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Book Review: "Zeit und Geschichte im Visnupurana"

Anand Nayak

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Christians among the contributors are more in number than the Hindus. But it is a praiseworthy venture.

Anand Amaladass, S.J.
Madras

Meditation. Klaus Engle. Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1995.

MEDITATION IS NO longer an exclusive religious and spiritual practice today. It is offered, taught, and practised in a variety of milieus and groups of people in search of spiritual well-being, in psychological and psychiatric therapies as well as in physical training centres and even in sports clubs. Engle's work tries to counteract this modern reductionism of what is fundamentally a spiritual practice with a spiritual goal. Its real worth is that we have here a compendium of all possible traditions of meditation developed in the Eastern as well as in the Western world, briefly presented in their historical background. Thus we read about the varieties of techniques issuing from the traditions of yoga and the buddhist traditions. The physical meditations proposed in the empirical research takes a large part of this work. The last chapter attempts to put order in this meditation jungle: unipolar models attempting at relaxation, regression, or progression; bipolar models with subjective-objective, immanent-transcendent, introvert-extrovert, and the like categories; complex models with

ascendance, descendance, and transcendence polarities. The book provides also a list of spiritual masters and mystics connected with the techniques of meditation.

Looking at the bibliography it becomes evident that Engle works practically only with secondary literature except for some more recent testimonies on the experience of meditation. The concept of meditation and why and how such a variety of spiritual and religious techniques could be brought under this concept, is nowhere discussed. The technical Sanskrit terms are not put in with diacritical marks and are sometimes badly written.

As we said above, the book is nevertheless valuable to get initial information on meditation practised in the present-day spiritual circles predominantly influenced by a new-age ideology and which academic circles sometimes have to deal with.

Anand NAYAK
University of Fribourg

Zeit und Geschichte im Viṣṇupurāna. Heinz Werner Wessler. Bern: Peter Lang, 1995.

THE ITIHĀSA AND *purāna* literatures have developed extraordinary concepts of time and revelled into fantastic discussions on them in spite of their timeless outlook of life and salvation. Wessler takes up a text analysis of the *Viṣṇupurāna* and brings out its concept and perception of time and their eschatological implications. The work in fact

is a history of time in Hinduism, starting from the vedas through the epics, an in-depth study of the fundamental time concepts of *yuga*, *yugānta*, *kalpa*, *manvantara*, *vaṃśa*, *pralaya*, and so forth. These mythological concepts are brought in contrast with the cosmic and historical chronology underlying the entire Hindu

world of religion and spirituality. This extremely well-documented work has also a good index of concepts and text references as well as an extensive bibliography.

The Hindu concept of cyclic cosmic creations and destructions have been noted frequently by international conferences and studies on time. The first congress of *International Society for the Study of Time* (1969) had brought the Hindu concepts to the notice of a wider circle of scientific scholarship. The discussion, however, has turned round mostly on cyclic and linear differences in the perception of history. Wessler tries to get out of these stereotypes which he considers not only as questionable but also misleading in the complexity of the Hindu perception of time.

Wessler's analysis brings to light to

what extent the *Viṣṇupurāṇa* gives a marked importance to discussions on time in its soteriology. Its quest for *bhakti* as the highest means of salvation does not eliminate the element of time. On the contrary, it tries to incorporate it in its theology as the necessary condition for the realization of salvation. The significance of time, however, is not consistent in all the *pralaya*. Its cyclic notion of it is not exactly what Western thought often makes of the contrast to the linear idea of history. Moreover, the *Viṣṇupurāṇa* proposes the cyclic concept only as one among many other perceptions of time.

Anand Nayak
University of Fribourg

Nama Japa: Prayer of the Name in the Hindu and Christian Traditions. Vandana Mataji. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1995, 268pp.

I HAVE HEARD it said that there is no such thing as delay with the Spirit, that everything happens at the right moment. It having taken me quite a time of hard work to let it percolate a little into my mind and heart, I suspect that it is not by chance that this book by Vandana Mataji has arrived at this moment.

One could be forgiven for thinking that it is concerned with one type of prayer, even a restricted method of prayer, but how mistaken one would be! Nothing narrow here for either the Hindu or the Christian, something much more than an idea or theological view and practice to be analysed. Vandana Mataji presents us rather with a way of life, a tool for our human liberation, demanding all we have, nearer to being a fire than a concept.

Nama Japa, the Prayer of the Name in the Hindu and Christian traditions is almost an encyclopedia. Others, better practised in this "way", might find something missing; I have tried, but have failed. This makes it

a very substantial book, hard work, and even harder work in the practising. The first 75 pages are the Praxis, the doing/living of the Prayer of the Name. How right it is that Praxis comes first! Abstract knowledge, of which there is much in Part II, Theory, is nothing more than what Zen people would call "third leg of chicken", unreal and useless, *unless* it flows from direct experience. If we hope for growth and wisdom from this way of *nama japa*, then we must always stay with the practice.

Nama means "name"; *Japa* means "repetition" - repetition of a Name of God. The Praxis part then takes one, in some detail, through *japa* in each one of its manifestations in the woman or man who is on this human/spiritual path, *japa*, i.e. with *mala* or rosary, with pen, with music, with rhythm, with breath-awareness, with *anusthana* and *purascarana*, with the Word of God, personally and in groups. This spiritual path is certainly a life involvement and we are not allowed for a minute to