

Julius Evola

Yoga, Immortality, & Freedom

Yoga, may well be said to be that portion of the heritage of Indian wisdom—nay, of the wisdom of the East as a whole—that is most familiar to Western Europeans and to Americans. Even newspaper readers and readers of popular fiction of the Somerset Maugham type, have an idea—confused though it may be—of Yoga and the yogis. Ever since the opening of the century they have attracted the attention of the West. And here it should be noted that at first, rather than of the serious studies made by Oriental scholars, it has been a question of superficial works written less with a view to making the theory known, than for acquainting the reader with the techniques followed to secure results on the spiritual plane and to produce supernormal phenomena. It is known that among these popularizers a foremost place is held by Ramacharaka, the pseudonym used by an American. His works however have often been mere profanations and distortions. The real substance and final aims of Yoga are often set aside in favor of commonplace applications and adaptations such as physical training, psychic training, the secret of success, deep breathing as a branch of hygiene, mental treatment of disease, Americanized Yoga, and so forth.

Perhaps still more regrettable has been the insertion of Yoga in a vaguely spiritualized framework or in a purely fanciful one. In this field the record has been beaten by the *Autobiography of a Yogi*, by Yogananda, a book on the level of fairytales for children which in the West has scored a bookselling success and has been translated into several languages. As Yogananda is a Hindu, it should be noted that the spate of Western popularizers and adapters has been followed by another of writers exported from India, attracted abroad by the environment prepared by the Western popularizers. This second group has given rise to a dangerous misunderstanding. Persons lacking the knowledge required for discriminating have thought that the mere fact of being a Hindu sufficed to make a man an authority on Hindu doctrines. Now, for intrinsic reasons due to the essentially esoteric nature of real Yoga, there is good reason to presume that those Orientals who feel the need of popularizing such doctrines and who become, so to speak, commercial travelers, peddling their goods in the West, can only be spurious exponents of their traditions. The same may be said of some Indians who

have made themselves readily “accessible” as “masters” in their own country, opening study centers, sometimes provided with typist, an administrative department, a correspondence bureau, etc. As a result of this, it often happens that those Westerners who have succeeded in penetrating and illustrating the real essence of the traditional wisdom of India are asked if they have not been engaged in the construction of some abstract ideal of their own, so different is the level of the teachings they impart to that of the authentic Indians of our day who have become the exporters and vulgarizers of the ancient wisdom.

It is only recently that scientific studies on Yoga by Westerners are keeping pace with those works of divulgation, as contributions in the domain of orientalism and the history of religions. But here we meet with the obstacle created by the “objective method” which aims at an exclusively exterior, documentary, and informative exactness. It is like undertaking the study of the geometry of solids with the means provided by plane geometry only. In the case of Yoga if the “depth dimension” be set aside, little remains but an empty husk, of little use not only in the practical but also in the theoretical field; it is little more than an object of curiosity. Nevertheless, in several Western circles which are serious and not merely interested in vague “spirituality,” the possible importance of Yoga in its bearing on the problems besetting the modern mind is beginning to be felt. Significant in this connection is the subtitle given to a collection of studies on Yoga recently published by J. Masui: “The Science of the Whole Man.”

Another work on the scientific plane recently published is Mircea Eliade’s *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* of which we wish to speak here. Having studied for three years in the University of Calcutta under Surendranath Dasgupta, the well-known author of several books on Indian philosophy and religion, and having spent some time in the ashram of Rishikesh, near the Himalayas, Eliade would seem to be in an exceptionally favorable position for dealing with this subject. Nevertheless we are inclined to think that Eliade’s qualifications for the task he has undertaken are not due to these circumstances, except as regards his mastery of philology, his knowledge of the texts, and his general information. In spite of his undoubted talents, Prof. Dasgupta is a markedly westernized Indian who follows the method of “neutral exposition,” and the ashram of Rishikesh, like others more or less accessible, is not so much a center of severe initiation and supervised practice as an environment whose atmosphere is similar to that of the “religious retreats” of the West. Eliade owes his special qualifications to another source; they derive from the fact that before going to India he had acquired knowledge of metaphysical and esoteric doctrines which as such are not of an “official” character. It is essentially to those doctrines that Eliade is indebted for some points of view that place his works on a different plane from those of most

writers on oriental ideas and the history of religions. All this, however, is not placed in the foreground. Eliade is very anxious to keep in line with the academic world of the West. Among the many hundreds of authors he quotes it would be difficult to find works that do not enjoy definite academic recognition. One might ask if this does not conceal an attempt to introduce a Trojan Horse into the citadel of official culture, an effort which would seem on the one hand to have met with success, as shown by the favorable and unusually prompt reception given to Eliade's works by those circles, but which is not exempt from the danger of "counter shocks."

