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YOGA AND MEDITATION
IN MODERN ESOTERIC
TRADITIONS

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Introduction

An exploration of the role of yogic and meditational practices within ‘esoteric traditions’ poses a range of methodological and historiographical challenges. ‘Esotericism’ has often been understood in a phenomenological or so-called perennialist sense as a universalist feature of religion, a perspective that resurfaced in the work of influential scholars such as Mircea Eliade. The emergence of esotericism as an institutionalised field of academic study, especially since the 1990s, went hand in hand with a rejection of such approaches, which appeared to carry too much of the ‘religionist’ baggage from insider-perspective understandings of esotericism (for an overview of these debates, see Hanegraaff 2015, 2012). For this reason, most of the scholarship on esotericism is produced within a field that is called ‘western esotericism’, which focuses on currents such as Gnosticism, Hermeticism, Rosicrucianism, Spiritualism or occultism in the geographical contexts of Europe and North America since Late Antiquity. On the other hand, esotericism can indeed be understood, for instance from a sociological or anthropological viewpoint, as signifying ‘hidden’ or ‘coded’, which would allow for a comparative structural analysis in different cultural, geographical or historical contexts. Perhaps even more importantly, it is anything but clear which boundaries can be drawn on the basis of the notion ‘western’ from a historical perspective (Asprem 2014; Granholm 2014). This can be exemplified by the highly important transmission of Greek (including Gnostic and Hermetic) sources within Islamicate contexts (Saif 2015) that are, in turn, relevant for an understanding of South Asian contexts.

The present chapter raises important questions about the meaning of ‘esotericism’ and the definitions and relationship between ‘East’ and ‘West’. As will be argued, the reception of yogic and meditational practice can only be comprehended against the background of western esoteric developments since the end of the seventeenth century, but it would be highly misleading to conclude that such influences were unidirectional. Quite the contrary, the examples that have been chosen for this chapter will serve to demonstrate that the very meaning of ‘esotericism’ can only be understood in the context of a complex tangle of global exchanges since the nineteenth century. These developments should be seen against the background of debates revolving around the meaning of religion, science, philosophy, national identity and perceptions of the body (Bergunder 2016). Esotericists, such as Spiritualist, occultists or members of the Theosophical Society, played an instrumental and often neglected role in these developments.
This chapter will highlight the role of such esotericists for modern interpretations of yoga and meditation, while at the same time stressing the need to take into account the agency and influence of their South Asian interlocutors, on whose expertise, knowledge and philosophical skills they depended. Indeed, it will be argued that modern understandings of yoga and meditation can only be fully grasped from a global perspective that investigates these mutual and often ambiguous influences. The chapter will move through the contexts of Mesmerism, Spiritualism, occultism and the Theosophical Society from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, a progression that increasingly saw global entanglements, profound shifts and ambiguous complexities. The heavy focus on the nineteenth century has been chosen because present-day understandings of yoga and meditation are arguably more significantly rooted in that period than in more recent contexts; the fields of youth, hippy or New Age cultures since the 1960s were certainly instrumental in popularising the practice of yoga and meditation, but can themselves only be comprehended against the background of nineteenth-century developments (e.g. Oliver 2014). While the frame and focus of this chapter are unavoidably incomplete, the reader will hopefully find abundant evidence for both the relevance of nineteenth-century developments for present-day yoga and meditation, and for the necessity to look at them from a perspective that questions historiographical dichotomies between ‘East’ and ‘West’.

**Mesmerism**

The modern history of yoga and meditation would be incomprehensible without Mesmerism, a theory named after its founder Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815) that developed into a range of highly influential currents. Since the publication of his dissertation about the influences of planetary forces on Earth and its inhabitants in 1766, Mesmer propounded a complex theory of an all-pervading ‘subtle physical fluid’ that manifested in different physical forces such as magnetism, warmth or electricity. In the middle of the 1770s, he developed the notion of ‘animal magnetism’, which, according to Mesmer, could be employed by trained doctors for therapeutic purposes. These medical implications, although controversially discussed by contemporaries, were enthusiastically received by readers and practitioners who, like many others at that time, were occupied with all-encompassing physical and cosmological theories. It was in this broader cultural context that Mesmerism would exert its largest influence, since its concept of an all-pervading universal fluid provided a basis for attempts to synthesise natural philosophy, the emerging modern sciences and theories about religious experiences. In this context, it was instrumental for the emergence of hypnotism and psychological theories (Crabtree 1993; Gauld 1992).

Central to this was the notion of a subtle energetic body and a concept of sickness relating to blockages of energy and subtle matter. According to Mesmeric therapy, the removal of such blockages could not only lead to a restoration of harmony within the individual body, but also to its unity with the ‘Whole’, the (re-)establishment of the individual’s connectedness with nature and the universe. Such combinations of mechanistic, natural philosophical and religious concepts were not unusual at the time, but Mesmer’s insistence on the body as a tool of experience and therapy was. The techniques to achieve this could be learned by cultivating the instinct, or what Mesmer referred to as the inner or sixth sense. The receptiveness of the cosmic fluid, and thus a connection to the Whole, could be increased and was especially effective when the activity of the mind was calmed. The methodical experimentation with calming the mind and inducing altered states of consciousness was an integral part of Mesmeric practice. As Karl Baier has pointed out, Mesmerism thus developed a complex language of contemplative bodily experience that formed a matrix for the later reception of South Asian yogic and
meditational practices (Baier 2009: 183). It also exerted a lasting influence on western discourse about religious experience, for instance in the context of Psychical Research and the theories of William James.

