

# The iron cage of hermeneutics – A review of D. G. White *The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali*

## *Summary.*

*This review raises some general methodological issues. David Gordon White's critical meta-reading of conflicting and opposing interpretations of the Yoga Sutra implicitly shows the boundaries of hermeneutics. There never was and never will be a faithful exposition.*

*White demonstrates that many receptions of the Yoga Sutra – especially the modern accounts - clearly are social biased. However he leaves some interpretations – especially pre-modern commentaries - unfounded in history and society. This omission is based in a scholar doxa which is constructing some agents and their yoga discourse as sheltered from society and history.*

## **Breaking out of the fold**

The aim of Princeton's series of *Lives of Great religious Books* is to “**examine the historical origins of texts from the great religious traditions and trace how their reception, interpretation, and influence have changed – often radically – over time.**” David Gordon White's treatment of *The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali* (2014) certainly lives up to this aspiration.

One would actually expect that White is the ideal choice for such a task as many of his excellent works actually are weaved around broad surveys of certain themes. Unlike most academics he does not lean to the deplorable habit of solely specialising in a tiny fragment of cultural history. Instead he comes up with bold new perspectives on historical events by impressive reading of various texts which origins spans over thousands of years. White has an impressive ability to excavate and find texts and put them into the new context he is drawing up for his readers.

It is my impression that this employment of diachronic and synchronic comparisons leaves White as a bit of a Maverick within the cultural field of yoga and Tantra. Within this field Ph.Ds. are generously handed out to academics who spend half a decade clarifying a handful of metaphysical Sanskrit notions of a dozen or so sectarian texts. It is generally believed that this hermeneutical methodology is the yellow brick road to a comprehensive map of the historical past: *Cultural memory* – the historical map – perceived as the sum of an infinite amount of detailed clarifications of Sanskrit concepts.

White – avoiding the worst pitfalls of such a methodology - shows a great talent in summarising complex cultural phenomena in a small paragraph or two. Such generalising efforts are often frowned upon by “serious specialists” who tend to accuse non-specialists (popularisers, generalists) trespassing their limited territory for being “simplistic” and “having missed the complexity” of the matter. But in my view does White deliver a good overview of a comprehensive subject and his book should be valuable reading for the target audience of this Princeton series.

White's writing style tends to be geared towards telling a good story. In order to do that he does not feel obliged to follow a strict chronological time line. Instead he is jumping forward and backward in historical time often following an associative style. Such historical and thematic jumps allows him to build up certain points and drama. The downside is that the reader easily loses historical overview and sense of chronology as we are following yet another of White's trains of thoughts which seems suddenly to appear out of nothing.

### **NOT another attempt to nail down THE meaning of the *Yoga Sutra***

This world is saturated with divergent translations-cum-interpretations of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*. Luckily White does not fall into the fallacy of providing us with yet another one. His task is rather to show how interpretations change dramatically across history and this to such a degree that White has to conclude that there is not any coherent tradition of "classical yoga" (p. xv). It is an invention.

Accordingly he spends surprisingly little space on telling us what actually is written in the *Yoga Sutra* except some expositions of the Samkhya philosophy, which for many is intimately associated with the *Yoga Sutra*. But we are for instance not given a short introduction to the various limbs in the eight phases of yoga practice (the *ashtanga*) so well known to most devoted yoga practitioners. Thus for someone who has never been introduced to the *Yoga Sutra* this lack of overview of its content and some of its meditative concepts may be a bit disorientating.

The positive side of this- and I find it a wise decision - is that White avoids to be dragged in to the quagmire of the infinite translation-cum-interpretation discussions which has marred the *Yoga Sutra* discourse. Instead White demonstrates how even the translation of the definition of 'yoga' in the *Yoga Sutra* is widely disputed: very few agree what even the word 'yoga' means according to Patanjali.

Another example of the fruitless interpretation-cum-translation controversy is the endless debate of the role the *Ishvara* - presumably a god or god like being - in the *Yoga Sutra*. White shows how scholars for a century or more have been disputing the correct translation of '*Ishvara*' and its related concept of '*pranidhana*'. It clearly transpires that - like in any other holy book - you can decode/translate such metaphysical concepts in unlimited ways. It all depends of what system of signs you envelope such notions within. They are like a piece of paper which changes colour according to the colour of the light in the room in which it is observed.