Our fundamental opinion of Eliade's work on Yoga may be expressed by saying that it is the most complete of all those that have been written on this subject in the domain of the history of religions and of Orientalism. One cannot mention another that for wealth of information, for comparisons, for philological accuracy, for the examination and utilization of all previous contributions, stands on the same level. But when once this has been admitted, some reservations have to be made. In the first place it would seem that the material he handles has often got the better of the writer. I mean to say that in his anxiety to make use of all, really all, that is known on the several varieties of Yoga and on what is directly or indirectly connected therewith, he has neglected the need of discriminating and selecting so as to give importance only to those parts of Yoga that are standard and typical, avoiding the danger that the reader lose track of the essential features by confusing them with the mass of information on secondary matters, variations, and side products. Looking at it from this standpoint, we are even led to wonder whether Eliade's previous book *Yoga, essai sur les origines de la mystique indienne* (Paris, 1936), is not in some respects superior to this last one, which is a reconstruction of the former. In the first book the essential points of reference were more clearly outlined, they were less smothered by the mass of information brought together, and the references to less-known forms of Yoga, such as the Tantric and others, were more clearly pointed out.

In the new edition the scrupulous desire to omit nothing has led to the admission of matter which cannot but give a feeling of contamination. Such are the passages on the relations between Yoga and Shamanism and forms of sorcery, necromancy, and even cannibalism present in the religious practices and in the folklore and magic of the natives. Such relationships, even though so studied as to establish the due distances and show the possible "degradations of an ideology due to the incomprehension of the symbolism it contained" may be of interest to the specialist, but they cannot but trouble those who are interested in the superior and "eternal" content of Yoga. Such a reader would have preferred that all such references had been either omitted or abbreviated to the indispensable minimum.

Problems of this kind have, moreover been already dealt with by Eliade in another of his works, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, and the present references are often nothing but lengthy repetitions. They could have been avoided, thus assuring the new book a character of greater “purity.”

But for all this, the reader can clearly see here the supreme purpose of the true Yoga, which is the attainment of immortality, the “deconditioning” of the human being, absolute freedom, the active attainment of the “unconditioned.” Students of these subjects well know that in Yoga, as in Indian metaphysics in general and still more clearly in Buddhism, immortality has a quite special meaning. In a certain sense, every man is immortal, for according to the doctrine under consideration, death does not end him, but his life is reproduced in an indefinite series of rebirths. The purpose of Yoga is to destroy this immortality, replacing it by that pertaining to a state free from all conditionality, whether cosmic or divine.

Eliade calls attention to the fact that existence in the heavens, divine life, what in Western religions is conceived of as Paradise, would seem, judged by this standard, to be a temptation and an arrest: one must place oneself at a point beyond all this. In this connection he might perhaps have quoted the *Sutta* of the “Visit on Brahma” of the *Majjhimonikaya*, where this idea finds its grandest expression. Attention is also called to the part “cognition” plays in the achievement of Yoga, which confers on this achievement a character that might be described as “Olympian.” The meaning of cognition as understood by Yoga is indeed that of a “mere awakening producing nothing, which gives immediate revelation of reality,” that is to say, of the true nature of the ego, and which thus sets free (p. 42). It is therefore the opposite of a “conquest” understood in the Faustian and activistic sense, and this should be realized by many modern Western sympathizers with yoga who are following a wrong path.

