Uttal and Krishna Das, who conduct chant workshops at Yoga retreats and link their performances to both Indian classical music and a variety of Hindu philosophies. Others have emphasized the potential of using *mantras* more specifically for purposes of “healing”, for example Thomas Ashley-Farrand and Shri Anandi Ma. We might also mention the popularity of *Transcendental Meditation*, *ISKCON*, *Siddha Yoga*, *Kundalini Yoga*, and the *Radhasoami* traditions, as well as various other groups that claim to use *nada-yoga* or *shabda-yoga* (“Yoga of Sound/Word”)—all of which utilize the repetition of mantras, meditation on sound and music, or chanting/recitation in one way or another.

In Viniyoga both recitation of the YS and so-called “Vedic Chant” have a prominent place. The *Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram* (KYM) in Chennai — an institute led by Desikachar which offers programs in yoga practice, classes on the YS and other texts, as well as therapeutic yoga treatments — has published several translations and commentaries of the YS (e.g. Desikachar 2003; 1995), including CD:s for learning how to recite it. They have also published a “Vedic Chant Companion” (Desikachar 2000). Recitation of YS is presented in Viniyoga as being an important way of transforming the text into a “personal experience”, whatever that might entail.(3) Recitation of the YS is also considered as the first step to learning the meaning of the text. This is no doubt based on methods of scriptural study traditionally used within many Indian religious settings, but one which is nevertheless new to Western practitioners and thus might involve at least partially new elements.

In a lecture given at Colgate University,(4) Desikachar refers to chant as being particularly well-suited for *kaliyuga* (the present degenerate age), “since the body is not the same today as it was when the ancient people designed the *asana* [physical postures], it is better to have some choices”.(5) Desikachar also mentions Manu (author of a famous text on *dharma*, “correct human conduct”) and his exhortation to recite the name of God (*samkirtana*) as a “practical way to change a disturbed mind”. Desikachar then links this to an interpretation of yoga as the “conscious attempt to focus the mind in a desired direction”, in which chant is a simple system which does not “require all the rigors of disciplining the body, the breath, the food habits, etc”. Desikachar argues that chant is the “first of the non-*asana*, *pranayama* techniques that *Patañjali* has offered us — the use of sound as a means to understand and rectify the mind, to understand ourselves. That is why chanting is very popular in India, and I must say, it is becoming popular elsewhere also”.(6)

Desikachar’s descriptions give rise to important questions. For example, how are “Vedic chant” and recitation of YS in Viniyoga related to various antecedents within the Hindu fold? Is there a form of “sonic theology” (Beck 1993), implicitly or explicitly, in use in Viniyoga?

Drawing on the work of Gerald Bruns (1992: 126f) we could distinguish between “listening” and “critical reading”: Critical reading presupposes *interrogation*; that is, in a critical reading one places the text “under one’s scrutiny—makes it, literally, a suspect” (p. 126). Listening, by contrast, is a form of *participation*, in which to understand implies to disappear into the text, be surrounded by it. This takes place especially through recitation. The point is not primarily to understand the text but to achieve a “gnostic experience” of it. Moreover, it is through reading aloud that one attempts to enter into a more intimate form of relationship with the text, making it accessible through the mediation of the voice. In a theological context the intention is to overcome even this mediation so that nothing stands between the reciter and God. By emptying oneself of one’s own interior monologue one can become completely absorbed into the language of the text. The reader is not simply an agent of recitation but is “‘included in the verse’—internal to the text, consumed by it, not working on it at a distance but, on the contrary, worked on and actualized by it ... ” (Bruns 1992: 132). Ultimately, the whole purpose of recitation, in this view, is to “go beyond interpretation altogether to the experience of God’s speech itself” (Bruns 1992: 132), a transcending of the experience of one’s separate existence.

“Listening” could be understood as a form of pre-objective bodily experiencing of sound (Merleau-Ponty 2002; Csordas 1990, 1993). This is a form experiencing and feeling the sounds “themselves”, so that the meaning of a sound “lies not in what it points to but in the pointing itself” (Zuckermandl 1956: 68). Paul Stoller has described this as avoiding to “spatialize” sound: it

is to hear not an “object”, or representation of an object, but to stay with the sensation of the sound itself (Stoller 1989: 103). Thus, non-spatialized sounds are experienced as forces manifesting *through* the body— “penetrating” the individual as it were—and this creates a sense of participation (Stoller 1989: 120). Reading a text by “listening” to it means to bodily (and, by interpretation, “existentially”) experience it. This is what Judith Kovach (2002) terms *explicitly reflexive intentionality*: focus is directed toward the phenomenality of the bodily experience itself, and may, under certain (interpretive) circumstances, result in a “religious” mode of experiencing profound selfhood (and which, one might add, could also be interpreted as self-transcendence).

