

2004 Modern Yoga Reading Group at the Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge

Between March and June 2004 the DHIIR hosted a series of eight bi-monthly reading groups on the topic of Modern Yoga. The sessions were facilitated by the DHIIR Director Elizabeth De Michelis and Research Assistant Mark Singleton, and were attended by both academics and yoga practitioners. Reading matter was circulated prior to each meeting (see full list of readings below). The format for the sessions themselves included a brief presentation on the selected texts and their context by the facilitators, followed by a group discussion. The sessions were divided into three main parts: 1. Mystical India (three sessions), 2. Modern Yoga Theory and Practice (two sessions), 3. Medicine, Health and Healing (three sessions). The material for the first two parts was based largely on research already carried out at the DHIIR, while the final part turned towards current and pending topics of research.

The first three sessions revolved around the construction of "mystical India", and were based on key texts of neo-Hinduism and esotericism. The first session examined the Governor General of India's introduction to the first English translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* (1784), and an important text by the Brahmo Samaj leader K.C. Sen on his "New Dispensation" (1881). Also discussed were some of Mme Blavatsky's comments on yoga, from the viewpoint of the Theosophical Society (also 1881). In the next meeting, we considered two landmarks in the creation of a popular Modern Yoga mythology, namely Paul Brunton's *A Search in Secret India* (1934) and Paramahansa Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi* (1946). These extremely popular and evocative texts generated a wave of enthusiasm in the West for mystical India and, in particular, for the practice of yoga, and are illustrative of the way in which Modern Yoga took shape in the popular imagination during the twentieth century. In the third session our focus turned to the myth-busting work of later sceptical academics and "insiders" like Agehananda Bharati (1961) and Gita Mehta (1980). Also discussed was Lee Siegel's tongue-in-cheek depiction of the making of a modern-day faux-guru (1991).

In the next two sessions, entitled "Modern Yoga Theory and Practice", we brought the critical perspective gained from the previous sessions to bear on two seminal yoga texts: Vivekananda's *Raja Yoga* (1896), and B.K.S. Iyengar's *Light on Yoga* (1966). In each case, the basis for the discussion was Dr De Michelis's groundbreaking new study, *A History of Modern Yoga* (2004, Chapters 6 and 7 respectively).

The final three sessions, "Modern Yoga: Medicine Health and Healing", introduced several of the DHIIR's new research areas, mainly explored by Mark Singleton during research carried out in 2003-2004. In the first session we considered whether psychology (particularly the Jungian and "humanistic" varieties) and Modern Yoga can be seen to issue from a common social and intellectual context,

and what implications this has for our understanding of both. The second meeting examined the incorporation of Western relaxation therapy into yoga, based on an article on the history of "relaxationism" by Mark Singleton. In the final session we looked at the influence of post-Reichian body therapies and energetic healing on evolving yoga discourses, as well as conducting a round-up of the topics covered at the previous meetings.

The wide range of backgrounds and experience among participants made for extremely stimulating discussions throughout the series, and elicited a number of important reflections regarding the phenomenon of Modern Yoga. The need for critical awareness and suitable analytical tools was keenly felt, as was the necessity of bridging the gap between "ancient" and "modern" forms of yoga. The series also made plain the importance of improved co-ordination and dialogue between academics, senior teachers and Modern Yoga schools.

READINGS

MYSTICAL INDIA

1. The Roots of Mystical India (4/3/04)

Texts: Hastings W., Introduction to the *Bhagavad Gita* (1784)

Sen, K.C., "We apostles of the New Dispensation" (1881)

Blavatsky H.P., "A Hindu Professor's Views on Indian Yoga" (1881)

Handout: Coleman, *The New Buddhism* (2001)

2. Popular Mystical India (18/3/04)

Texts: Brunton, P., *A Search in Secret India* (1934)

Yogananda, *Autobiography of a Yogi* (1946)

3. The Sceptical Insider (1/4/04)

Texts: Bharati, A., *The Ochre Robe* (1961)

Mehta, G., *Karma Cola* (1980)

Siegel L., "West/Fall, The Reflections of Professor M.T. Bannerji 2", *Net of Magic* (1991)

MODERN YOGA THEORY AND PRACTICE

4. Vivekananda and the early Modern Yoga Manual (15/04/04)

Texts: De Michelis, E., *A History of Modern Yoga* (2004), Ch.5

(Optional), Vivekananda Sw., *Raja Yoga* (1896)

5. B.K.S. Iyengar (29/4/04)

Texts: De Michelis, E., *A History of Modern Yoga* (2004), Ch.6, pp.194-207 and Ch.7

(Optional) Iyengar B.K.S., Intro to *Light on Yoga* (1966); *Light on Pranayama*

(1981); *Light the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* (1993)

MODERN YOGA: MEDICINE HEALTH AND HEALING

6. Psychology and Yoga (Samadhi Model) (13/5/04)

Texts: Jung, C.G., "The Psychology of Eastern Meditation" (1943); "Yoga and the West" (1936)

Fuller, R.C., "Powers of the Hidden Self, Psychological Spirituality" (2000)

Bouanchaud, C., extracts from *The Essence of Yoga* (1997)

7. You Must Relax! (27/5/04)

Texts: Singleton, M., "Salvation through Relaxation" (unpublished)

8. Bodywork and Energetic Healing (Prana Model) (10/6/04)

Texts: Reich, W., on Body Armour (from *Character Analysis*, 1933)

Raskin, D., "Emotions in Motion" (*Yoga Journal*, April 2004)

Jenner-Fust, A., "Second that Emotion" (*Yoga, Mind-Body-Spirit*, Oct. 2003)