The predominance of the religious, ‘spiritual’ or ‘mystical’ element made Mesmerism especially attractive within the context of Romanticism (Darnton 1968; Winter 1998). Contemporaries would soon point out Mesmerism’s similarity with Neo-Platonic and Hermetic concepts of the World Soul and correspondences or analogies between the bodily microcosm and the universal macrocosm. It is important to emphasise that Mesmerism grew into a highly heterogeneous and eclectic set of currents, rather than representing a unified school of thought. An important step in this process was the activities of the Marquis de Puységur (1751–1825), who stressed the role of the magnetiser’s ‘will’ and thus highlighted the need for the cultivation of the practitioner’s individual capabilities. According to Puységur and his followers, it was largely due to the therapist’s will that a ‘magnetic sleep’ could be induced in the patient, leading to ‘somnambulistic’ states that climaxed in ecstatic experiences. These included the perception of the bodily energy flows along the nerve plexuses, which was described by widely-read authors such as Carl Alexander Ferdinand Kluge (1782–1844) and Joseph Ennemoser (1787–1854). In this context, magnetism was linked to magical practices and gave birth to a veritable ‘magnetic historiography’ that sought to explain magic scientifically (Hanegraaff 2012: 260–277). It was also seen as a means to establishing contact with the spirit world and the development of clairvoyant abilities, for instance in the famous works of Justinus Kerner (1786–1862) and Johann Heinrich Jung-Stilling (1740–1817).

These authors had openly religious backgrounds and intentions, which were often related to Freemasonry, Swedenborgianism or Rosicrucianism. While Mesmer also had close links to these milieus, he kept them separate from his medical theories, at least in public. This alliance between (esoteric) religious currents and Mesmerism led to several schisms with strands who proclaimed more scientific-medical identities. Mesmerism was thus controversially transformed from a therapeutic-medical theory into an integral part of nineteenth-century religious discourse. This went hand in hand with the further elaboration of techniques of ‘self-magnetisation’ and the control of occult forces through Mesmeric magic. Such syntheses were central to the emergence of modern magical currents, such as French Martinism at the end of the eighteenth century (Viatte 1928; Le Forestier 1970), which were essential for developments in the nineteenth century and remain influential.

It was also in the Romantic context that the idea of animal magnetism at the root of universal religious experience was linked to contemporary theories about the common origin of myths and religion in ‘the East’ (Baier 2009: 200–221). In his famous Latin translation of the Oupnek’hât (1801–1802), the Persian rendering of the Upanishads, Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron (1731–1805) established a correlation between prāṇa and magnetism, which was taken up by a number of influential authors. For instance, Joseph Görres (1776–1848) discussed these forces in the context of meditation. Ennemoser claimed that wisdom about magnetism was especially developed in ‘the East’, and discussed Indian magic in relation to the meditational practices of the Brahmans. In his Untersuchungen über den Lebensmagnetismus und das Hellsehen from 1821, Johann Carl Passavant (1790–1857) contemplated travel accounts about fakirs, Sufis and ‘yogins’ (‘Djogis’, ‘Jauguis’…), linking their practices to magic, somnambulism, clairvoyance, ecstasy, meditation, contemplation or Kabbalah.

In the work of Karl Joseph Windischmann (1775–1839), these connections were particularly elaborated (Baier 2009: 221–243). A professor of philosophy in Bonn who was also a member of the medical faculty, Windischmann had made a Romantic transition from Freemasonry to Catholicism. He specialised in magnetism both from a historical and practical perspective. Due
to his close contacts with the Indologists in Bonn, he could draw on significant philological expertise for his unfinished *Philosophie im Fortgang der Weltgeschichte* (1827–1834). Making use of the *Manusmṛti*, several Upanishads and the first German translation of the beginning of the *Yogasūtra* by Friedrich Rosen, Windischmann argued that ‘the magnetic life of the soul’ was the ‘principle of Indian thought’ and interpreted Brahmanical doctrines through the lens of animal magnetism. He drew extensive parallels between somnambulism and Indian meditational and yogic practices. According to him, Brahmanical practices were thoroughly determined by ‘Joga’, a method of contemplation leading to ecstasy and finally to a unification with God. Since such ‘magical’ practices lay at the foundation of Indian thought, they formed the crucial link to western practices of magic and Mesmerism, a case that Windischmann made, among other things, by an identification of *prāṇa* and the magnetic fluid.

**Spiritualism and early occultism**

These developments of Mesmeric theories formed an integral part of the contexts in which nineteenth-century European and North American esoteric currents such as Spiritualism and occultism emerged. Somewhat misleadingly, the history of Spiritualism is often begun in the year 1848 when the young Fox sisters heard ‘rappings’ in their home in Hydesville, New York, which were interpreted as attempts by spirits to communicate with the living. This prompted a hugely influential fashion of conducting spirit research, holding séances and consulting mediums. The history of Spiritualism, however, reaches back at least to works such as those by Kerner, Jung-Stilling and others. The milieu in which Spiritualism emerged as a movement was largely determined by a mélange of mesmeric theories, Swedenborgianism and early socialist doctrines, most notably Fourierism and Saint-Simonism. This socio-political context is responsible for the radical, progressive character that is associated with nineteenth-century Spiritualism, which was often concerned with social reform, emancipation and feminism. In Europe, the triad Mesmer-Swedenborg-Fourier had been commonplace among radicals in the 1820s until the 1840s (Monroe 2008; Strube 2016; Strube 2017b). Social and physical laws were perceived as inherently intertwined and often expressed in the language of (magnetic) attraction, correspondences and analogies. This combination is also characteristic of the pioneers of US-American Spiritualism such as Andrew Jackson Davis (1826–1910) (Fuller 1982; Albanese 2007). It is important to keep these connections in mind because they also manifested in a concern for alternative forms of healing and diet, new models of communal living and body culture, which paved the way for twentieth-century New Age culture.