The opposition between the yoga experience and the mystic experience is dearly shown by Eliade. Although he uses the word “mystic” (see also the subtitle of his previous book) in speaking of several matters connected with Yoga, this point is clearly noted by the use he makes of an original expression “enstasy” instead of ecstasy (see pp. 89 ff). “Yoga is not a technique of ecstasy; on the contrary, it endeavors to realize complete concentration, to attain enstasy.” As the meaning of “ecstasy” is “out-standing” so the meaning of “enstasy” is “in-standing,” a return to the metaphysical center of one’s own being as though resuming possession of a throne that has been deserted through that mysterious transcendental fact that Hindu tradition designates by the expression *maya*. While Eliade stresses this opposition particularly in the case of shamanism, it holds good morphologically also for the relations between Yoga and mysticism.

Thus Eliade interprets as “enstasy” *samadhi* itself, the ultimate aim of classical Yoga. And he thus also overcomes the idea of those who, knowing nothing of experiences of this kind, believe that this ultimate term is a kind of trance, a condition of reduced consciousness, almost of unconsciousness (“a zero point between consciousness and unconsciousness” as Rhys Davids said referring to *nirvana*), whereas it is really a state of super-consciousness. The strange thing is that not only Westerners have fallen into so gross an error. We have, for instance, seen D. T. Suzuki suggest an interpretation of this kind (even if in defense of Zen as a specific tendency) in relation to the Yoga of Samkhya and similar mahayanic doctrines.

It would perhaps have been useful to develop in this field a comparison between the horizons of Yoga and those of psychoanalysis. All those Westerners who believe they have made such an extraordinary discovery with their psychoanalysis (Jung goes as far as to assert presumptuously, that psychoanalysis alone makes “scientific” understanding of the learning of the East possible) should realize that the positive side of psychoanalysis had been previously discovered centuries and centuries before, by Yoga as part of a full knowledge of man, and not of that mutilated, deformed, and contaminated anthropology, which provides the basis of Freudianism and of all its more or less orthodox derivatives.

Reservations must, however, be made as regards that which arouses the Yoga vocation. From the external, historical point of view it is true that Yoga arose from the need of a practical (and we would add: active) experience of sacred things and as a reaction against metaphysical speculations and fossilized ritual. But when it comes to the existentialist motive, we are far from agreeing with Eliade when he writes: “Freedom from suffering, that is *the* principal aim of all Hindu philosophies and all Hindu mysticism” (p. 26). It may appear to be so if only the more popular exoteric aspects of the teaching are taken into account. But this is not true even of Buddhism, as we have shown in one of our works (*The Doctrine of Awakening: The Attainment of Self-Mastery According to the Earliest Buddhist Texts* [London, 1951], pp. 59 ff.); after Stcherbatsky had already shown (*The Central Conception of Buddhism* [London, 1906]) that a deeper meaning could be given to *duhka* than the vulgar one of “pain.” The very word *kliṣṭa* applied to states of consciousness to be suppressed by the practice of Yoga, properly means “impure” (in a metaphysical, not in a moral sense) and does not mean “painful.” The real starting point of Yoga (and of Buddhism itself) is the reaction of a soul aspiring to the absolute as against a contingent, unstable existence, conditioned by agitation, subject to change, existence that includes in its emotional aspects both pain and pleasure and even the beatitude of the most radiant celestial gods. What Eliade states is therefore incorrect, although the book

contains matter enough to lead us to a just view of things.

The use in the early chapters of the book of a “vegetative” analogy to describe the Yogic mode of existence, also seems to us unsuitable. Recourse to a “mineral” analogy would be better suited. It would better express Yogic immobility, the “arrest of the flow,” the concentration of consciousness on “being” as opposed to “life,” and its ritual expressions also: the immobility of the *asana*, the impassiveness of the features, etc.