I believe it is this form of “listening”—emphasizing the transformative aspects of receiving a text as it were—which is implied in much Viniyoga chanting, and which may also be compared to similar traditions within Hinduism. For example, Guy Beck (1993) argues that in many Hindu traditions sacred sound is believed to operate in a mysterious way, a “soteriological modus operandi” which involves a sonic act informed by a sonic theology (p. 212f). A variety of discourses within the Hindu traditions include description of the universe as an emanation from cosmic sound, prescription of methods of individual salvation through the use of sonic techniques, and speculations about the nature of sound as an eternal substance in itself.

For example, several Yoga traditions give central importance to meditation on sacred sound in the form of *Nada-Brahman* (“Sound-Brahman”). This so-called *Nada-Yoga* forms the basis for a large variety of sonic meditational techniques, which are shared by both classical and Hatha Yoga. Especially the *Yoga Upanisads* and the three major Hatha Yoga texts (*Sivasambhita*, *Gherandasambhita*, and *Hathayogapradipika*) include speculation on and application of Nada-Yoga and Nada-Brahman (Beck 1993: 208). In fact, says Beck, they share an underlying theology and epistemology of sound as Nada-Brahman, which, taken together, is by-and-large an esoteric physiology of sound that denotes advancement along the path of salvation for the Yogi: “Sound as reverberation beckons the aspirant toward deeper penetration of himself, as he awakens toward higher and higher levels of sonic perception” (p. 97). Beck argues that the practice of Yoga as outlined in the *Yogasutra* reflects an ongoing concern with the use of sacred sound and linguistic symbols as fundamental aids in meditation.⁽⁷⁾ His analysis also indicates that the theory of sacred sound has a distinctive profile in Yogic meditation, in stark contrast to monistic Vedanta (p. 89-90).⁽⁸⁾

The orthodox understanding of Vedic mantras is that they are ultimately authorless but nevertheless believed to generate their own “intentions” as they are uttered (Beck 1993: 33-4): In other words, “Vedic language manifests intentions without anyone ever having spoken them” (Taber 1989: 158).⁽⁹⁾ In this view, mantras are a sacred language with “numinous power” and “self-generating capacity”. According to Bhartrhari, for example, the Vedas are understood to be

a manifestation of the ultimate Word (*shabda*) that underlies phenomenal existence (Carpenter 1992: 19). Because of this,

the Veda is more important for what it *is* and for what it *does* than for what it “means”. It is first and foremost a reality of sacred power. Vedic speech is thus not primarily referential. It does not express an individual author’s intentionality, but rather makes manifest the objective structures [...] through which the world of time and space is related back to its ultimate ground. It does this not by describing these structures, but by bringing them into existence through the injunctive power intrinsic to the sacred speech. (Carpenter 1992: 20)

Thus, “understanding” the Veda, according to Bhartrhari, has little to do with elucidating its meaning for a religious community (Carpenter 1992: 18-9). The Veda is a source of sacred power more than a source of religious meaning, a reality to be appropriated through memorization and (participatory) recitation rather than through (critical) reading and reflection.

These examples, admittedly only rudimentarily presented, imply emic perspectives that variously emphasize the transformative, symbolic and transactive dimensions of chant and recitation (see also note 21). As such they might be helpful as a basis for analyzing the use of chant and recitation in Viniyoga. A more in-depth use of traditional sources, as well as a closer look at how these are related to in modern Yoga, is thus suggested for future research.

Turning again to Viniyoga, Desikachar insists that “*japa* [repeating short phrases] is the recitation of some symbolic higher force”. Because of “the power of sound”, whether it is the syllable ‘*Om*’, “or something else that talks about a higher force”, reciting these sounds “take us to a higher plane”. Desikachar claims that this has nothing to do with religion, “it is simply a fact that sound has an effect on the mind”. Moreover, “chanting will take you back to yourself, and you will begin to see yourself in a way you haven’t seen before”. This is to enter into a “higher self”, “a Divine Consciousness that exists deep inside us”,⁽¹⁰⁾ and, “it is one of the important teachings that God is as much inside as elsewhere. [...] *Om* does not represent me, my mind. It represents something beyond. It represents God. So when I produce that sound, *Om*, with feeling, it has to take me back to what it represents”.⁽¹¹⁾ Despite Desikachar’s own claims (that this has nothing to do with religion), his views *do* in fact seem to imply a form of sonic theology and thus invites for a more detailed comparison with the traditions he refers to, as well as an analysis of the “religious” beliefs that apparently sustain it. It is my contention that Desikachar’s views on chanting, and his pedagogy in general, is motivated by the devotionism of his background in Sri Vaisnavism (see Nevrin 2005). Although his teachings are intended such that his students may accept practices without also adopting specific devotional attitudes or religious beliefs, various chants are nevertheless referred to as being directed towards higher powers (the Lord, nature, the sun, the moon, and so on). Seeing his students chant during a three-day course

on Yoga philosophy (April 2005, Stockholm), led by Desikachar and his family, it was clear to me that chanting served different purposes to different people: devotional, aesthetic, emotive, contemplative, and so on. In an interview that I conducted with Desikachar at the time (050420) he stated that the primary purpose of chanting texts is to learn them in an aesthetically pleasing manner that simultaneously may be helpful to calming the mind and help keep the student interested. However, with sustained practice of Yoga, which of course includes chanting, the student ripens and may eventually choose to resort to devotion, if he or she so wishes to. Desikachar himself views devotion as the highest and most noble aspiration, albeit not a prerequisite for practicing Yoga.

