

Yoga and the Meaning of the Body

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I recently entered Mircea Eliade's *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* (1958)¹ and within the context of this Somatics-Hermeneutics seminar was amazed at one of the opening trains of thought. In the Foreward (pp. xxix-xxx) we read:

For over a century, the greater part of the scientific and philosophical effort of the West has been devoted to the factors that "condition" the human being. It has been shown how and to what degree man is conditioned by his physiology, his heredity, his social milieu, the cultural ideology in which he shares, his unconscious – and above all his history, by his historical moment and his own personal history. This last discovery of Western thought – that man is essentially a temporal and historical being, that he is, and can only be, what history has made him – still dominates Western philosophy.

What Eliade claims is certainly true in Hermeneutics. In a scholarly survey of the roots of interpretation theory, Palmer (1969, p. 111) states with emphasis:

Experience is intrinsically temporal (and this means historical in the deepest sense of the word), and therefore understanding of experience must also be in commensurately temporal (historical) categories of thought.

The point Palmer is trying to make is that any experience (or text, work of art, life situation, bodily comportment, etc.) can only be understood within the horizon of a past and a future; indeed, "this is not a matter of conscious effort but is built into the structure of experience itself" (1969, p. 111).² This belief in an inescapable, almost fated, "conditioning" became the basis for Behaviorist Psychology and its contemporary offshoot computational/representational neuroscience, which has positioned itself as the very ground of Western scientific ontology.

Yet, Eliade and the yogic tradition he represents would wholly disagree with this sort of materialistic determinism: "Now, this problem of the "conditioning" of man (and its corollary, rather neglected in the West: his "deconditioning") constitutes the central problem of Indian thought" (p. xxx). This thought was applied "to learn how far the conditioned zones of the

¹ I had become familiar with Eliade through some of his other, perhaps more well-recognized, works: *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, *Myth and Reality*, and *The Sacred and the Profane*. It turns out that he was a scholar of Yoga long before these publications; therefore Yoga was the epistemological foundation of his thought and practice.

² Perhaps this is why Jimmy Page used to say, "There is no escaping our roots."

human being extend and *to see if anything else exists beyond these conditionings*” (p. xxxi, original emphasis). The purpose of Yoga was to effect this deconditioning.

But it goes even deeper than that: We’re probably all familiar with the Indian term *maya*, translated as ‘illusion,’ referring to the illusory or ephemeral nature of material reality. Well, “looking more closely, we see that *maya* is illusion because it does not participate in Being, because it is “*becoming*”” (p. xxxii, added emphasis). This becoming could also be considered as “temporality” – an *historical* becoming. “What modern Western philosophy terms “being situated,” “being constituted by temporality and historicity,” has its counterpart, in Indian philosophy, in “existence in *maya*” (Ibid). Isn’t this astounding? What Western philosophy deems to be “the structure of experience itself,” Indian philosophy dismisses as illusion. Eliade sums up this train of thought succinctly: “*maya* is not only cosmic illusion but also, and above all, historicity; not only existence in the eternal cosmic becoming but above all existence in time and history” (Ibid).

Perhaps we ought to pause and take stock of what’s being revealed here: If historicity is illusory, that is only because it is a forever ‘becoming,’ an ongoing temporal unfoldment of eternal Being. The Being is the underlying solid ground, and so ought to procure our utmost attention. Eckhart Tolle (2004) explains this nicely with his image of “the power of the Now.” According to Tolle, historicity, or “the world,” presents itself in an ever-flowing pageant of “forms.” Many of these forms are quite beautiful; others can induce pain – but what all these forms have in common, ultimately, is that they all arise and then pass away, *every single one of them*. Why give them or the historicity within which they’re embedded any credence? It’s all temporary; there is only the ever-present Now of Being. That’s why Eliade closes his train of thought by referencing the *Bhagavad Gita*, sacred text of India, with its repeated admonition: Once a seeker of knowledge becomes aware of this predicament, “[she] must at all costs find *in this world* a road that issues upon a transhistorical and atemporal plane...What we wish to emphasize now is that all these solutions represent various applications of Yoga (p. xxxiii, original emphasis).

