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Review - Yoga and Psychology

Language, Memory, and Mysticism

by Harold G. Coward
SUNY Press, 2002

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For Harold Coward, Indian poetry and philosophy encapsulate "the creative tension between a profound attraction to sensual beauty and the yearning for liberation from it" (p.42). That tension is the hallmark of yoga, which is the art and science of release from suffering and ignorance given concise voice in Patanjali's Sutras. Indian philosophy has never been so divorced from praxis as occurs in the West. In India practice is at the heart of the ideas themselves. Many in the West, drawn by techniques and exotic notions borrow from whichever spiritual tradition addresses such tensions between immersion and release; rarely do we get a chance to see the integrity of such systems of thought in their own terms. Harold Coward makes plain yoga's intriguing promise of release and its sharp differences from psychoanalysis and transpersonal psychology in his new book *Yoga and Psychology: Language, Memory and Mysticism*. Coward does not address Psychology as his title promises, but addresses two giants of psychoanalysis. In Part One of the book, Coward establishes the centrality of language to yoga. Here his thesis is bold and clear - that language has inherent within itself the power to convey knowledge both of a sensuous and a super sensuous kind, and to realize release. In the second part he discusses Freud, Jung and some transpersonal psychologists' perspectives on yogic issues like dualism and the possibility of an almost immaterial, ego-less knowing, the eradication of desires and of the unconscious, and free will.

The links between part one and two are there, but what Coward is trying to achieve in his critical discussion of what he terms Western Psychology is less clear. The organization of the book does not bring his contribution to full power. For those not so well steeped in yoga philosophy as Coward, the first part of the first section is a daunting acquisition of a new language with which to think the yoga sutras. I had Georg Feuerstein's translation and commentary of Patanjali's Sutras open to read the sutras discussed. At times Coward is dismissive of 'modern readers' and their partial knowledge, and this does not make him feel a completely compassionate guide. Persistence pays off when the book crackles with the poetry and passion of Bhartrhari -- India's greatest philosopher of language (c 500CE). Suddenly all the issues that one assimilated in the first part without quite knowing where it was all headed come to sparkling life. The section on the overlaps and distinctions between yoga and psychoanalysis is very clear though there is some repetition in his section on Jung, and some (perhaps necessary) repetition of

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the assumptions of yoga philosophy. Despite the comprehensive introduction, the authorial voice to combine the issues into a sustained vision falters at times.

For those who thought they could practice yoga without the issue of faith arising, this book will be a challenging experience. Coward's perspective on yoga is erudite and committed. He speaks from within the yoga system of thought and accordingly views most of Western psychoanalysis as falling short. He details differences between East and West with an unflinching clarity. His detailed citation of the original writers along with his commentary makes this book a rare journey indeed.

First, Coward establishes in detail the centrality of trustworthy linguistic communications: the importance of testimony. David Cooper remarks it is "an epistemological issue whose importance contrasts with the scant attention it has received in the Western tradition; that of the credentials of testimony as a distinct source of knowledge. This issue has long vexed Indian philosophers..." (Cooper, 1999, p11). According to Coward, there are divisions of Indian schools depending on the "degree of revealing power allowed to words" (p12). Verbal communication (agama) is one of three sources of valid knowledge (pramana) in Indian thought, (along with perception (pratyaksa) and inference (anumana)). Verbal communication functions when a trusted observer (apta), transfers his or her knowledge to us and is valid "if it is not deceptive, confused or barren in knowledge" (p. 12). The apta has to be "skilled and compassionate in the passing on of knowledge" (p.12), and not prone to any twisting of the knowledge for fame or fortune. Of course, the verbal communication may still fail if the mind of the hearer is too 'covered with karmic impurity' or too distracted to pay attention.

Coward addresses not merely empirical concerns regarding trustworthiness and what it takes for justified true knowledge to arise from testimony. He moves beyond empirical to metaphysical issues concerning the Original Speaker Isvara. Isvara's authority hinges on his status as perceiver and speaker. Isvara is the source of knowledge par extraordinaire because from the start, "Isvara was the Original Speaker who was omniscient and therefore of unquestionable authority" (p. 13). Isvara has no karmic taint (ignorance, ego-sense, desire, hatred, and clinging to life), no clouds of desire or of habit to obscure his perception. Isvara is defined by a special kind of self or purusa that is beginninglessly untouched by the taints of karmas. As pure sattva (transparent consciousness), he functions as a mind in the world. By a thought he resumes his task: "after this period of latency finishes I must again assume a pure sattva body so as to continue to help the world" (p.15). Thus the next cycle of creation begins.