Despite their increasing popularity in many contemporary religious strands, chant and recitation, as well as their kin “sound mysticism”, is surprisingly unexplored. Even though sonic and oral dimensions historically have been a central feature of many religious traditions, the subject as part of modern Yoga has not attracted much attention. It does however seem to raise several important questions: What is the relation of contemporary usage of chant and recitation toward their historical forms? Why the increasing interest? Is the development perhaps part of a process of *aesthetization*, exciting pleasurable sentiments among practitioners? Or is the use of chant and recitation part of a turn toward more devotion-oriented styles of yoga, however without invoking more explicit notions of God or divinity?

Recitation of the YS is but one example within this development, but an interesting one. It seems to be a very complex phenomenon, as it involves various intricate relations between text and performance, between pre-reflective and discursive understanding, and so on. Moreover, performative dimensions have often been underestimated when studying texts, and many prejudgements involving how to approach the ritual use of texts have predominated until only very recently.

A PERFORMANCE APPROACH

In the following I will focus on how a “performance approach” might be useful to studying recitation. I argue that recitation benefits from being analyzed primarily as a form of “performance”, rather than as a “ritual”, because a performance approach a/ makes possible fruitful comparisons with other performances (such as meditation and worship); b/ avoids problematic dichotomizations that are otherwise often connected with notions of ritual; and c/ is receptive and flexible enough to recognize changing circumstances instead of using an a priori scheme to which data is adjusted. Nevertheless, I also suggest that the term “ritualization” might be useful in certain circumstances, when referring to a specific inflection or mode of

performance. The crucial difference is that *although recitation is perhaps typically “ritualized”, it is always relatively so, not absolutely, and, moreover, it may be so in different ways.*

The incentive for performance approaches is to highlight the “doing”, the interactive aspects of ritualized situations, understood in terms of participatory models rather than just communication ones (Hughes-Freeland 1998: 15). Catherine Bell argues that performance approaches should acknowledge both personal (conscious as well as unconscious) and cultural strategies used by the actor, and be alert to the micropolitics of the act, “the ways in which people manipulate traditions and conventions to construct an empowering understanding of their present situation” (Bell 1998: 217). This version of the performance approach, one which Bell (1997, 1992) elsewhere has referred to as being influenced by practice theory (e.g. Bourdieu), is particularly attentive to how and why a community ritualizes a set of actions, and to the way that ritual may serve as a vehicle for the *construction* (rather than their *expression*) of relationships of authority and submission.

Although these aspects, suggested by Bell, are most certainly important, I believe there are yet other important features that may be acknowledged when using performance approaches. This entails that the notion “performance” be used with a specific purpose, differing from at least some common uses.⁽¹²⁾ According to several scholars “performance” should preferably be used as an *essentially contested concept* (Carlson 1996: 1-2) and as a heuristic category useful for generating comparisons within the broader spectrum of social actions (Schechner 2002). This is to avoid using absolute distinctions and to allow for a greater amount of complexity. It thus implies both a more open-ended analysis that acknowledges the often indistinct boundaries between various types of performances, as well as the great variety of functions and structures that may or may not be involved, as well as a focus on specific instances, looking at what is most distinctive about a situation instead of claiming universal features. I will attempt to unfold this view in the following.

Performances may be said to *typically* involve characteristics that distinguish them from ordinary or everyday action (using the word “typically” indicates that these characteristics are debatable, essentially contested as it were, but nevertheless may serve as a point of departure):

- a. The action or set of actions are **highlighted** in some way by the people involved (named, pointed at, displayed, and so on); i.e. an action which is somehow distinguished from or set apart from everyday life, or “framed” (Carlson 1996: 20);

- b. these actions consist of **twice-behaved behaviors** (Schechner 2002), i.e. strips of behavior which have been exaggerated, simplified, made repetitive, rearranged, elaborated, and so on;
- c. this, in turn, relies on a form of **double-agency** or **double consciousness**, i.e., placing the action in comparison with a model of that action, whether explicitly or implicitly;
- d. many performances also seem to involve what Lawrence Sullivan (1986) calls **synesthesia** and Thomas Csordas (1999) refers to as **embodied imagery**; this concerns qualities of knowledge that are not restricted to cognitive operations or beliefs but rather involves forms of “embodied knowledge”, i.e., the bodily, emotional, practical or pre-reflective forms of “knowledge” that may be involved in a performance as it were.

