

## Body and Mind in Qi Gong and Yoga A Comparative Perspective on India and China

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I will not be so edifying and inspirational as our previous speaker – not because I am lacking inspiration from my background; I was raised as a Calvinist in the Netherlands, and there was a lot of sin in the world and a lot of redemption, too, for some. However, I felt that I should distance myself a little bit from that background and try to follow at least some of the elements of the Eranos tradition, namely comparative religion, and the study of religions from a comparative perspective, which – as we saw in the film *Eranos Reborn*, was of course done by people like Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade. I am also inspired by this place, Monte Verità, more Eros than Eranos actually, and by the traditions of the body, some of them sexual, some of them really expressionist, the tradition of performance, and of dance. Of course, Ascona has a very strong artist tradition and indeed a tradition of free expression through dance. This is to some extent my topic; it is the topic of the disciplines of the body, so a little less free but more disciplined, in Yoga and Chi Gong.

What I will do is make an excursion through India and Indian traditions, as well as China and Chinese traditions, and I shall actually look at these from the perspective of the encounter with the West. So it is almost the whole world, but it is not the entire cosmos, so I am actually still in some historical scope. I will also look at these traditions, not from a phenomenological aspect, which was of course the perspective of people like Otto and Eliade, and was very much textual based, but more from the perspective of social history and political history, and how these disciplines of the body are embedded in a political and economic environment; therefore, we will see how this changed and evolved, so that these practices do not have an essential, unchangeable meaning, to be discovered in old texts, but are actually related to an ever changing environment, in which they have a political significance. This may be strange to some people, because they generally believe that so-called spiritual traditions are higher, transcendent, and have nothing to do with the mundane; they think they are actually pleasant in a sense, because one can engage with them and become more perfect and more understanding in one's own life. They are then often not seen as disciplines directly related to something negative that people normally want to escape from, like political or economic history, for example. I have found in my own work that they are basically very much connected to socio-economic change, and I will give you a few examples later on. In general, and this is a feeling shared not only in the West, but also in the so-called East, spiritual traditions are seen as 'outside' traditions. We see ascetics living in caves in the Himalayan mountains, and so it should be, so that you do not encounter them and they can therefore stay inspirational.

To give you an example, this feeling was expressed in Indian newspapers in the year 2000, when I visited a large bathing festival in Northern India in Allahabad. In the Hindu tradition it is called *Prayag*, the *Kumbh Mela*, and this occurs once every twelve years, when about twelve million pilgrims visit the place; it is, in fact, one of the largest pilgrim festivals in India. However, it is also a gathering of ascetics. I myself have worked among India's ascetics, the *sadhus*, for thirty years now. The *Kumbh Mela* is a very important gathering for these ascetics. In one of the many subsequent newspaper reports, a journalist said, 'Well, you see them now dipping in the Ganges, but in a few days, they will happily go back to their caves in the Himalaya.' There is no doubt about it, this is not true. Most of these ascetics actually have a cellphone (although it is rather difficult to see where they put it, given that some are *nagas*, which means naked, and makes one wonder about the miracles of life). They do not really go back to the Himalaya, they are very much present in Hindu daily life, and I shall expand on that a bit further, starting with Yoga and then going on to Qi Gong.

Let me preface that with my perspective, which is a bit different from Eliade's. Eliade wrote a very good book, *Yoga – Immortality and Freedom*, incorporating important research on the sources of Yoga and on some theories of how Yoga as a breathing technique is related to shamanistic practices. His book is a very scholarly work, very much based on the textual tradition. This is not because Eliade, a Rumanian, had not gone to India; he did, and had lived there with his professor. He even studied Sanskrit and therefore had access to those sources. Although he stayed in Calcutta, he does not mention the performance of Yoga in his time; he does not look at which kind of social groups actually do Yoga, and what the changes were, say at the beginning of the century, when

he was in Calcutta – changes from those ancient practices when he studied the texts, and the contemporary practices he could have encountered in Calcutta.

