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RELG 213 – Hinduism

“Hathayoga: An Illustrative History” by James Mallinson, SOAS University of London

Dr. James Mallinson was everything I expected him to be (at least appearance-wise and socially) and that was an absolute delight. He had the perfect look for an Indological scholar and he exuded a great breadth and depth of knowledge about his areas of expertise. I thoroughly enjoyed his talk.

Before the talk, I had lunch with him, Professor Burchett, a few professors, and some fellow students. We ate Nawab and discussed his path to where he is today; from his high school and university days, to his post-graduate work and repeated trips to India. Dr. Mallinson regaled us with many anecdotes, several quite humorous. Having lunch with him and learning a bit about his background made his talk that much more interesting.

A few hours after lunch he gave a presentation entitled “Hathayoga: An Illustrative History” to a packed room in Blow Hall. The attendance of the event is a testament to the relevance of the subject matter to us in the western world, given the popularity of yoga. Dr. Mallinson took a somewhat chronological approach to the presentation and began with a brief survey of the predecessors of yoga in other religions present in India.

He began by discussing the Buddha, who spent some time enduring a number of ascetic practices before reaching the conclusion that it is a futile mean by which one may achieve enlightenment. The Buddha then prescribed the “middle path” (as Dr. Mallinson put it) as the best way to live. One of the first visuals of the talk was a statue depicting a starving rendering of the Buddha. Dr. Mallinson explains that this statue was most likely made after the Buddha had renounced his ascetic practices, and that its main purpose was probably to draw those who are attracted to