

Poses and Poseurs

Contributed by Chitra Raman
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A recent essay by Wendy Doniger on the website of The Christian Post (December 30, 2010) is titled: Is Yoga a form of Hinduism? Is Hinduism a form of Yoga? Which leads me to ask: Is American anthropology a form of Donigerism? Or does Doniger manifest a form of American anthropology? More amazing to me than Doniger's inventiveness is her reputation as an infallible authority on Hinduism. Many Americans would sooner turn to her than to a Hindu for answers on Hinduism, even if the latter were a scholar. Anyway, what is someone with Doniger's personal and publishing history doing on a conservative Christian website that publishes strongly anti-gay viewpoints? Hoping she won't be noticed, perhaps?

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By

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If ignorance is bliss, there should be more happy people.

Victor Cousin, (1792-1867) French

philosopher and historian

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Anyway, what is someone with Doniger's personal and publishing history doing on a conservative Christian website that publishes strongly anti-gay viewpoints? Hoping she won't be noticed, perhaps?

In discussing the origins and evolution of yoga, she says in this article: "The (yoga) postures developed much later ... but more from nineteenth-century European traditions such as Swedish gymnastics, British body-building, Christian Science, and the YMCA."

I wonder what Yogacharya B.K.S Iyengar would make of this contention. At what point in Iyengar's life, I wonder, does Doniger place him secretly observing Swedish gymnasts and British bodybuilders and incorporating their moves into his asanas? Surely not before the age of 15, in the years that Iyengar spent falling ill with malaria, typhoid and tuberculosis. He couldn't have picked up pointers from watching television either. Iyengar began teaching yoga at Pune in 1937. The first hour-long inaugural television program on Doordarshan was broadcast from New Delhi in 1973.

Doniger's forays into her subject matter are sometimes strongly reminiscent of the first-century Roman naturalist Pliny the Elder, whose completely made-up descriptions of animals and exotic places transfixed his gullible readership. According to one source,

"Compiling so much information didn't leave much time for fact-checking, and Pliny verified little of what he wrote. Among the marvels he described were monstrous races in far-off places: evil-eyed Illyrians, one-legged Monocoli and animal-human hybrids. Monsters particularly congregated, he suspected, in places like India and Ethiopia."

Pliny wrote about a tiny fish that could immobilize a war ship with the power of its suction. He described elephants walking to a river for a purification ritual at the new moon, and carrying their young in a procession

after it was completed.

Apart from its entertainment value, certain aspects of Pliny's work are worth noting for their bearing on modern-day scholarship. His Natural History -- a staggeringly voluminous 37-Volume opus - continued to be regarded as a respected and much-admired reference among the highly educated a whole millennium after his death. He wrote in Latin, a language accessible to a very narrow spectrum of the educated elite, which might explain why no serious critique of his work appeared until 1492. He did not willfully set out to mislead. He just didn't -- or couldn't -- verify the information that he presented as absolute fact.

So how can we reasonably separate fact from fancy with respect to yoga?

Modern yoga had its genesis in the work of the 14th century Hindu sage Svamimarama, who wrote the 389-verse "Hatha Yoga Pradipika." However, its roots and philosophical approach to human enlightenment through self-discipline and awareness definitely extend much farther back to older Hindu texts. Indian scholars date Patanjali, author of the Yoga Sutras to 1300 BCE, not 250 BCE as believed by Doniger. The basis for this date is that the texts record Kappa Draconis in the constellation Draco as the pole star.

Astronomical data can reliably be construed as absolute proof of a text's true antiquity. This is because observations were made with the naked eye in ancient times, without recourse to the computerized and immensely powerful observational instruments available today. There would have been no way of making up the coordinates and relative positions of the stars unless that was exactly how it appeared at that point in time. The ancients faithfully recorded what they saw. And with the sophisticated instruments now available to make back-calculations, we are able to verify the historical era that best fits that celestial snapshot.

Doniger goes on to contend that "yoga is 'not just Hinduism'; as we have seen, it has rich European (and Christian!) elements..."

She then adds "despite the historical evidence" for those influences (you'll have to look elsewhere for that evidence, it's not in this article) "many Hindus, such as those in the Hindu American Foundation, insist that meditational yoga-rather than temple rituals, the worship of images of the gods, or other, more passionate and communal forms of religion-has always been, and remains, the essence of Hinduism, their religion."

I don't recall that the Hindu American Foundation (HAF) ever said Hinduism was about meditational yoga "rather than" temple

rituals and all the other practices of Hinduism that Doniger lists. The Hinduism that Hindus practice is not encoded in George Bush - style "either-or" binaries. One may incorporate meditational yoga if one so chooses, along with other norms of worship.

What HAF did was to step forward and make a strong and unambiguous statement in the "On Faith" blog of the Washington Post, about something that all Hindus know to be true -- namely, that yoga is of Hindu origin and is part of Hindu spiritual practice. Period.

This assertion piqued none other than the mighty Deepak Chopra, pop salvation icon and recipient of the satirical Ig Nobel Prize in 1998 for "his unique interpretation of quantum physics as it applies to life, liberty, and the pursuit of economic happiness." Chopra, alarmed perhaps by the possible damage to his multimillion-dollar repackaging enterprise tried in his rejoinder to decisively unyoke Yoga from Hinduism.

Chopra stated that yoga was rooted in a "non-sectarian universal consciousness" as expounded by Vedic sages long before Hinduism arose. His comments clearly were addressed to the sizeable section of his readership that cannot tell if the word "Vedic" has any connection with Hinduism.

Not to be intimidated, blog author and HAF co-founder Aseem Shukla shot back with an essay titled "Dr. Chopra: Honor thy Heritage." The piece delivered a strong and classy rebuke to Chopra for the latter's failure to acknowledge the philosophical source of his brilliant word-edifices.

One understands why Chopra would be worried, but accepting yoga's roots in Hinduism needn't be traumatic for our Christian friends. After all, no Hindu expects a Christian to deny Christ and embrace Hinduism in order to practice yoga.

So, to fence-sitters from every faith, I say relax, renew, and resume your deep breathing exercises.

But if it's enlightenment you're after, do abstain from Wendy Doniger.