The revived interest in the magnetically informed theory and practice of magic came to full fruition in the middle of the nineteenth century and manifested in a new edition of Ennemoser’s 1819 work about the history of magnetism, now titled *Geschichte der Magie* (1844, English as *The History of Magic* in 1854), as well as in the widely-read *History of Magic, Witchcraft, and Animal Magnetism* by John Campbell Colquhoun (1851). Most influential, however, were the works of Alphonse-Louis Constant (1810–1875), who, using his new pseudonym Eliphas Lévi, was the first to systematically employ the term *occultisme* from the year 1854 onward. His *Dogme et rituel de la haute magie* (1854–1856), *Histoire de la magie* (1860) and other writings, are still among the most influential esoteric writings ever published. Constant had been a radical religious socialist, exiled Catholic cleric and Romantic artist in the 1840s. It could hardly become more obvious that it was exactly in this context of radical social reform, Spiritualism and heterodox-Romantic Catholicism that Constant’s ‘occultism’ emerged (Strube 2016).

It is important to emphasise that this reflected major debates about the origin of religion and the explanation of religious experiences, rather than esoteric doctrines that could be regarded as
culturally marginal. For instance, among Constant’s main influences we find the so-called neo-Catholic school around Félicité de Lamennais (1782–1854) that propagated a ‘Catholic science’ to counter the blossoming historical-critical scholarship. Part of that science was an occupation with Mesmerism, as illustrated by the famous work of Henri Lacordaire (1802–1861) who explained the miracles of Jesus Christ with his command of ‘occult’ magnetic powers. Most importantly, the neo-Catholics developed the notion of the révélation primitive, a common origin of all religions that allegedly became demonstrable through the recent discoveries of orientalist studies, especially in Sanskrit and Persian (McCalla 2009). These ideas were intensely discussed across national borders and exerted a significant influence on contemporary debates about religion. The vast exchanges between French and German Catholics, including Görres, exemplify how these issues were directly linked to the history, theory and practices of magnetism, including its supposed identity with ‘Indian magic’.

This Romantic, often Catholic and socialist occupation with Mesmerism and occult traditions of wisdom (often from ‘the East’) formed the basis of what can be termed ‘spiritualist magnetism’ (Strube 2016: 375, cf. Monroe 2008: 64–94). Constant was a relatively new member of this heterogeneous group of authors. Much more prominent at the time was Jules du Potet de Sennevoy (1796–1881), who published extensively about his peculiar mix of Martinist-style magic, which involved the use of mirrors, magnetism and socialist ideas. When Constant entered this sphere as Eliphas Lévi, he sharply rejected the practice of Spiritualism and posited himself as a vocal critic of practical magic, whose history and procedures he nevertheless discussed in length. Dismissing the Spiritualists as amateurish dabblers unaware of the true nature of their phenomena, he stressed the importance of the magician’s will for the mastery of the universal force that he termed the Astral Light, following Du Potet and the Martinists. This rejection of both Spiritualism and the ‘amateurish’ practice of magic was an important hallmark in the history of occultism. At the same time, altered states of consciousness, meditation and contemplation were among Lévi’s favourite subjects, bearing importance for later occultist appropriation of yogic and meditational techniques. According to Lévi, one of the most important goals of the magician was the mastery of ‘self-magnetisation’ to induce ecstatic and visionary states. However, he levelled harsh criticism against ‘India’, which he regarded as a locus of black magic and religious degeneration – citing the Oupnek’hat and yogic practices as evidence (Baier 2009: 276). Lévi’s discussion of ‘India’ was mainly informed by contemporary (Catholic) historiographies of religion and did not rely on primary source material. His understanding of Indian ‘black magic’ that supposedly originated in the ‘Gnostic’ context of the School of Alexandria mainly served the purpose of promoting his ambiguous and often confusing narrative of ‘true’ versus ‘false’ religion (Strube 2017c). It was only later that European esotericists would engage with Indian sources more directly.

The Theosophical Society

As has become clear by now, Romantic and orientalist images of India or ‘the East’ formed an important frame of reference for early occultist writings. In contrast to Lévi’s negative remarks, later works such as Emma Hardinge Britten’s novel Ghost Land (1876) presented India as a haven of occult wisdom, although in a very abstract, ahistorical fashion. At that time, India was still mainly an orientalist fantasy rather than a source of information. When occultism became ‘institutionalised’ in the 1870s and the 1890s, this changed radically. A key factor in that development was the founding of the Theosophical Society in New York in 1875 (Hammer 2013). Growing out of a Spiritualist context and relying on most of the magnetistic, Romantic and occultist authors that have been discussed so far, Theosophy was occupied with an idealised
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‘East’ from the beginning. However, it was Rosicrucianism, Hermeticism, Kabbalah and other ‘western esoteric’ currents that provided the most relevant references and identity markers for Theosophists. This focus would soon shift towards the east. After the Society’s founders Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891) and Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907) had visited Mumbai (then Bombay) for the first time in 1879, the Society permanently moved its headquarters to Adyar near Chennai (then Madras) in 1882.

It quickly established itself, not only as a significant force in the Indian cultural, religious and political landscape, but also as one of the most important platforms for exchanges between India, Europe and North America – and, as becomes increasingly clear, with other parts of the world (Chajes and Huss 2016). Prominent Indian historical figures such as Mahatma Gandhi were influenced by Theosophy, and the election of Annie Besant, president of the Theosophical Society from 1907, as president of the Indian National Congress in 1917 is an illustration of the significant and often ambiguous role of Theosophy within the colonial framework. On the one hand, Theosophists such as Besant were instrumental in the struggle for Indian national identity and independence, providing Indian intellectuals with new means of communication and religious authority; on the other hand, the Theosophical perception of India was thoroughly informed by orientalist notions that more or less implicitly reproduced racially connoted power hierarchies (Bevir 1998; Viswanathan 1998; Bevir 2000; Bevir 2003; Veer 2001: 55–82; Lubelsky 2012; Bergunder 2014; Bergunder 2016). These ambiguities, of which an example will be given below, deserve further scholarship.

