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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 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 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 practices that emphasize extreme discipline and then teach them the true way once they became more involved. The society of the time was quite taken by holy men performing extreme physical acts. Dr. Mallinson also discussed the extreme ascetic tendencies of the Jain tradition. In Jainism, karma is thought to be something of a material substance that sticks to the soul and weighs one down. One can get rid of it by building *tapas* through extreme practices.

Dr. Mallinson went on to show several images of men meditating around fires. He explains that that practice is done at certain parts of the year and some incorporate yoga into it as well. He also showed a depiction of a man lying on a bed of nails and told us that that practice has died down of late.

The presentation included a number of direct quotes from Hindu texts. For example, “pursue *siddhi* and *yoga* *siddhi* by means of *tapas*, o Bharata”, a quote from Mahabharata Aranyaka Parvan 2.77. Dr. Mallinson also mentioned that building *tapas* garners the attention of the gods so that they may grant you what you want. However, if one tries to build a lot of *tapas* for the wrong reasons, the gods may send a beautiful maiden to seduce you (he mentions the emphasis on celibacy among holy men and ascetics).

Dr. Mallinson discussed some of the ideas in the earliest identified texts dealing with yoga. Roughly speaking, the moon is in the head and the sun is in the stomach. The moon drips semen (which causes death over time). This can be overcome by breathing deeply into the stomach to push the fluid back up (although some try a more direct approach and hang upside down or do headstands to achieve this effect). Dr. Mallinson briefly discusses *Chakras* and then goes on to explain *Kundalini*, the goddess who resides in the lower back. She goes up to the head and brings back enlightenment with her.

He goes on to explore ancient idea about who can benefit from yoga; contrasting those who believed the “house-holder” could not gain much from it and those who viewed it as a completely non-sectarian practice that can benefit everyone. He also briefly mentions recent (somewhat controversial) findings that Buddhist texts may be the first to mention Hathayoga. He discussed several other topics throughout his presentation.

Dr. Mallinson’s talk was as informative as it was entertaining. It was great to hear about the theory of the origins of a practice as widespread and influential as yoga (even I do it!). I think the Williamsburg yoga scene really benefitted from learning about the roots of Hathayoga.