Surely the presence of desire to remain active in the material world disqualifies one from enlightened status? This is akin to the paradox of the Bodhisattva discussed by Arthur C Danto. For Coward, the crux is Isvara's motivation "since the motivation is for others and not for himself, Isvara remains free from the taint of karma" (Vyasa's commentary on yoga Sutra 1:25, cited in page 15).

In this move to considering the metaphysics of the original speaker there is much to trouble some Western Philosophers: circularity of argument, fixity of link between word and meaning, dualism and a kind of telos attributed to consciousness. Coward is so clear in his exposition that one grasps immediately where faith is required.

The scriptures are proof of Isvara, and the authority of the scriptures comes from the fact that they are manifestations of Isvara's sattva. "Clearly this argument is circular" notes Coward, adding this "is a presupposition upon which the Yoga Sutra definition of the authority of agama [verbal communication] with regard to super sensuous matters is grounded" (p. 15).

Yoga is thus a set of techniques for permitting the committed yogin to become one with Isvara, a mystical fusion that entails losing one's impure personal ego. Language is central to this mystical experience since in it sound and meaning become one. "It is Isvara who is expressed by the word AUM: the sound of the word evokes its meaning" (p17). The relation between word and meaning here is not by convention" the relationship between Isvara and the word AUM is fixed like a lamp and its light" (Vyasa cited in p. 17). Coward says that "AUM... as the beginningless utterance of Isvara is the seed from which the Vedas arise. By meditatively chanting AUM, the devotee will gradually purify his or her mind.... Then the fully purified perception of Isvara as the eternally pure purusa and original speaker of the Vedas opens the door to the devotee's realization of his or her own purusa as also pure and free." (p. 20).

Coward objects to what he terms Eliade's (1971, p. 74) rather 'flippant remark' in suggesting that Patanjali's introduction of Isvara to the Sankhya soteriology is perfectly useless. Coward suggests that without Isvara there would be no special help from the Vedas and no special help from chanting AUM.

Unlike the materialism of Classical Freudian Psychoanalysis the yoga system is ultimately a duality between pure consciousness (purusa) and non-intelligent matter (prakrti). Further, yoga posits a telos of consciousness. Coward notes "Yoga psychology maintains that in itself consciousness [citta] is always attempting to move towards moksa [release]. Therefore all the specific yoga techniques do is remove the obstructions within the mind, and consciousness then passes naturally into the state of moksa." (p. 36). It is a matter of getting out of our own way. Though this requires dedication, as Coward shows.

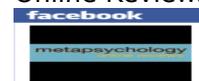
Yoga assumes that humans are perfectible to a very high degree. We can be restrained,

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truthful and capable of noble silence. Of the five self-restraints recommended in Yoga truthfulness (satya) requires most discipline. "Satya is the conformity of one's speech and mind [citta vrtti] with the thing itself" (p36). There is a link with the Buddhist notion of noble silence. "This vak [true speech] is for the benefit of all beings, not for their injury" (p.36). "Utter what is beneficial to others; do not utter what is true but injurious to others..." (Manu, cited in Coward, p 36).

In the second part of his book, Coward canvasses the challenges the yogic system of thought presents for what he calls modern psychology, though the subjects he discusses are actually psychoanalysts and transpersonalist psychology that flourished in the 1970's though it still has some green shoots in the form of Ken Wilber.

Yoga teaches freedom and release from the individual ego rather than the cultivation of ego-strength or uniqueness endorsed in the west, entails a loss of individual ego. Yoga entails the belief that the true nature of objects can be encountered when we have transcended all of the material apparatus of body, senses and to some extent individual mind. Yoga is not about control of the object, but of changing the subject. It has a very precise array of techniques and practices to achieve that, involving postures, breath-control, taming of the fluctuations of the mind as a result of wandering senses, and an exquisite attention to the role that habits of mind and perception play in distorting our grasp of reality so that we can counter these habits, and be open to what is. With meditative practice one becomes so subtly aware of the way that past traces, emotions and a kind of sloth or heaviness marks one's consciousness that one can root out those tendencies to an ever-increasing degree. Coward suggests that Yoga assumes that when 'egoity' (sic) is overcome there is no further duality between subject and object, only immediate intuition. Coward notes "yoga psychology finds the essence of human nature to be at the transcendent level of consciousness, where ego and unconscious desires have been excised" (p. 2). For Patanjali "the goal of Yoga is the complete overcoming of the karmic traces and thus, in the end, the annihilation of the unconscious." (p. 56). Yoga claims that human nature is not finite, that its ego limitations can be transcended.