Scholars have discussed in some detail how the founders of the Theosophical Society, most prominently the towering character of Blavatsky, gradually directed their attention to the east, and finally to India (Prothero 1993; McVey 2005; Pasi 2010; Hanegraaff 2015). It is important to note that this went hand in hand with a rejection of Spiritualism, which, like in the works of Lévi, was regarded as puerile, superficial and amateurish. Rather, Theosophists stressed the need for initiation and ‘traditional’ knowledge, meaning that esoteric wisdom cannot simply be accessed and understood by a medium, but requires a learned preparation in esoteric teachings and the means to decipher them. India came to be regarded as the treasure trove of ancient ‘Aryan’ wisdom that held that required key to occultism. Behind that idea stood the orientalist discovery of the relationship between Sanskrit and European languages, which, during the nineteenth century, first inspired several theories about the origins of religion and ‘myths’, and received an increasingly biological connotation towards the end of the century. In this context, Yogic and meditational practices were at the core of Theosophical interest in that supposed traditional ‘Aryan’ wisdom, and as a result, Theosophists gave yoga an unprecedented global attention that formed the basis for later developments in the twentieth century and New Age culture.

This process is inherently intertwined with global debates about the meaning and relationship of religion, science and philosophy (a ‘synthesis’ of which was promised by Blavatsky in her famous Secret Doctrine from 1888), as well as with questions of Hindu religious and national identities. When they entered India, Theosophists found themselves amid existing debates about these issues, which in their own right were already the outcome of intense exchanges between ‘East and West’. The Theosophical Society was briefly allied with Dayananda Saraswati’s Arya Samaj in 1877 and joined the debates surrounding the Brahma Samaj. The Theosophical Society rapidly branched out in the 1880s, founding numerous lodges across the subcontinent and providing the Indian intelligentsia with forums such as The Theosophist, a journal that opened up a new effective global line of communication for numerous Indians.

The Theosophists’ activities were a decisive factor for a revival of yogic practices on the subcontinent. They thus became an integral part of the dynamics often referred to as ‘Hindu revivalism’, in which the Arya and Brahmo Samaj played a key role. Formed in 1875 and 1828,
respectively, these societies tried to renegotiate – or, perhaps more precisely, establish – the meaning of ‘Hindu’ in the light of western criticism of Indian religious traditions. Part of this heterogenous project were not only concerns about the religious and cultural regeneration of India, but also of physical exercises that should invigorate the Indian body. Yoga played a central part in this context, and the Theosophists would actively contribute to its modern interpretation and popularisation.

A major factor in that was the Theosophical concern for new editions and translations of Sanskrit and vernacular texts: readers will find that many contemporary editions and studies were printed by Theosophical publishing houses. In 1883, Rajendralal Mitra wrote in the translation of *The Yoga Aphorisms of Patanjali* that no pandit in Bengal had made yoga the special subject of his studies (Mitra 1881: xc), which demonstrates the relative lack of interest of western-educated Indians in yoga. Mirroring missionary and orientalist polemics, yoga was often regarded as superstitious, barbaric and dangerous. Not least thanks to the Theosophists, this attitude was beginning to change. One year before Mitra, the Indian Theosophist Tukaram Tatya (1836–1898) had published James R. Ballantyne’s translation of the first and second chapters of the *Yoga Sūtra*, combined with Govindaram Sastri’s translation of the third and fourth chapters that had been published in the journal *Pandit*. This book, called *The Yoga Philosophy*, was thus the first English edition of the whole of Patañjali’s text. Its introduction was written by Olcott, who explicitly identified yoga with the occultist technique of self-mesmerisation. A second enhanced version was published in 1886, and a revised, more accessible version in 1889 by the leading US-American Theosophist and co-founder William Quan Judge (1851–1896).

The Theosophical occupation with yoga can be observed as early as with the inception of the flagship journal, *The Theosophist*, in an article about ‘Yoga Vidya’ from October 1879 until January 1880. Therein, yoga is discussed in the light of Mesmerism and Spiritualism, with references to the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and the English translation of the *Yoga Sūtra* from *Pandit*. The year 1880 also marks the first engagement with tantra, which set the stage for a Theosophical reception of *kuṇḍalinī*, *cakras* and related yogic concepts that remains influential up to the present day (Baier 2012; Baier 2016). In what follows, this first encounter with tantra will be put in the context of the western esoteric reception of yoga and meditation, focusing on a selection of key concepts and the role of Indian authors in their transmission into western alternative religious culture.

In January 1880, a western Theosophist using the pseudonym ‘Truth Seeker’ requested further information about the rising of the Kundalini, about which he had read in an article series from 1853/1854. This practice was supposedly described in the *Jñānēśvarī* and equalled, in the eyes of the Truth Seeker, those of the *Oupnek’hat* as well as those of western mystics. The editors hoped that Dayananda ‘would give the world a translation of this work, and also of Patanjali’s *Yoga Sastra* …’ In the February issue, ‘a Bengali friend’ penned a first response to this query, pointing out that Dayananda, who was in fact a staunch critic of tantra, was mistaken. He had only seen the ‘black Tantra’ and unfairly dismissed the whole tradition, which indeed stood behind the *Jñānēśvarī*. This rejection of Dayananda’s judgement is interesting insofar as it represents a criticism of both western-educated Indians as well as missionary and orientalist perspectives on tantra. The Theosophists’ eagerness to learn more about this topic would soon be satisfied. After the editors had wondered if ‘no one in Bengal care enough for truth and science to send us English translations’ of the *Jñānēśvarī*, a range of articles was published on the topic in the same year and the years to follow.

