



January 2009

Book Review: "Yoga: India's Philosophy of Meditation"

Harold Coward

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/jhcs>



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Coward, Harold (2009) "Book Review: "Yoga: India's Philosophy of Meditation"," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*: Vol. 22, Article 18.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1445>

The *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* is a publication of the [Society for Hindu-Christian Studies](#). The digital version is made available by Digital Commons @ Butler University. For questions about the Journal or the Society, please contact cbauman@butler.edu. For more information about Digital Commons @ Butler University, please contact digitalscholarship@butler.edu.

contemplation, devotion, and action to open ourselves to and participate in the divine life within us. Panikkar has interesting things to say about love and joy, suffering and evil as pointed out earlier, but he singles out silence as the privileged site for our encounter with God. In line with his apophatism Panikkar reminds us that the highest knowledge of God is not to know. "Every time we name God—every time we conceptualize God—we commit a profanation, a blasphemy" (129). Thus we are led to a profound silence encompassing out intellect, will, and action that attempts in spiritual passivity to let life unfold and in purity of heart and clarity of mind to mold it in an attitude of *niskama karma* (action without egoistic desire).

The flavor and beauty of this silence are best conveyed by Angelus Silesius in *Der cherubinische Wandersmann (The Cherubic Pilgrim)*, from which Panikkar quotes:

God is so far beyond everything that we can scarcely speak,

Thus it is also by means of your silence that you adore him.

Remain silent, beloved, silent: if you can rest completely
in silence,

Then God will give you more blessings than you would know how to ask for.

If you wish to express the being of eternity,

You must first abandon all discourse.

When you remember God, you hear him in yourself.

You become quiet and if you remain silent and peaceful,

He will not stop speaking to you. (130)

Joseph Prabhu

California State University, Los Angeles

Yoga: India's Philosophy of Meditation. Edited by Gerald James Larson and Ram Shankar Bhattacharya. Volume XII of the Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2008, 784 pp.

WITH Karl Potter as its General Editor, the 27 volume Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies was begun in 1981. Each volume consists of two parts: an introductory essay on the history and philosophy of the school of thought, followed by English language summaries of the key texts by leading scholars. This model has proved very useful for scholars and students who may not know Sanskrit well enough to read the school's primary texts in the original. In a single volume, one has an authoritative presentation of the main teachings of the philosophical school together with summaries of its major texts. Gerald Larson and Ram Shankar Bhattacharya previously brought out the Samkhya volume in the series, and now they have completed the Yoga volume, which depends on Samkhya thought for its

philosophical foundation. Larson lists the goals of this volume as: 1) showing in what sense Yoga is a philosophical school of India; 2) determining the boundaries between Yoga as a philosophy and Yoga as a tradition of practice; 3) elucidating to what degree Yoga's experiential/practice claims can be separated from its philosophical claims; and 4) clarifying the meaning of the term "yoga." The book largely achieves these goals.

This is the only book I know that disentangles and gives critical analysis to the practice or *yoganga* (II.28 – III.5) portion of the *Yoga Sutras* (YS) as distinct from the more philosophical sections. In this regard Larson helpfully shows that Yoga as a collection of experimental practices and ascetic exercises

goes back well before the *Yoga Sutras* to Vedic and Indus Valley times. Larson also acknowledges gaps in our knowledge of how the YS relate to parallel yoga traditions such as the yoga of the *Gita*, the Yoga Upanisads, the Nath Yoga and the Hatha Yoga of the medieval period (several major Hatha Yoga texts are included in Part Two of the volume). Summarized texts of the Patanjali Yoga Traditions run from the *Patanjaliyogasutra* (c. 350 – 400) through the *Bhasya* of Vedavyasa (also c. 350 – 400), the *Gloss* Vacaspati Misra (c. 950), right up to six 20th century commentaries. In sampling many of the summaries of texts, I found them to be quite reliable in relation to the Sanskrit original. Of the key *Bhasya* of Vyasa, I still have a preference for the English of Rama Prasada,¹ but the summary offered by Ram Shankar Bhattacharya is quite acceptable. In the end a good understanding for most students will require a line by line reading of the text with a scholar trained in the tradition – as I did with T. R. V. Murti,² and as Gerald Larson did with Ram Shankar Bhattacharya, who also has done summaries of many of the texts. Other summarizers include Karl Potter for the *Gloss* of Vacaspati Mishra and T. S. Rukmani for the *Vivarana* identified with a Samkara of the 11th to 14th centuries. As for the identity of the Patanjali of the YS, Larson sides with tradition that the Patanjali of the *Mahabhasya* and the YS may be the same, as both include Sphota Theory and begin in the same way. Also, Patanjali is not a common name in the Indian tradition. As to the date, Larson convincingly argues that the Yoga tradition emerges out of old Sankhya philosophy, early Buddhist philosophy, and a codification of older meditation traditions from the last two centuries BCE and the first centuries CE.

With his depth of knowledge of both Sankhya and YS, Larson makes a compelling case that Yoga offers a more simplified and sophisticated account of the transformations of ordinary experience as knowing, error, constructing, sleeping and remembering – conceptions which become fundamental for other Indian philosophy discussions in major schools (e.g. Grammarian, Vedanta, Mimamsa and Buddhist). I agree with Larson's rejection of

Eliade's suggestion of an *Ur* Yoga as present throughout Indian thought.³ I also agree with Larson's limiting of the practice or yoganga portion to YS II.28 to III.5 and his contention that it is traceable back to Patanjali. I agree that Patanjali's Yoga should be seen as a companion to Bhartrhari's study of language⁴ and to the study of medicine. All these areas of study (psychology of mind, language and medicine) are connected with the name Patanjali and had their origins in older ritualistic and religious contexts. Like the study of language and its *mantra* chanting, or medicine, the YS offers techniques of practice which should be judged by whether they work or not. If such practices fail to work, then they should be given up, as Vacaspatimishra argues in his introduction and *Gloss* on YS 1.1. But for the claims of Yoga to be rejected, they must first be tried. The end goal for Patanjali's YS is of course release of the *purusa* or self from misidentification with the *karma* and *gunas* of *prakriti* into *kaivaliya* or "the standing forth of pure consciousness in its own inherent nature" (p. 136).

The authors have succeeded in presenting the complex concepts and practices of Patanjali's Yoga tradition in a scholarly yet also readable and clear English (and this is no small achievement). For my students, who want to read and write on Yoga, this is the book I will send them to. It is balanced in its presentation, critical yet faithful to the historical tradition, and more complete and comprehensive than any other volume on Yoga that is available.

Notes

¹ *Patajali's Yoga Sutras*, translated by Rama Prasada. Delhi: Oriental Books, 1978.

² See Harold Coward, *Yoga and Psychology: Language, Memory and Mysticism*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002.

³ Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1958.

⁴ See my *Yoga and Psychology*, chapters 3 & 4, pp. 21-50.

Harold Coward
University of Victoria