This is what I want to look at. Yoga, or *yuchum* in Latin, something that you put on your shoulder, that you can harness a horse or a water buffalo with. It is actually a discipline, and the best translation would perhaps be Augustine's terminology, *disziplina*. In the early Christian church, Augustine argued that one does not receive belief as a kind of gift from heaven, but that one has to be disciplined. He even uses the word *coercio* – one is coerced to belief. This is very much reminiscent of my own background as a Calvinist. It is not something that is a natural gift. So you have to discipline your body first, and then you will experience. Well, at the moment, you all are of course in a particular state of discipline: you have to listen. I think the academic life is also a life of discipline, but perhaps it doesn't really lead to perfection. However, yoga is a set of practices, very well defined, but defined in terms of actions, of doing exercises, one after the other, and learning to do them. They are not easy to do, and the so-called spiritual experiences – the experiences of the mind that are produced by the body; they are produced by certain forms of concentration of the mind, where you put your mind into focus. The Buddhists also have these slow practices: they start to concentrate on walking – on the parts of the body that you use, trying to figure out how to do it slowly, and then meditate on it. So these bodily Yoga practices of Yoga are for the first time described in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. by someone called Patangali, in the so-called Yoga Sutras. There are indeed texts, but besides these texts there are ascetic groups who practise these exercises, and I have studied these ascetic groups. I will not go into great detail, but in general one can say that these groups are

focussed on spiritual experience, on having a certain kind of devotional experience. They have a kind of theology about the relation of the self to the cosmic energy, *shakti*, located in the body, and summon it from the body. But these groups also have a very interesting socio-economic history. They are into money lending, so-called bankers, and they are into long-distance trade; they even become involved in violence and into military actions. Up to the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, they were the most important military groups in India. So this is far-off from the normal idea of naval-staring ascetics focussing on the spiritual. These groups have large monasteries, often some of the most important buildings throughout India; they have temples and a huge amount of cash, and because they do not marry – this is of course one of these wonderful things of celibacy – they amass money, since they do not have inheritors. This is not only so for Hindu ascetics, this is also true for ascetics in the Buddhist world, in the Dao world, and in the Sufi world. I could tell you a whole story about the relation between Barakha and of charisma in the Sufi world and money. So this is not exceptional – it is a general trait of what we now call the spiritual. These groups were really active in the world.

That whole world of asceticism in India, with its Yoga and ascetic practices, comes to an end with colonialism. When the British settled in India, they did not want to have all these people on the streets. They were a direct challenge to their own tax collections; they collected money themselves. In British texts, they often referred to as beggars, 'holy beggars'. So the British developed laws, also in England itself, against these groups, who indeed were very mobile; there were bands of ascetics going through the countryside, and these beggars collected money, sometimes owned land and had parts of the group staying in temple land; they were also

very mobile and therefore very good for the military and for long distance trade. So that whole world came to an end with the Pax Britannica. That is then also the period in which Yoga gets divorced from these practices, from this world of ascetics into an emerging bourgeoisie or 19<sup>th</sup> Century middle class in India, which adopts these practices as signifying their religion and as a kind of shield against Christianity.

So instead of ascetics practising this in the first place, we find that laypeople practise Yoga. The most important figure in this transition from ascetic groups to middle-class villageosity is a man called Vivekananda. Vivekananda is the most important figure in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. In translating Yoga into English, into a palatable middle-class religiosity, very different from the practices he had learned himself from his own guru, Ramakrishna (in which there are some kind of sexual elements, not so palatable for the Victorian mind), he synthesised Yoga into something very pleasant, non-transgressive. In fact, all these ascetic practices that I have described connect transgression to transcendence. It actually means transgressing boundaries all the time, which is of course very much in the spirit of this place, of Monte Verità. It is a place of transgression. And that was the spirit of Yoga throughout the ages, up to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, when a kind of Victorian sensibility got into the way of transgression. And then it became something that could be exported all over the world. Indeed, Vivekananda goes to the World Parliament of Religion in Chicago in 1893, where you find so-called representatives of all religions: Daoism, Confucianism, all these –isms that actually just emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century because they did not exist before. There was no Hinduism before, say the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. These were all kinds of disparate traditions, which were then homogenised and created as religions. The religion of the Indians – Hinduism – did