To the extent that recitation involves the above-mentioned characteristics it could then also be compared to other performances that evince similar traits, this being a primary purpose of the performance approach: to supply for fruitful comparisons with other (highlighted) social actions, yet simultaneously allowing for an open-ended analysis that emphasizes what is most distinctive about the situation (cf. Bell 1998: 216).(13) For example, if recitation shares characteristics with other performances, such as meditation, play or devotion, in what ways is it different? And in what ways do specific instances of recitation differ from each other?

A second purpose of the performance approach is to challenge the assumption that certain activities (e.g. “ritual”) can be a form of thoughtless, non-cognitive behaviour, merely a vehicle for thought but not a mode of thinking itself. It attempts to avert the dichotomization between beliefs and practices, or between mind and body, by recognizing that “knowledge is necessarily embodied, intersubjective and active” (Schilbrack 2004: 2). In fact, contrary to mind-biased models of the world, action or “doing” may well give rise to belief (cf. Olsson 2000).(14) Instead of viewing knowledge solely as properties of the mind (and thus as distinct from bodily life), it is to acknowledge that our *primary* grasp upon the world consists in practical know-how, an irreducibly embodied way of knowing (Crossley 2004: 35-6). As sociologist Nick Crossley puts it, “To know or understand, in this primary sense, is to be able to do something, and that doing is necessarily a bodily doing. Furthermore, it is often a doing which is done without reflective or conscious intention” (2004: 36). In other words, this challenges us to address familiar topics from a different standpoint, “a methodological attitude that demands attention to bodiliness even in purely verbal data” (Csordas 1999: 148). Body techniques (and in my view chant and recitation most certainly belong here) can be seen as forms of practical and pre-reflective knowledge, rendering the world intelligible and constituting it as a meaningful context for action, thus “anchoring” us in situations which are simultaneously physical and social (Crossley 2004: 37).

Moreover, they can tap into and affect our intentional, emotional, and imaginative lives.(15) Emotionally, they modify our relationship to the world (“ways of acting towards, perceiving, thinking about, and being affected by the world”) by invoking or (alternatively) circumventing a particular emotional state (Crossley 2004: 42f).

RITUALIZATION

So where does this leave us regarding “ritual”? In my view the notion of *ritual* could preferably be used to refer to a specific mode or quality of action—i.e. as an inflection of a particular performance. Instead of imagining “ritual” as a specific set of events, in other words consisting of universally similar structures or functions, a view that is common in various accounts of ritual in the study of religion,(16) I suggest instead that we focus on the notion of *ritualization*. Here I will attempt an interpretation of this notion by drawing primarily on the work of Humphrey & Laidlaw (1994), Rostas (1998), Schechner (2002) and Hughes-Freeland (1998). In my view, ritualization may thus be understood in terms of three overlapping tendencies in the mode of a performance:

1. the tendency to emphasize *constraint* (or formalization), but always in tension with creativity (or contingency, playfulness, improvisation) (17)
2. the tendency to emphasize the distancing of the actor from intention (i.e. selflessness, *intentionlessness*), but always in tension with deliberateness (e.g. in aesthetic commitments)(18)
3. the tendency to emphasize the *efficacious*, but always in tension with the non-instrumental (e.g. entertainment)

The three tendencies all share certain similarities, and there are no definite boundaries between them. In the approach that I wish to use, “performance” includes many actions within a broad spectrum, an overarching term for various types of situated and highlighted social action which may be ritualized to different degrees and in different ways, i.e. be *variously* oriented towards constraint or creativity, towards intentionlessness or deliberateness, towards efficacy or entertainment — depending upon the situation. It seems that it is a specific mixture of these aspects, the varying degrees and forms in which they are manifested, that influence whether we associate the action with being, for example, ritualized, playful, or aesthetic. They are all, however, various modes of performing. Comparing them on such grounds might give rise to interesting results of research.

TEXT-PERFORMANCE HYBRIDITY

The tensions involved in the relationship between *text and performance* are important when studying recitation of the YS. According to some interpreters the paradigmatic case for performance-oriented research is precisely to counter the primacy of the *text metaphor*. However, we should avoid polarizing text against performance, in itself a reflection of dichotomizing thought and action.⁽¹⁹⁾ Avoiding their polarization thus entails recognizing the often very complex relations that exist between them. Following Dwight Conquergood (2002),⁽²⁰⁾ among others, I choose to view the issue in terms of a hybridity, in which the notion of inscription may serve as a link between the two.