It would perhaps be better, when dealing with the state of existence that has to be overcome, not to introduce the notion of “history,” an exclusively Western notion, which finds no match in the world of Hindu metaphysics. In it, as we know, the basic idea is, instead, that of *samsara*, of purely irrational becoming, which differs widely from the notion of “history” and even from the simple condition of temporality for, in the Hindu conception, *samsara* and the world of *maya* are also inclusive of states in which time, as we know it, is non-existent. We have made this remark because Eliade has a special personal notion of his own, which, though it supplies a valuable and legitimate key for the interpretation of many things in the world of myths and rites, is not applicable to all cases. We are dealing with the motive of the destruction of “history” by the return to the prehistoric and a-temporal state of the origins. This scheme can be applied wherever cyclical structures are in evidence. We do not think there is much place for it in the Yoga field. Eliade himself has what is really at issue, i.e., a “break of the level,” not only of the level of human, historical experience, whether individual or collective, but also of the cosmic level. The legitimate point of reference is, therefore, that of a doctrine of the multiple states of being, seen as a *vertical system*, whereas the idea of a pre-temporal (prehistoric) origin implies always a residuum of “horizontalism.” At a certain point in *samsara* there is an arrest; after which one proceeds not so much backwards as upwards, liberating oneself from all conditioning circumstances. A metaphysical itinerary, this, which in the ancient Western civilization was expressed by the symbolism of the journey through successive planetary spheres and the progressive “unclothing” that took place in each of them while an equivalent of this is given in the Tantric Yoga by the ascent of consciousness transported by the power of the *kundalini* through the seven *chakras*.

We have referred to Tantrism, and one of the principal merits of Eliade’s book is that it has dealt fully with this current of Indian spirituality, still little known in the West and which when it has been studied has been generally decried because of its connection with sex magic rites and the use of women. While remaining faithful to the style of “neutral” exposition, more especially in this matter, Eliade

suggests the key to interpretations of undoubted value, based always on extensive documentary evidence, as when dealing with the rites of “transubstantiation,” “polyvalent languages,” etc. So also on the matter of “hyperphysical physiology” or “subtle physiology,” which plays an important part in Tantric Yoga, Eliade holds himself afar from the materializing opinions formulated by some Orientalists and some physicians who are ignorant of the very principles underlying such notions.

But as Tantric Yoga follows a course which differs widely from that followed by classical Yoga, it would seem likely that important results might have been obtained by engaging in research on typological and morphological lines. It seems to us that in several cases the different forms of Yoga arise not only from technical differences but from a difference in the spirit that inspires them. The background, which is to some extent immanentistic, of Tantric practices differs substantially from the transcendent one of the Yoga of strict type and of patanjalian orientation. Jnana Yoga and Hatha Yoga (taking the latter in its deeper sense which is not that of “physical Yoga”) may have definite differential implications in their general vision of the world (we have referred to it in our work *The Yoga of Power*. We may set up the ideal of liberation against the more positive one of liberty (and here we may refer to the Tantric Siddha and the Kaula whose antinomianism has precedents in some veins of the most ancient Upanishads and Brahmanic literature). The stress laid on the importance of the body in its esoteric aspect may also afford a clue, while it is quite clear that the process of conferring cosmic sense on the body may have a significance of its own which must be referred back to the spirituality of the Vedic origins, and contrasts with the ascetic trends on a dualistic background.

These considerations lead us to the much debated problem of the origins of Yoga. It would seem that Eliade is inclined to believe in a non-Indo-European, non-“Aryan” origin. In his first book, this view was more stressed and was extended to cover not only Yoga but part of Hindu ascetic tendencies in general. As is known, some inquirers with racial views had already formulated the theory that all forms of asceticism and practices of mortification of the flesh were foreign—*artfremd*—to the spirituality of the Aryan conquerors of India, and that all such notions in Hinduism should be traced back to exogenous influences and to a world-outlook no less foreign—*artfremd*. At first the reference made here was to Dravidian and Kosalian natives; later on the question arose of the archaic civilization brought to light by the excavations at Mohenjo-Daro. It is claimed that among the objects found at Mohenjo-Daro there are figures in the postures—*asana*—of Yogis and ascetics, along with divinities who are not found in the Vedas, while they play an important part in many currents of Yogic and ascetic