not exist before the 18<sup>th</sup> Century; it is a British invention, and was then of course taken over by the Indians. The same in Confucianism: there is no Confucianism before the Sacred Books of the East at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, when these were translated. There were Confucian traditions, but that is different. So Vivekananda brought Yoga to the United States, to the World Parliament of Religions, and he really packaged it for the middle-class in the West. He was a handsome man and was very popular among American women. According to some reports on his visits to Boston, Bostonian women seem to have gone totally through the roof with this guy. And this just continues to this day. A guru has to be handsome. Perhaps that is why there is a kind of linkage between the middle-class in India and the middle-class elsewhere. These are new modern experiences of religion. For the first time, the word spirituality was used here. Indians did not speak about spirituality before that time. It is a translated word, yet spirituality is not translatable into Sanskrit. There is no Sanskrit word for spirituality.

So it becomes a universal spirituality, and becomes connected to American transcendentalists like Emerson and others who meditate in forests. In Holland, we have Frederik van Heyden. It is mostly wealthy people who are attracted to this. It is a universal spirituality, and Yoga becomes part of that package, also because there is an emphasis on the distinction between Eastern spirituality and Western materialism. There is this idea that the East has a gift for mankind, namely Eastern spirituality. I have studied these traditions, and one can still find the ascetic groups in India, but they are marginalised. They are not palatable to a nice Yoga centre in Utrecht. They are very difficult and require you to give up many things that seem so normal in our lives. So we are not just talking about being vegetarian and doing some Yoga

at 8 o'clock in the morning before going to work. It is really something very different.

So you see the kind of transformation of these traditions into Yoga. Vivekananda transforms Yoga into a sign, a symbol of Hinduism and of Hindu nationalism. It became the most important element identifying the middle-class Hindu: a gift to mankind. It has a universal element, but also has a nationalist element. So it is seen as a national tradition, and in that sense, people like Sri Aurobindo and Gandhi also made use of the idea that Yoga was a typical Hindu element in the heritage of mankind. I want to make you aware of this transformation, the way things seemed new and yet how they were at the same time universal and nationalist. So they have a different meaning in India than they have in Boston. In India, they also mean Hindu nationalists in relation to Muslims who are there. There is a relationship between nationalism and religion, which has its not so pleasant elements. In this transformation of Yoga from ascetic practices to national practices, I would also like to stress the connection to science and to health.

Yoga is seen as being healthy because of the theory of the body and bodily functioning, which through practising it is seen as enhancing one's health. This is not just a fake theory; it is also scientific in the sense that the Indians believe, just like Vivekananda and many philosophers around him did, that there is a scientific basis to it. In Indian laboratories, much effort goes into showing and proving that Yoga is indeed a scientific theory. The need to show that spirituality or these spiritual exercises are scientific is a new need, of course; it is a need in relation to the emergence of science as a dominant force in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. We had science before, but you had to be inside of science, and you can only be proud of your traditions if they are scientific. So what happens with Yoga is

that the practices become part of the nationalist imaginary as a scientific contribution to mankind.

Well, I have spent some time on Yoga now, and will briefly move on to Qi Gong as well. Qi Gong are also disciplines. *Gong* are disciplines, namely those of controlling the life force, which is *Qi*. There is this idea that there is life or a connection of the microcosm of the body and the macrocosm of nature, and that one can connect to these forces. Qi Gong as a set of practices emerges in the Ming period in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century. Like many practices in China today, it is a combination of Daoist ideas and Buddhist ideas. They are also ideas of health and a healthy body, referring to a kind of spiritual awakening, very much like Yoga. They are connected to certain groups who can instruct you in these practices. So just like in the Indian way of teachings through gurus and masters, we also have that kind of teaching from people who have mastered the techniques in the Chinese tradition. They also develop martial arts like internal boxing, *Taichijien*, and external boxing, *Wushu*, all kinds of forms of spirituality connected to power, to violence, not only a discipline of the body, but also a discipline which can be used to create power in a larger world. So there is an enormous similarity between say these Chinese institutional practices and the Indian institutional practices, and there may even be some connections through Buddhism in their genealogy. Just like in India, practices of martial arts and of spiritual accomplishments in China are also connected to politics. Throughout Chinese history, there are millenarian movements, peasant movements that strive for a total change in society, and these spiritual masters create millenarian movements. To some extent, they connect to Buddhist ideas of the coming of a Messiah, of a total transformation of the social work, of the response to bad government; so they are mostly really a