As argued by Leo Howe (2000), elaborating on the work of Clifford Geertz, *inscription* is the fixing of meaning, making it more or less permanently available through some process of recording, whether materially (for example with YS, in written commentaries) or non-materially (for example by mnemonic devices, or by practices and acts that induce specific emotional or pre-reflective attitudes, and so on). In this view, a text is primarily approached as a struggle about who can get what inscribed. By excluding alternatives, what is inscribed becomes authoritative, legitimate and even obligatory (p. 65). However, this fixation can never be completely permanent, because even established texts are always open to subversion and revision, reinterpretation as it were. This entails viewing a text more in terms of an event or a field of transgression, rather than as a material object or thing. From the other point of view, performance (such as recitation, bodily practices, and so on) must also be a site for the production of meaning and authority, rather than a means of echoing meanings which already exist in a pre-given text. Especially important to this understanding is that inscription is as much about doing something or other, it is just as applicable to acts, skills, abilities, and so on, as it is to meanings. An action may thus be inscribed in bodily movements, habits, memories and experiences of people (p. 65-66).

Moreover, according to recent methodologies (e.g. Crossley 1996 and Csordas 1990, 1993, 1994, 1999) intended to overcome the Cartesianism that hampers so much research, also performances must be seen as ways of establishing or producing knowledge, related in various ways to the ideational knowledge dealt with in texts.

This is precisely the point where text overlaps with performance. To polarize text and performance entails that text is associated with fixity of meaning whereas performance is then seen either as attempts of evading the authority of the text, or alternatively being dominated by it. However, this view is untenable, simply because both text and performance involve processes of inscription that are always relatively open to revision. Texts cannot be simply a matter of fixity, nor can performance be exclusively associated with either replicating the fixity of a text or with

overcoming it. Similarly, both text and performance involve the production of meaning and knowledge, and thus cannot be opposed to each other on such grounds.

These issues point out the complexity of relations between text and performance, and the ways in which thought and action overlap on many levels. They also indicate the importance of studying any text *as performance*, i.e. as practice or event, and not simply as an object or thing, thus urging us to acknowledge dimensions of “liveness”, dialogicality, presence, agency and embodiment.

RECITATION

Following this discussion of the text-performance hybridity, I argue that recitation is not simply a matter of constraint, fixity, or repetition. It is rather the *tendency* towards constraint (eliminating alternatives, downplaying the role of improvisation) that associates it with a form of “ritualization”, not that it is (or ever could be) totally repetitive or fixed. Citation, whether of words or of deeds, can never be completely exact, though it may of course be more or less so.

One way of looking to different processes of inscription involved in recitation, *as performance*, is to acknowledge various modes of receiving a text. For example, we may look to the personal and communal roles that texts are typically bound to, as well as moving from an exclusive attention to the intellectual realm to including also that of the senses. As William Graham (1987, 1989) has argued extensively, it is essential to approach scriptures as a part of living experience, not least when they have their life in oral-aural reception. He thus calls for a greater openness to the sensory and performative dimensions of scripture, and for greater attention to the implications of their internalization through recitation and memory. From a different perspective, this is to acknowledge, argues Cort (1992), that the understanding of a particular scripture in a particular context is not always regarded as an intellectual one, based upon study and reflection, but sometimes more of a devotional one, based upon praise and worship of the salvific knowledge contained within the text(s). Obtaining this salvific knowledge is then believed to be less of an epistemological process than an ontological process of causing the qualities of knowledge to arise in one’s soul through ritual devotion, veneration, and approval.

Miriam Levering (1989: 13-4, 59-60) proposes a useful model which acknowledges four different modes of receiving a text: informative, transformative, transactive, and symbolic.(21) This model indicates the various purposes also of recitation that may be involved, spanning from devotionism to ways for guiding and sustaining daily practice, from assuring the practitioner’s diligence to protecting or fostering the community. For example, recitation may simultaneously be understood as being meritorious and also work as an aid to concentration for the purpose of

realizing the wisdom symbolized by the text. Or recitation can simultaneously serve to manifest symbols of “ineffable Truth”, as well as symbolize the intentions and role of the community.

Turning to the YS, it is clear that it may well serve many different purposes, such as recitation, chanting, oral instruction, memorization, textual and scholastic study, contemplative guidance, and so on. We may also observe the tensions between treating the text as a unified philosophical treatise or as a teaching in “oral” style, between being an object of scholastic study or a loosely interpreted practice-text (Sarbacker 2001: 133). Stuart Sarbacker has even suggested that we might assume from the structure of the text that “the foundation for the study of the YS lies in the commitment of the text to memory, a practice that in itself is surely transformational” (2001: 159-160; also cf. Chapple 1994), memorization perhaps having a deeper psychological impact (and not just being a “vehicle” for communicating the text’s message). In line with this, Norman Sjoman (1986) has developed an interpretation which is basically compatible with Deikman’s (1982) view of meditation as moving from the object mode to a receptive style of cognition. According to Sjoman’s interpretations, in classical Yoga wisdom is seen as a synthetic function of memory, the last stage of a learning process. Throughout the learning process the passive aspect of mind is emphasized as a practical learning technique, assuming that perception is passive and thinking is active (1986: 199). The final stage of memory is a form of heightened perception or vision, an imprint brought about through bringing memory under control (p. 210). Memory is then eradicated in favour of (passive) perception (p. 206). In this interpretation, *samadhi* (the transparent mind-state which is the goal of classical yoga) is a “function of memory” (p. 208), “transforming memory into a form of direct perception” (p. 210). Memorization is thus seen as a particularly efficient tool for enabling *samadhi*, demonstrating the close relationship between recitation and meditation.(22) Although this arguably is more of an emic account, and as such might be interpreted in terms of embodied imagery, synaesthesia or pre-reflective understanding instead, it clearly points to the importance of taking seriously the transformative aspects of recitation in the case of YS.