The first to take up the task was the Bengali author Barada Kanta Majumdar, who published a series of articles praising the value of tantra. It is significant that Majumdar would later collaborate with John Woodroffe on the Arthur Avalon project, which produced highly influential
books on tantra, as will be discussed below. This collaboration was arguably prepared, at least to a significant extent, by these early exchanges in the 1880s. In ‘Tantric Philosophy’ and ‘A Glimpse of Tantrik Occultism’, Majumdar drew parallels between tantric-yogic practices, Mesmerism and Spiritualism. This remarkable identification of ‘western’ and ‘Tantrik Occultism’ was further explained by Majumdar in his contribution to Tukaram Tatyā’s (1836–1898) influential Guide to Theosophy from 1887. In ‘The Occult Sciences’, Majumdar emphasised that western science was only rediscovering what Indian Tantric wisdom had already been practicing throughout the ages. While Theosophists and other esotericists had long claimed the superiority of their synthesis of science, religion and philosophy over ‘materialistic’ mainstream science and scholarship, this declaration of Indian spiritual-scientific superiority was a key characteristic of the discourse about yoga, meditation and tantra.

These assertions of authenticity and superiority played directly into the inner-esoteric identity struggles revolving around initiation into higher knowledge and the ‘competent’ practice of magic. It is not least for this reason that the western esoteric reception of Indian concepts was strongly contested, chaotic and often self-contradictory. What can be said with certainty is that western esotericism and Indian traditions became deeply intertwined in the process. The studies by Elizabeth De Michelis (2004), Karl Baier (2009) and Mark Singleton (2010) have demonstrated the importance of these exchanges for new understandings of yoga, both in India and in the West. The hybrid outcomes of these entanglements have often been dismissed as inauthentic. However, instead of regarding them simply as the products of western Theosophical imagination, it is important to consider the agency of the learned Indians on whose information and philological competence western Theosophists relied.

An influential example of this relationship is Sri Sabhapati Swami, who was born in 1840 in Chennai and educated at a Christian missionary school. After having worked in the textile trade, he embarked on a spiritual journey and in 1880 published Om: A Treatise on Vedantic Raj Yoga. The text focused on Kundalini Yoga and presented a twelve-chakra system, six of which were located in the head. It saw several editions in the subsequent years and a German translation in 1909. Sabhapati Swami’s writings, which were praised by an ‘Admirer’ in the Theosophist in September 1880, exerted a decisive yet controversial influence on western perceptions of Tantric yoga (Baier 2009: 363–369). Blavatsky herself adopted the terminology of chakras in the Theosophist in August 1882, referring to a six-chakra system that would later be expanded into seven. In the same year, Olcott lectured about the connection between the chakras and the western technique of ‘astral projection’, as he saw it taught by Sabhapati Swami’s Vedantic Raj Yoga.

Astral projection was an important concept in nineteenth-century esotericism, which can be traced back to the early Mesmeric authors discussed above. Jung-Stilling had already discussed the separation of an ‘etheric body’ from the material one. While early Theosophical texts discussed this with reference to Mesmeric and ascetic practices, incense or drugs and techniques like magic mirrors as described by Du Potet, Hardinge Britten and others, the shift to Kundalini Yoga for achieving astral projection is a hallmark in the esoteric reception of yoga (Deveney 1997a; Baier 2009: 297–299). Although a footnote in the Theosophist from June 1883 was still cautious to distinguish between ‘black’ and ‘white’ tantra analogous to black and white magic, several Theosophists were now willing to recognise the value of ‘Tantrik Occultism’ as the highest form of Indian esotericism – criticising the negative views on it held by adherents of the Arya and Brahmo Samaj.

In 1887, Sris Chandra Basu (1861–1918) published The Esoteric Science and Philosophy of the Tantras, a translation of the Śiva Saṃhitā. Basu (also spelled Vasu) was a Bengali civil servant and Sanskritist who was closely involved in Theosophical circles. Notably, he edited Sabhapati
Swami’s work and appears to have introduced the notion of ‘Mesmerism’ into it. Basu became a widely-read key actor for ‘Hindu revivalism’ in the early twentieth century and promoted the values of Indian culture based around the celebration of yogic texts, most notably the Śiva Saṃhitā and the Gheraṇḍa Saṃhitā, from an early point on. Apart from being hugely popular among esoteric actors, he was also cited by established academics such as Friedrich Max Müller, in his Six Systems of Indian Philosophy (1899) (Singleton 2010: 44–53). In March 1888, Basu’s younger brother Baman Das Basu (1867–1930) published an article about ‘The Anatomy of the Tantras’ in the Theosophist. While we find a six-chakra system plus the sahasrāra in Srish Chandra’s translation, Baman Das placed a seventh chakra in the medulla oblongata at the base of the brain; that is below the sixth chakra instead of at the crown of the head. Basu associated the chakras with the nerve plexuses, which was a product of both Theosophical and traditional Indian concepts and an important step in the development of modern systems of yoga. Early Mesmeric theories had already emphasised the importance of the ganglia for interactions between a subtle and a material body through ‘fine’ forces; this now became an integral point of reference for the explanation of yogic techniques. The association of the nervous system and the chakras is often traced to Vasant G. Rele’s Mysterious Kundalini from 1927, which however appeared almost forty years after Basu’s article.

Another key aspect is the Theosophical reception of prānāyāma. Blavatsky had already referred to this technique as part of a ‘psychological science’ in her famous Isis Unveiled from 1877 (Blavatsky 1877: 590), but without tangible in-depth knowledge of actual Indian sources. In the 1880s, Theosophists were eager to learn more about pranayama, incorporating it into a variety of contested appropriations of yogic techniques and, in turn, transforming indigenous Indian understandings of it. Instrumental in this regard was Occult Science: The Science of Breath, first published in 1884 by Ram Prasad, the president of the Meerut Theosophical Society in Uttar Pradesh. Between 1887 and 1889, it was published as ‘Nature’s Finer Forces’ in The Theosophist, followed by an 1890 edition titled The Science of Breath and the Philosophy of the Tattvas. It exerted a large influence on a wide readership and had a profound impact on western esoteric practices.