threat to the imperial authority. The imperial authority in China is a much more unified state than India; it responds to these movements rather harshly and violently. They are always called White Lotus movements, movements that have a structure in which a saviour, a Messiah comes on Earth to save the world and mankind if you follow his teachings. That had enormous consequences throughout Chinese history. Somehow, that world of asceticism and of spiritual masters, as in India, also comes to an end in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. China is not colonised, but it is of course under the direct influence of imperialism after the Opium Wars. The Qi Gong is no longer independent. So one has to respond to the West, and the way the Chinese respond to the West is basically in two ways. First of all, there are very strong and violent millenarian movements at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, which are crushed. The most important ones are the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom movement, and the Boxer movement. Boxer already refers to these martial arts. Millions of people were killed in those movements, and many temples were destroyed. These were very violent movements, in an attempt to recreate the glory of the Chinese empire and of Chinese civilisation against the pressure of imperialism. They were attempts to connect religion with anti-imperialism and nationalism, but they were crushed, and the Chinese development has therefore almost been the reverse of the Indian development. In China as well as in India, the belief in science made the Chinese want to eradicate their traditions. From the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century onwards, there are a whole range of movements, so-called scientific movements that basically want to westernise China, bring it into the forum of civilised nations by destroying all the Chinese temples and traditions. Tens of thousands of temples were already destroyed by 1910. There is an expression in Chinese that says, 'Well, we destroy the temples to

frame, you understand that they want to control whatever happens among the people. So they tried to control this by putting troublemakers into mental hospitals because they had become too Qi Gong, there was too much Qi, and by trying to put them all into an organisation called the Association of Scientific Research in Qi Gong. So the party tried to control this, but it is very hard to control. Most of you have probably heard of Falun Gong, later called Falun Dafa. Its founder, Li Hongzhi, was a party official; he was also very much supported by the Communist party when he began to establish his movement. But when he became too successful, he turned into a threat to the party, and so the Communist party crushed his movement, which was probably of greater significance than the entire Tiananmen Square movement.

This is one of the most important issues in China today, this question of such movements. We may only see the Falun Gong, but there are so many other such movements in China, which the Party tries to control, because they always have a kind of religious element in them. The problem with Li Hongzhi was that he was not only trying to teach breathing techniques, but he also maintained that he was born as the incarnation of Sakyamuni, the Buddha, and that he was the reincarnation of Buddha coming back to rescue the Chinese people from the evils of the Empire and from the Communist party. So this shows the longstanding tradition of this kind of threat to the central government. Hongzhi had to flee and went to Brooklyn. When you now walk in the streets of New York, you are constantly accosted by Falun Gong adherents who speak of the tortures of their followers in China. It is also an attempt to try and influence the American government under the rubric of human rights. However, there is something very important in the kind of political significance of these movements, even in China and India today.

It is true for Yoga in India, too. The gurus in Yoga tradition have a strong political significance in India and they have a global significance.

With this, I want to end my presentation. I already said that Vivekananda had packaged Yoga for consumption, a kind of global consumption in a market of spirituality, and therefore it becomes one of the techniques of therapy and spiritual awakening among a whole variety of such techniques. Qi Gong has now also been adopted in that range. In Utrecht, where I live, they have at least 10 or 15 centres in which you can learn and exercise these practices. So it becomes global and universal. It also becomes part of management techniques. When I did a study of IT engineers in Bangalore, a centre for IT, I found that many of them are supporters of a man called Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. He has a movement in Bangalore and the spiritual content of his movement seems to be very limited, there is not much in it. However, he seems to inspire a lot of people in the IT community to cope with the pressures of daily life, when you are a software engineer. They make a living under tough circumstances – not so much materially, because they do make a lot of money, but coding and developing software is not such a challenging thing to do – really, no harm intended, it is difficult work, so you need some kind of relaxation. Yoga then becomes part of that relaxation. Both in India and abroad, it has also become part of a global capitalist market, and the latest instance of that is the attempt in India to brand Yoga, to create a kind of copyright on Yoga. This will of course be followed by branding Qi Gong, which then turns into a particular control of the market. I hope I have been edifying enough. Thank you.