The various modes of receiving a text are connected to the text-performance hybridity in recitation. Though these modes are not exclusively a matter of authorization or power, it is nevertheless often the case, manifesting as different forms of inscription. Various performance approaches to ritual that acknowledge this, such as Bell’s (cf. also Tambiah 1979), will surely prove useful to a study of recitation. However, I also believe that their approaches must be complemented by dimensions of embodiment and pre-reflective qualities of knowledge (Merleau-Ponty 2002), as suggested by the work of Thomas Csordas, Nick Crossley, and Lawrence Sullivan.

In summary, recitation may involve both communicating meaning as well as “doing” something or other, whether this entails establishing beliefs, identities, hierarchies, and so on, or transforming the individual's perceptions and motivations, perhaps by triggering synaesthetic experiences. Crucial to a multiperspectival study of recitation thus involves, at the very least, both attention to bodily dimensions and the complex relationships between intertextuality, embodiment and intersubjectivity, as well as an acknowledgement of the various modes of receiving a text.

ENDNOTES

- (1) Although in other contexts one may distinguish between “recitation” and “chant” (the latter being relatively closer to “song”), in Viniyoga these terms are used interchangeably. In fact, the techniques used in Viniyoga for reciting text passages, performing invocations or prayers, chanting Vedic mantras, and so on, are basically the same. It is important to recognize that aligning recitation of the YS with “Vedic chant” may have its reasons: Patañjali's *Yogasutra* is presented in books published by the *Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram* (KYM) as being a presentation or clarification of the “boundless wisdom” of the Vedas, in turn attributed to the voice of God. Thus the YS is approached as being based on messages from the Vedas that would help alleviate suffering. Although this (partly problematic) contention is not an unusual one, it does seem to have a special significance when connecting Yoga with Vedic traditions (*vaidika sampradaya*), a link often emphasized by Krishnamacharya as being centrally important to his understanding of Yoga (see e.g. Srivatsan 1998: xvi). Using the same techniques for chanting Vedic mantras and the YS thus seems to establish this connection more firmly. Moreover, traditionally only so-called revealed texts (*sruti*) were recited using these techniques, which might indicate that recitation of the YS is here seen as *efficient in itself* for transforming the individual towards liberation (i.e. as *moksopaya*, “a means for liberation”).
- (2) From [<http://www.yogajournal.com/views/680.cfm>] viewed at 2004-03-16.
- (3) “Personal experience” is of course a notoriously difficult notion (see e.g. Halbfass 1990: chp 21). Questions here concern what is in fact intended by using it, and in what ways it relates to forms of “privatization” in other modern settings, or to the “rhetoric of experience” claimed by Sharf (1995; 1998) and questioned by Gyatso (1999).
- (4) See http://www.yogastudies.org/public_html/articles-6.html for a transcription of this lecture, given by Desikachar in August 1987 at the “Viniyoga America Seminar”, Colgate University (a liberal arts college in New York). This lecture has also been published in *The Viniyoga Letter* - November 1988 (Nr. 5), although this journal has not been available to me.
- (5) Of course, many of the *asana* are not nearly as “ancient” as they are often claimed to be. See Norman Sjoman (1999) for an interesting study of the development of *asana* within the Krishnamacharya-lineage.
- (6) However, it must be pointed out that the use of “sound” mentioned in YS is OM (*pranava*), whereas the extent to which Vedic chant or recitation of YS itself is regarded as liberative is unclear (cf. Carpenter 2003).
- (7) Moreover, Beck argues that Vacaspati's commentary on YS I.36 provides an important missing link in the gradual evolution of a distinctively Yogic meditation on sacred sound. It is, Beck claims, the earliest appearance of *Nada-Brahman* in the classical Yoga tradition, and the first incidence of *nada* within the six systems of Indian philosophy as meaning more than physical voiced sound.

(8) In these Yoga traditions, Highest Brahman is “sound-ful” and half-measured (*ardha-matra*), whereas in Advaita it is boundless (*amatra*) and “soundless” (*ashabda*). This is to be understood, says Beck, in juxtaposition with *Maitri-Upanisad* 6.22, as well as the *Mandukya-Upanisad*. The former posits Higher Brahman as being “sound-ful” (*param brahma=nadah*) and redefines the fourth stage (*turiya-sthanam*) of AUM as being of half-measure (*ardha-matra*) rather than of no-measure (*amatra*), as found in the *Mandukya-Upanisad*.