but also devotional intonation of the later period. All this strikes us as rather problematic for we consider that in such matters morphological considerations must be decisive. Eliade writes: "Yoga, in so far as it represents a reaction against ritualism and scholastic speculation, belongs to the aboriginal tradition and conflicts with the Indo-European [i.e. Aryan] religious heritage" (p. 356). He adds "We should remember that the absence of the Yoga complex in other Indo-European peoples would confirm that this technique is a product of the Asian soil of the Indian territory" (ibid.). All this is not quite right. As regards the first point, we may note that early Buddhism was also a reaction to ritualism and speculation, but it was of purely Aryan origin, starting with the person of its founder. For the rest, the consideration of historical metaphysics must be introduced in a morphological framework that we have already outlined elsewhere (in the already quoted *The Doctrine of Awakening* and also in our *Revolt Against the Modern World*). Account must be taken of that regression of mankind from the spirituality of the origins, to which the traditions of all peoples bear witness and to which, indeed, Eliade himself makes frequent reference in the course of his researches. As a result of this regression, states of spirituality which in the beginning had an almost natural character and were at the basis of a sacramental and ritual conception of the world, were later on attained only exceptionally as the result of ascetic and violent practices. In our opinion this is the historical place of Yoga also, as *spirit*. In other Indo-European traditions it is matched by the Mysteries and initiation practices which, though varying widely in form and method, have the like significance of an experimental *opus restaurationis* and occupy the same position of Yoga when considered in relation to the origins. It may be that in the framework of Hindu spirituality, the transition to a phase of this kind, which corresponds to Yoga, was favored by exogenous influences: *favored*, not *determined*. Beyond possible exterior resemblances of themes, we must consider the possibility that, when passing from one civilization to another, they acquired a widely different meaning. Thus, for instance, it seems pretty certain that the Mohenjo-Daro civilization was essentially a "Mother civilization," a civilization of the "Divine Woman" with a tellurian or lunar background belonging morphologically to the same cycle of southern, paleo-Mediterranean, and even South-American civilizations. The classic spirit of Yoga is, on the other hand, exclusively virile and uranic. We have knowledge of an asceticism which was known also to the Mother civilizations (from the Maya to the Babylonians). But it had a character of mortification which is quite absent from Yoga. Even the central theme of that civilization, the Divine Woman, revives in Hinduism, through the Tantric metaphysics, in a strongly spiritualized form which would be unaccountable if it be not related to the Aryan heritage and to the Upanishads

themselves, while its original features survive only in the reemergence of popular orgiastic or devotional cults.

The examination of those problems would lead us far afield. But in any case it seems to us that Yoga should be considered only as an integral part of Indo-European spirituality of the purest kind. For this reason also it seems to us that the search for relations with the drosses of Shamanism as they are present in the origins of the Aryan peoples. Or elsewhere, is of no interest. The only thing of interest, as we have said, is the definition of the autonomous features of a spiritual phenomenon which should be examined there where it arose in conformity with its "idea" and therefore in its typical imperfection, liberating itself from empirical conditioning factors.

After this glance at the contents of Eliade's new book we are tempted to inquire of him a somewhat prejudicial question: to whom is the book addressed? As we have openly declared, it is a fundamental work for specialists in the field not only of Oriental research, but also in that of the history of religions. But in his introduction Eliade states that the book is addressed also to a wider public and he speaks of the importance that a knowledge of a doctrine such as that of Yoga may have for the solution of the existential problems of the modern Westerner, confirmed as that doctrine is by immemorial experience.

Here complications arise. To meet such a purpose it would be necessary to follow a different plan and to treat the matter in a different way. A Westerner who reads Eliade's book may be able to acquire an idea of Yoga as "*la science intégrale de l'homme* [the integral science of man]," he may acquire knowledge of a teaching that has faced in practice as well as in theory the problem of "deconditioning" man; he will thus add yet one other panorama to the list of the many modern culture has provided him with. His interest will perhaps be more lively than the "neutral" interest of the specialist; he may flirt with the aspects of a "*spiritualite virante*." But on the existential plane the situation will be pretty much the same as it was before, even if the information available be deeper, more accurate, better documented. The possibility of exercising a more direct influence could only be looked for from a book addressed to those who have shown an interest in Yoga and similar sciences not because they seek for information but because they are seeking for a path; a book that in this special field would remove the misunderstandings, the popular notions, the deviations, and the delusions spread by a certain kind of literature to which we referred at the beginning of this article; a book displaying the accuracy and knowledge that we find in this work of Eliade, in as far as it is an exposition kept within the limits of the history of religions. Such a book has perhaps still to be written. But even so the essential need would

not be met, for it is the unanimous opinion of the true masters of Yoga that the key to their science cannot be handed on by the written word.

East and West, vol. 6, no. 3 (1955): 224–30.

Translation anonymous, edited by Greg Johnson