This illustrates once more that Yoga assumes a virtually limitless capacity for perfection in humans, where psychoanalysis has a much grittier, more embodied stance. For psychoanalysis desire is here to stay, and while one can become more sublimated in the manner of expressing desire, it is always desire that provides the motivation for perception and remembering and any encounter with objects in the world. Coward is right to say that for Western Psychology (excluding post-modern varieties), "it is impossible to have a knowing experience without the presence of a knower", but it is important to note that it need not be a conscious knower, or even a 'knower in consciousness' as Coward (p.65) maintains. For Freud the knower may be but a part of us, like a drive (see Maze, 1983), with the drive standing in knowing relation to some object in the environment. For Freud the drives at the basis of the unconscious cannot 'go away' or be transcended while a person is still embodied. Coward suggests that yoga philosophy suggests that there is a state in which such dualities as knower and known, subject and object are overcome, and rather than unconsciousness, a clear consciousness persists.

Yet from a psychoanalytic point of view the required annihilation of memory traces, of the unconscious and the transcendence of bodily desire entailed in the egolessness that yoga suggests we may aspire to, and that some dedicated yogis are said to achieve are not theoretically possible.

Few philosophers or psychologists in the West would suggest that we are able to know the ding an sich. Yet this is precisely the aim of yoga; to be open to what is. Patanjali's sutras suggest, says Coward that we can come to know the object itself unclouded by the habits of perception, memories, associations that come to mind as a result of the word we use in language to name the object and all the associations. In other words, Yoga assumes that we can drop all the 'motes in the mind's eye'. These motes or samskaras include all the traces of memories of past encounters with similar objects, all biases of perception like perceptual readiness, desire, schemas that make some features of an event more personally salient to us, even the categories of knowledge of our particular culture which might prime us to attend to certain features more than others and in time distort our recollection of an object.

Coward notes however that psychoanalysis and yoga do have similarities. "In theory, both yoga and Freud agree that memory and motivation are parts of a single psychic process which also embodies choice or selection" (p.55). That Freud would not endorse choice in the sense of free will choice, is something that Coward is aware of since he notes "Freud seems convinced that there is no such thing as free will." (p.56). For Freud, seemingly free actions are under the control of the unconscious and "determinism in the psychic realm is carried out uninterruptedly" (pg 56). Coward notes it is "with this final stand in favour of absolute determinism of the unconscious that Freud sharply diverges from Yoga". Jung takes more of the middle path between the two extremes according to Coward, though it is hard to see why since Jung seems quite uncompromising in the account given here. He doesn't like the emphasis on meditation, rejects reincarnation and suggests that egolessness is impossible. Jung argued that his technique of active imagination was more suited to the westerner than the meditation that yoga requires. He said Patanjali's yogic practice would only exacerbate the 'overdevelopment of the will and the conscious control of the psyche' (p. 64) already endemic in the West. Jung thought it better to use active imagination that "leaves the integrative processes of the ego-consciousness functional and thereby enables therapeutic gains to be made." (p.67).

For yoga the samskaras (memory traces) come from the 'individual history of that particular person's past lives' (pp. 57-58). Jung flatly rejects the reincarnation of the individual soul, but suggests that there are inherited archetypes, and that these memory complexes from the history of mankind could organize our perceptions and allow us to individuate as an individual ego provided that we were dominated neither by archetype nor by instinct. Jung's notion of freedom as 'individuating the archetypes' is the polar opposite notion of freedom to that of yoga where freedom is known 'only when one gives up all ego-activity' (p.58). Jung draws the line (it "is absolutely impossible to know what I would experience when that "I" which could experience didn't exist any more...." (Jung, 1939, cited in Coward, p.64) and suggests this is an example of "Eastern intuition over-reaching itself." (p. 61).

The West falls short from the Eastern point of view established by Coward, and Jung (seen by many in the West to have moved well beyond science) emerges as a hard-headed man dismissing as speculation what those within the tradition see as shored up by empirical experience. After that journey we are left as readers with more insight as to what issues are at stake as we take our position between immersion in the material world and release from its limitations and our own.

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