(9) Cf. the approximate definition of *mantra* proposed by Jan Gonda: “word(s) believed to be of ‘superhuman origin,’ received, fashioned and spoken by the ‘inspired’ seers, poets and reciters in order to invoke divine power(s) and especially conceived as means of creating, conveying, concentrating and realizing intentional and efficient thought, and of coming into touch or identifying oneself with the essence of the divinity which is present in the *mantra*” (Gonda 1975: 259). Moreover, in the Vedic context, they are considered, “not products of discursive thought, human wisdom or poetic phantasy, but flashlights of the eternal truth” (ibid: 251).

(10) Desikachar also uses the Vedantic concept *sacidananda*, even though it seems to conflict in different ways with the philosophy of the *Yogasutra*. As such, this is one example of the influence of his background in Visistadvaita Vedanta (the philosophy of Sri Vaisnavism) on his understanding of Yoga.

(11) From public lecture at Colgate University (see note 4). Cf. Desikachar’s view of “OM” with the above-mentioned approach of “listening” to the sensation of the sound itself: the physical manifestation of the word *is* significance before it *has* significance (Stoller 1989: 120). Also cf. Charles Peirce’s notion of *index*: the sign OM is “really” or “physically” connected to that which it represents; representing its object by a real correspondence with it. (See the *Commens Dictionary of Peirce’s Terms*, at <http://www.helsinki.fi/science/commens/dictionary.html>)

(12) Such as when performance is linked more or less exclusively to “theatrical” or “public” performances, or when (in the study of religion) it is associated with, for example, “schamanic” performance (and then understood as the opposite of “liturgic ritual”).

(13) Arguably, a performance approach also allows us to acknowledge those features of “ritual” in the modern world, such as fragmentation of meaning and diversity of individual experience, that according to Tomas Gerholm (1988) are not covered in classic theories of ritual.

(14) As an imaginative-embodied act, ritual (or performance) may entail “a ‘suspension of disbelief’ and an investment of imagination which opens up ‘alternative realities’ and experiences” (Crossley 2004: 45), allowing us to invest meaning and structure in the world in an embodied and sensuous way. By tapping into and concentrating the imagination, ritualized performances invest the world with a recognizable sense and structure, situating agents imaginatively: “The ritual frames the experience which, in turn, shapes the belief” (Crossley 2004: 44). Although often romanticized, this aspect of performance (or ritual) may certainly lend itself to manipulative processes and authorities, and thus result in less attractive commitments on behalf of the actor. Also cf. Conquergood (2002), who argues that it is only a “simplistic dichotomy that would align texts with domination and performance with liberation” (p. 151).

(15) This might sound like a causal influence of the “exterior” on the “interior”; body techniques “tapping into” our “inner life”. But Crossley relies here on a rather complex Merleau-Pontian view of mind/body. Suffice it to say that in Merleau-Ponty’s (2002 [1962]) view the subject is primordially involved with the world, as a Being-for-the-world, originally existent and prior to reflection. The subject is the *lived body* (*Leib*, in phenomenology distinguished from *Körper*), or rather, a “subject-object”, an ambiguous existence in which subject and object are constantly interchanging and overlapping. The body is constantly present in all action and experience, it is always with us, making perception possible in the first place. The (lived) body is itself the subject to which any object is revealed.

(See Bengtsson [2001] for an accessible interpretation of Merleau-Ponty in Swedish.) Moreover, which is important to a study of (ritualized) performance, on the level of perception there is not yet a subject-object distinction—we are simply in the world—and analysis must begin with the pre-objective act of perception rather than with already constituted objects; a perception that is always embedded in a cultural world (Csordas 1993: 137). It is only due to reflection that a subject-object distinction is “constructed” as it were. In Crossley’s terms (1996) this is the move from “radical” to “egological” intersubjectivity.

(16) In traditional approaches to ritual, which rely on a more or less essentialist treatment, ritual has often been seen as a definable, unified, and coherent phenomenon; that is, “as a matter of relatively scripted actions, structurally distinct from nonritual action and possessing certain apparently universal properties (like formality, repetition, and divine beings)” (Bell 1998: 215). In a performance approach this conception of ritual must be avoided.

(17) Compare Schechner’s (2002: 25, 45, 71-2, 77, 79) proposal that all performance is constituted by the interaction between “ritual” and “play”. My account draws extensively on this idea, although it differs from his interpretations in several aspects. Also compare: “The re-evaluation of the ritual process by means of performance produces an emphasis on agency and creativity, which does not preclude structural constraint. Instead of a process which moves from one to the other in time and space, creativity and constraint are simultaneous, co-present, and co-dependent in performative practices embodied in different forms of participation” (Hughes-Freeland 1998: 22-3).