As will be recalled, the question of ‘practice’ has been a subject of dispute among esotericists at least since the middle of the nineteenth century. Much of what has so far been referred to as ‘contested’ revolved around the question of whether a practice should be considered as ‘white’ or ‘black’, or if it operated on the material rather than the ‘spiritual’ level. This led to the Theosophical separation between what was perceived as Haṭha Yoga and Rāja Yoga. Many Theosophists rejected Hatha Yoga as an exoteric, merely physical system that was not only superficial and superstitious, but outright dangerous. This triggered controversial debates, which are reflected in the writings of another highly influential Indian author, Tallapragada Subba Row (1856–1890), who challenged Blavatsky’s negative view about Hatha Yoga in the 1880s and remains one the most important sources in the Theosophical context. The controversy is an illustrative example of the ambiguous power relations and claims to authenticity among the different actors within the Theosophical Society and other esoteric currents.

Raja Yoga, in contrast, was hailed by many Theosophical authors as the superior esoteric practice operating on the spiritual level, achieving the practitioner’s ascent through asceticism, meditation and spiritual exercises. This distinction was probably mainly inspired by Dayananda Saraswati, although Nobin Chunder Paul’s Treatise on the Yoga Philosophy from 1851 was also frequently cited as a source. However, these opinions were controversially discussed; in some instances, the front lines appear to reveal inner-Indian rivalries that demand further research. A good example for this is Damodar K. Mavalankar’s attack on Sabhapati Swami’s Vedantic Raj Yoga. Born in Ahmedabad in 1857, Mavalankar was one of the earliest and most important Indian informants of the Theosophists, since he had met Blavatsky and Olcott in 1879. In a
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review of Sabhapati Swami’s book in *The Theosophist* of March 1884, he strongly denounced the physical exercises described by the author, including the practice of āsanas. This criticism was adopted by Blavatsky and Olcott, for instance in the second edition of the Patañjali edition from 1885. Similarly, Blavatsky levelled harsh criticism against the pranayama taught by Ram Prasad, which she regarded as black magical, Tantric and thus harmful.

These quarrels did not end the demand of many Theosophists for practical experiences, and it was for this reason – and, as will be seen, because of competing esoteric societies – that Blavatsky formed an Esoteric Section or Eastern School in 1888 (Baier 2009: 385–395). In this ‘Inner Group’, members were taught ‘practical occultism’ including tantric-inspired yoga (Leland 2016: 117–127). Blavatsky designed the lessons for this group, which were published by Besant in the posthumous third volume of the *Secret Doctrine* in 1897. Blavatsky’s interpretation of notions like the chakras, nadis, kundalini, etc. were fairly ‘creative’ and often erroneous from a historical perspective. Clearly, Blavatsky was concerned with harmonising these concepts with her understanding of Theosophy, or with what she termed the ‘Trans–Himalayan school, of the ancient Indian Raja-Yogis, with which the modern Yogis of India have little to do’ (Blavatsky 1987: 616). In doing so, she increasingly referred to the hidden ‘Masters’ from whom she supposedly received esoteric instructions, rather than living Indian yogis or historical yogic traditions. This underlines how colonial and racial power dynamics led to an often ambiguous relationship between western Theosophists and their Indian collaborators, as has been indicated above. Apart from this, the tendency of the Theosophical Society to reject the bodily practices of ‘Hatha Yoga’ left the field open to other currents who became instrumental in preparing the ground for present-day practices of yoga.

Later Occultism and New Thought

Apart from the clashes about the question of practice, the esoteric landscape was determined by an escalating antagonism between ‘eastern’ and ‘western’ esotericism. The Theosophical Society went through several schisms after a crisis in 1886 that questioned the credibility of Blavatsky, the existence of the Masters and by extension the authority of eastern wisdom. In France, where the Theosophical Society had largely stimulated the formation of several occultist groups, a strand of neo-Martinism became increasingly vocal against eastern knowledge and instead proclaimed western Hermeticism, Kabbalah or Renaissance magic (Strube 2017a). This ‘Hermetic Reaction’ can also be observed in other national – and nationalistic – contexts, most notably in the Anglophone world where influential new societies were founded, such as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in 1888 (Godwin 1994: 333–362). In Germany, Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) founded the Anthroposophical Society in 1912, whose decidedly ‘Christian’, ‘Hermetic’ or ‘Gnostic’ orientation subsequently dominated an already fractured scene of Theosophical Societies in the German-speaking countries (Zander 2007; Staudenmaier 2014). At the same time, the emerging current of Traditionalism did retain an orientation towards India, most notably in the work of René Guénon (1886–1951), who exerted a decisive influence on Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877–1947) (Sedgwick 2004).

The most crucial and direct role for modern yogic and meditational practices was played by a heterogenous current called New Thought, which was largely stimulated by the writings of the US-based Mesmeric healer Phineas Quimby (1802–1866) and gained enormous influence in the 1870s and 1880s. According to Karl Baier, it can be considered ‘the first modern religious mass movement in the west that was simultaneously a meditation movement’ (Baier 2009: 430). The success of Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) is a good example for New Thought’s relevance. It was in this milieu that Vivekananda was especially popular during his activities in the United States since 1893. In turn, it has been pointed out that his outstandingly successful
system of Raja Yoga showed significant influences from the context of western esotericism, such as contemplative exercises, focus on bodily health, certain body postures and a concept of prana that was largely informed by Mesmerism (De Michelis 2004: 159–168). It can be argued, however, that Vivekananda’s success is not so much due to a spiritual vacuum or ‘craving’ on behalf of his western admirers (De Michelis 2004: 150). Quite the contrary, the ingredients of his success had already been prepared since the 1880s and were widespread at the time of his arrival. It might therefore be more appropriate to speak of ‘welcome structures’ (Baier 2009: 485) that were established by Mesmerism, Spiritualism, occultism, Theosophy and New Thought.