In reference to the Somatics seminar – what could possibly be the meaning of the body in all this? The body is just another form in the pageant of historicity; it is a temporal vehicle; it will one day pass away – so why give it any credence? Indeed, William James, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), documented how piety often could be measured by the degree to which the body could be flagellated or abused as a demonstration of indifference – or even revulsion – to this fleshly physical manifestation, often portrayed as a “prison,” or at least an obstacle to true divinity, which will be discovered no doubt in some glorious, disembodied *after-life*. Then why does Yoga give the body so much attention?

The answer can be found by emphasizing that the practicing yogi is seeking liberation *in this life*, in the present condition; therefore, the body, as a locus of experience, can be regarded

as a welcome means to liberation. Swami Saraswati (1997, pp. 10-1) explains it this way: “The ultimate purpose of yoga is the awakening of *kundalini-shakti*, the evolutionary energy in man. Practicing asanas stimulates the chakras [foci of the energetic body], distributing the generated energy of kundalini all over the body...Hatha yoga, therefore, not only strengthens the body and improves health but also activates and awakens the higher centres responsible for the evolution of human consciousness.” Consciousness, then, is intimately associated with the body, not just the brain, and can be advanced through working *with* the body – and who would disagree that advancing consciousness is a path toward liberation?

Feuerstein (2008, p. xxviii) speaks of “psychospiritual technologies” that are developed by the yogi. “Psychospiritual technology is applied knowledge and wisdom that is geared toward serving the larger evolutionary destiny of humankind by fostering the psychospiritual maturation of the individual.” Once again, this consciousness expansion – facilitating “the larger evolutionary destiny of humankind” – is a process that is cultivated *within* the body. Feuerstein goes on to quote a contemporary adept, Da Free John, to give an indication of just how important the body is in this process:

The key to mystical language and religious metaphor is not theology or cosmology but *anatomy*. All the religious and cosmological language of mysticism is metaphorical. And the metaphors are symbols for anatomical features of the higher functional structures of the human individual.

Those who enter deeply into the mystical dimension of experience soon discover that the cosmic design they expected to find in their inward path of ascent to God is in fact simply the design of their own anatomical or psychophysical structures. Indeed, this is the secret divulged to initiates of mystical schools (p. xxix, added emphasis).

And you thought Somatics was simply a way to gain more flexibility!

The potentials of this internal sensing of the body, as universal metaphor, as the path to liberation, are finally consummated after many years of disciplined meditation, for which the asanas of Hatha yoga are preparatory stages. “Some states of consciousness go beyond proprioception, beyond the body, and it is precisely these states that the Yoga adepts seek to cultivate. Enlightenment or liberation itself is definitely a body-transcending condition. Here the entire universe becomes a “body” for the liberated being” (Feuerstein, 2008, p. xxix).

I would suggest that the best course of action is to accept things as they are: somehow we became embodied beings living within some sort of temporal, historical process. So much drama! I have to admit, it’s hard for me to take it seriously. Am I really supposed to perpetuate the traits of my parents through hereditary determinism? Am I supposed to identify with the legacy of my nation through cultural indoctrination? Am I really supposed to believe the reductionist materialism that has become entrenched as global technocratic imperialism? Am I really going to suffer the same karma as all these entities?

When I sit still and close my eyes and go deep within, all that seems far away – or more precisely, it's of a completely different qualitative character than the reality I can be sure of. Sometimes, if my mind becomes real still, I can sense a sort of energy body that seems to be super-imposed on top of my physical body. This energy body is the same body I've recognized in dreams, after I realize I'm dreaming, and go find a mirror to look in to see what my eyes look like...

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