(18) It seems that intentionlessness may come in various guises (*pave* Humphrey & Laidlaw). There is, for example, the difference between “simple” or “dutiful” absence of self-interest, on the one hand, and the “devotional” sacrifice of personal intention to some higher willpower, such as God (corresponding perhaps to the differences between *dharma* and *bhakti*) (Erik af Edholm, personal discussion). Moreover, deliberation (as in aesthetic commitments), when pushed to its extremes, ultimately seems to end in precisely (an experience of) the absence of personal intention; thus closing the circle between intentionlessness and deliberation as it were. When an act is increasingly loaded with meaning, by overdoing the action or putting more into it than is absolutely necessary, at a certain level there seems to arise a similarity with non-intentional or “selfless” modes of action. See Rostas (1998: 91-2, *passim*) for an interesting discussion of the relationship between different states of (non)intentionality involved in dances by Mexican Concheros. It is also my own experience, from improvising music, that over-deliberated action may at times result in selfless experiences of the body-mind, associated with a form of intentionlessness. In performance theory (Carlson 1996: 25-6) this has variously been spoken about in terms of 1/ the merging of action and awareness, 2/ the loss of a sense of ego, 3/ a sense of “enchantment” or “captivation”, or 4/ an awareness of the body set free from normal structures of control and meaning. Particularly useful to an analysis of this oscillation process in performance may be the terms “flow” (Csiszentmihalyi) and “ilinx/vertigo” (Callois). Also related to this issue are the phenomena of *synesthesia* and *embodied imagery*, mentioned above. Finally, the approach to performance as proposed by David George (1999), which explores similarities between performance and Buddhist meditation, may also prove useful.

(19) For example, Schieffelin (1985: 707) seems to come dangerously close to polarization when he argues that “symbols are effective less because they communicate meaning (though this is also important) than because, through performance, meanings are formulated in a social rather than cognitive space, and the participants are engaged with the symbols in the interactional creation of a performance reality, rather than merely being informed by them as knowers”. This is to recognize the importance of nondiscursive elements for the efficacy of ritual or performance. Thus, “many things are cognitively accepted in performance precisely because they are dramatic, impressive, or mysterious rather than because their rational significance is understood” (Schieffelin 1985: 722).

(20) Conquergood (2002) urges us to embrace *both* texts and performance. In his view, it is “textocentrism” that is the problem, not texts themselves. We should certainly challenge the hegemony of textocentrism, “but not by replacing one hierarchy with another, the romance of performance for the authority of the text” (p. 151). In fact, “Performance studies is uniquely suited for the challenge of braiding together disparate and stratified ways of knowing” (p. 152), and thus the challenge is to refuse and supercede the “apartheid of knowledges, that plays out inside the academy as the difference between thinking and doing, interpreting and making, conceptualizing and creating” (p. 153). Also compare Csordas’ (1990; 1994; 1999) *cultural phenomenology*, concerned with “synthesizing the immediacy of embodied experience with the multiplicity of cultural meaning in which we are always and inevitably immersed” (1999: 143). This is to acknowledge “being-in-the-world as a dialogical partner for representation”, and whereas “semiotics gives us textuality in order to understand representation, phenomenology gives us embodiment in order to understand being-in-the-world” (Csordas 1999: 147).

(21) The *informative* mode primarily takes a pedagogical view of the text as transmitting an authoritative teaching or guidance. It involves studying and taking seriously the authority and message of a text, i.e. the way a text is allowed to shape one’s understanding of the world. In the *transformative* mode words are seen as useful only in so far as they mediate immediate perception of truth that lies beyond the grasp of words. The text is seen as a catalyst for personal transformation or to an encounter with an Other. In the *transactive* mode, certain words (for example, in the Indian context, *mantra*, *dharami*) are believed to supply empowerment and protection. Thus, they may variously be received “in order to obtain protection or powers; to create merit; to bring benefit to others; to enact confession or repentance; to make vows; to offer devotion and praise; and to express and bring into effect relationships between members of the community living and dead, and between those members and transhuman agents” (Levering 1989: 72). It involves a belief in causing things to happen, or various relations to be established—e.g., reciting or reading enables one to act in the power of the ultimate. Finally, in the *symbolic* or presentational mode the text itself is seen as the locus of divine presence and power, thus becoming the object of offerings and reverence. The text symbolizes truth or power, e.g. when the text is itself seen as a symbol of the ultimate. In my view, Levering’s four-fold characterization has the advantage of distinguishing in more detail than Gill’s (1993) informative and performative dimensions. The latter would thus tend to conflate the symbolic, transformative and transactive modes of reception into one single, the performative. This would have the result of not being able to distinguish between recitation as a transactive or transformative act, or as a combination of the two (cf. Levering 1989: 81-2 and 92 n.1).

(22) Compare also David Carpenter (2003: 29f), who notes that there is an intimate link between *svadhyaya* (“self-study”) and the notions of recitation found in the Vedic tradition, a practice understood as a form of *tapas* itself.

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