As Philip Deslippe has argued, early forms of yoga in the United States were ‘not physical or postural, but primarily mental and magical’ (Deslippe 2018). With this in mind, it must be noted that New Thought was markedly different to Theosophy in that it was very positive towards bodily practices. At the same time, contrary to occultist organisations who focused on practical occultism, it was neither restricted by elitist structures of initiation, nor was it stigmatised by the more extreme, scandalous practices of sexual magic that will be discussed below. New Thought proclaimed the power of mind over matter and developed systems of ‘positive thinking’ and ‘auto-suggestion’ that remain highly influential up to the present day. In the eyes of William James, it represented a system of ‘Mind Cure’, which he described in the chapter ‘The Religion of Healthy-Mindedness’ in The Varieties of Religious Experience (1902).

The followers of New Thought usually identified as Christian, and the movement itself was closely interwoven with the somewhat rivalling Christian Science, founded by Mary Baker Eddy (1821–1910). Despite its profession of ‘esoteric Christianity’, New Thought was not secret but open for all, and typically organised in Churches or communities. Nevertheless, New Thought shared common ancestors, narratives and sources, such as Mesmerism, Spiritualism or Christian mysticism. It also became widely successful in Europe, sharing many parallels and having large overlaps with movements such as the German Lebensreform. It was concerned with alternative lifestyles, health, body culture, spiritual and personal growth, communal living, art and often socially progressive and feminist tendencies. On both sides of the Atlantic, it was predominantly successful among the white Protestant middle class and developed strong missionary activities, including an unprecedented use of modern media.

Not surprisingly, New Thought had a complicated relationship with Theosophy and soon rose to the rank of its main competitor. This resulted in ambiguous mutual influences. For instance, the popular book The Primitive Mind Culture (1884) by the New Thought author Warren Felt Evans (1817–1889) showed influences of Theosophy, and it was through the latter that New Thought quickly opened up to Hinduism and Buddhism, promoting its own forms of yoga and meditation. In turn, Blavatsky’s Esoteric School teachings are clearly marked by New Thought concepts. Meditation, by the US-American Theosophist Henry Bedinger Mitchell, a pioneering work of an emerging genre of popular literature on meditation (1906, German 1908), is a mix of Theosophy, New Thought and Transcendentalism that does not stress, or even display, Theosophical teachings, initiations or Masters.

These developments laid the foundations for yoga as a mass movement. Its authors became progressively eclectic, such as William Walker Atkinson (1862–1932), who was as much an occultist as a proponent of New Thought. Using the name Yogi Ramacharaka, among numerous others, he focused on an interpretation of Hatha Yoga largely inspired by western body culture and techniques of pranayama that were largely mesmeric. In the early twentieth century, such writings widely disseminated instructions for relaxation, meditation and contemplation, often combined with yogic practices or what was named as such. By the end of World War I, such practices were an integral part of North American and European culture and appreciated not only by those seeking alternative lifestyles.
There were also more deviant and exclusive currents within the occultist fold that not only focused on the refinement of the material, astral or etheric body through postural, meditational or breathing techniques, but also on more scandalous forms of sexual magic (Urban 2006). In 1884, the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor made a public appearance. Claiming to be of ancient origin, it propagated the ideas of Pascal Beverly Randolph (1825–1875), an Afro-American occultist who had elaborated a system of magic that tried to harness sexual energies (Godwin, Chanel and Deveney 1995; Deveney 1997b). This magical system was derived from western sources, largely within the context of Spiritualism and Mesmerism, but it should be noted that Randolph’s claim to have learned these techniques from fakirs and dervishes in the Near East still awaits scholarly investigation. The year 1888 saw the founding of the more famous Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, a training ground for a range of occultists dedicated to more transgressive strands of practical occultism. The Golden Dawn practice of ‘Tattwa meditation’ in order to achieve ‘astral travel’ (Owen 2004: 150) is an illustrative example of how Theosophically transmitted writings by Indians found their way into western occultism: its main source were Ram Prasad’s writings on ‘Nature’s Finer Sources’ and the ‘Science of Breath’.

An occupation with yogic notions in relation to sexual magic arose especially within the Ordo Templi Orientis, whose foundation can be traced back to a collaboration between Carl Kellner (1850–1905), Theodor Reuss (1855–1923) and Franz Hartmann (1838–1912) in the 1890s. The order was probably established between 1906 and 1912 (Pasi 2014). Kellner’s Yoga: Eine Skizze über den psycho-physiologischen Teil der alten indischen Yogalehre (1896) discussed Hatha Yoga practices, while Reuss’s 1906 writing, Lingam-Yoni, oder die Mysterien des Geschlechts-Kultus, was occupied with sexuality in the comparative history of religions (Baier 2018). Despite the Indianising title, the latter book was a translation of Hargrave Jennings’s Phallicism (1884) and thus a specimen of the genre of literature about ‘phallic worship’ that had been popular in the nineteenth century. Reuss did not relate yogic or tantric concepts to sexual magic, and the use of respective terminology was most likely merely superficial (Bogdan 2006). Nevertheless, the Ordo Templi Orientis contributed to the flourishing of yogic terminology, and its influences can be discerned across the alternative religious milieu in Europe and North America, for instance in the work of Rudolf von Laban (1879–1958), the pioneer of modern dancing, whose mélange of dance and sun worship is exemplary of ‘Oriental’-inspired bodily practices.

Better known is the occultism of Aleister Crowley (1875–1947), who began his esoteric career in 1898 in the Golden Dawn and soon took over the Ordo Templi Orientis (Kaczynski 2010; Bogdan and Starr 2012; Pasi 2014). It is somewhat unclear to what extent Crowley relied on knowledge about historical Indian traditions for the construction of his immensely influential system called Thelema (Urban 2003; Urban 2006; Bogdan 2006: 223–226; Djurdjevic 2012). While Crowley never claimed to be a ‘tantric’, he did engage with Indian sources such as Basu’s translation of the Śiva Saṃhitā. This demonstrates the complex and often ambiguous character of the category ‘tantra’, not only in esoteric parlance during the period around 1900, but also in light of more recent scholarly attempts to define the category either on certain practices and or on traceable scriptural traditions. In the occultist contexts, these boundaries were frequently blurred, as Crowley’s synthesis can illustrate: there is no question that his strong focus on sexual magic led him to adopt a range of tantric vocabulary and yogic practices, which he combined with western esoteric elements – especially those arising from the work of Randolph – but also with contemporary scholarship such as that by William James or James G. Frazer (Asprem 2008; Pasi 2011). Within the system that Crowley called ‘ Magick’, yoga was perceived as an ancient method of psychological and physical self-enhancement that could now be employed in a thoroughly ‘scientific’ way – notions that clearly mirror the ideas that have been discussed so far.
The same period also saw the works of John Woodroffe (1865–1936), a British judge who worked in Kolkata (then Calcutta) between 1890 and 1922. From 1913 onward, a group of learned Indians and Woodroffe began to publish editions, translations and studies of tantric texts under the pseudonym ‘Arthur Avalon’ (Taylor 2001). This collaboration almost single-handedly initiated the academic study of tantra and yoga, influencing generations of scholars. Books like The Serpent Power (1918) remain popular until today. These texts, which were printed by the Theosophical publisher Ganesh & Co. in Chennai, are a fascinating example of how inherently intertwined the emerging academic study of tantra and yoga has been with the contexts discussed above. Although Woodroffe was no Theosophist and skeptical of contemporary esoteric movements, he drew extensive parallels between New Thought, Christian Science, Theosophy, occultism, etc. and tantric yoga. As Woodroffe wrote in Shakti and Shakta (1918), tantra, as ‘Indian occultism’, shared the same roots and goals as those western movements, which, like the most recent scientific advances, were only rediscovering ancient truths (e.g. Woodroffe 1929: 73–74). These and many similar remarks can only be comprehended in the light of what has been summarised in this chapter. Much of the evidence for this is rather straightforward: it might be recalled that one of Woodroffe’s main collaborators was none other than Barada Kanta Majumdar, the very same Bengali who began the Theosophist articles about tantra in 1880.

Against this background, mesmeric, New Thought and occultist concepts of ‘will power’ found their way into the Avalon/Woodroffe writings, as they did into other contemporary publications about yoga, tantra and related topics. Interestingly, there is no evidence that Crowley relied on the work of Woodroffe and his collaborators, but there are clear influences among a diverse range of other esotericists: the Italian fascistic esotericist Julius Evola (1898–1974), who corresponded with Woodroffe, developed this into a veritable ‘Yoga of Power’ (Urban 2006: 140–161) that aimed at the perfection of the individual and the development of superhuman faculties. All these strands come together in more recent, widely-read esoteric authors and editors such as Gerald J. Yorke (1901–1983), Israel Regardie (1907–1985) and Kenneth Grant (1924–2011), who fused yogic, magical, Kabbalistic and psychoanalytical aspects, especially those of Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961). These writings form the basis of much of present-day esoteric yogic and meditational practice (Newcombe 2013).

Jung, who was influenced by contemporary esoteric ideas as well as by Romantic Mesmerism, in turn largely relied on the writings of Avalon and Woodroffe in his discussions of yoga. This also applies to Mircea Eliade (1907–1986), another participant of the famous Eranos meetings where distinguished scholars of religion met since 1933 to discuss the history and theories of religions (Hanegraaff 2012: 277–314; Hakl 2013). As the case of the influential Indologist Heinrich Zimmer (1890–1943) illustrates, such ideas formed an integral part of Indological scholarship well into the twentieth century. For Zimmer and many others, Woodroffe’s/Avalon’s notion about tantra were especially influential for their understandings of Indian philosophy, art and esoteric traditions – aspects that form the core of the latter’s writings from the 1910s until the 1920s (Urban 2003: 168–170; cf. Kripal 2007).

Conclusion

This chapter has pointed towards the manifold and yet interconnected ways that led into the diffuse field of New Age culture, in which present-day yogic and meditational practices took shape. As has become evident, much of what is commonly understood as yoga and meditation was the outcome of a complex tangle of developments since the end of the eighteenth
century, when a Viennese doctor pondered the astral influences on the human mind and body. These exchanges between South Asian and western actors call for further exploration, which is thankfully happening within an expanding area of new research. Central challenges include an increased recognition of the historically significant role of historical actors that are marginalised or dismissed in more traditional lines of research – such as the Theosophists and other esotericists. It is also necessary to pay closer attention to the agency and influence of the colonised, which does not only require an increased consideration of vernacular sources but also an awareness of the ambiguities within the colonial framework that have been indicated above. Such an approach would ideally combine research and methodologies from the field of western esotericism and related subjects with those from the area of South Asian Studies and Indology.

As the examples in this chapter have shown, such a wider perspective would contribute, not only to an understanding of ‘esotericism’ but also of larger historical processes since the nineteenth century, whose ambiguities and complexities help to explain modern interpretations of yogic and meditational practices.

Bibliography


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