### **Instead it is a history of interpretations**

The overarching tenet of White's book is that out of a nebulous past which perhaps commenced in the first century AD there slowly emerges a verifiable "classical yoga" discourse celebrating Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra* as a religio-philosophical icon. This period according to White lasted from about the 7<sup>th</sup> Century to the 12<sup>th</sup>. Then due to devotional Hinduism, Muslim take over and increasing monopoly of the Vedanta religio-philosophy among the Brahmins the interest in the *Yoga Sutra* almost disappeared. The discourse was then slowly revived from about 1800 - often with some scepticism and stigmatism - by initially mainly Western Orientalist and cultural elites. Around 1900 mainly Colonial Indian cultural elites - among them especially Vivekananda - re-invented the significance of the *Yoga Sutra* and constructed the notion of the "classical yoga tradition".

Vivekananda's imagination was adopted by a wide range of groups during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: spiritualists, romanticists, female body culture and various youth and yogic sub-cultures to mention a few. Here often the *Yoga Sutra* became celebrated as a 'holy scripture' giving significance to the various gymnastic and relaxation exercises now practiced under the label 'yoga'.

White is clearly and rightly targeting such groups with his book. He wants to - what in semiotics is called - replace their *dominant reading* of the text (creations of myths, hagiography, rumours, legitimation) with that of a *critical reading* (an allegedly truthful mapping exercise excavating the facts of history).

To do that he lays bare all the conflicting and opposing interpretations of the *Yoga Sutra* emerging from the various époques. He demonstrates for contemporary yoga-tribes and communities that despite their opposite claims there is no such unbroken line of gurus and disciples transmitting a unison interpretation of the *Yoga Sutra*. It is all wishful thinking. In fact in a chapter on Krishnamacharya White gets so carried away with this task that he ends up in a detailed and revealing de-construction of the guru's claim to legacy. Nothing wrong with that -

and Whites disclosure is warmly welcomed - but the question is if this guru de-construction belongs in a book about the *Yoga Sutra*?

### **A cultural memory with little anchor in society**

So far so good. White display all the merits of *critical reading*. By focusing on the *plurality* of interpretations he avoids the pitfall of promoting a single “final” interpretation which I label the iron cage of hermeneutics (I will return to this). For me as a social scientist there are however some methodological shortcomings of the book I would like to address. What I have to say here holds true not only for White but for most if not all of academic yoga discourse. What I would like to address in not so much *yoga history* but rather the *yoga historian* – an important figure in the creation of *yoga cultural memory*.

My main concern is that this book lacks to anchor and integrate the various interpretations of the *Yoga Sutra* in and with historio-sociological categories. There clearly is no *overall guiding social theory* of how ideas, discourses and cultural phenomena are interweaved with social conflicts, historio-economical processes and political manoeuvring. Hence White’s book represents a cultural memory with too little attachment to underlying society. Instead we are presented with a cultural memory consisting of a rather autonom realm of ideas and thinkers. In this field we encounter intelligent and mostly unbiased exchanges of views. We are represented with a cultural memory where the agents – the intellectuals - solely base their new opposing interpretations on their *intellectual genius and rationality*. Suddenly there *emerges out of the blue* a proficient commentary disagreeing in a brilliant way and this alteration appears only to be based on intellectual reasoning: the previous commentator apparently had not thought things rightly through but here comes the new and decisive illumination according to both its author and the yoga historian. In this way a cultural memory anaemic of society and social conflicts is crystallising.

And then this is not a totally fair description of White’s methodology. In fact we see that when he is dealing with the thinkers of *modernity* he often situate them within religio-philosophical debates and conflicts. *Their* modern interpretations are growing out of and related to their religio-political agendas and personal ambitions. Thus behind many apparently disinterested modern intellectuals contributing to the yoga discourse, White rightly traces subjective motives which are biasing and compromising the thinker’s interpretation.

But as we shall see it is only a weak and accidental link to society which White provides. There is no dialectical relation between agents and their discourse and society. To firmly provide a *dialectical* relation between agent and discourse on one side and society on the other, one would have to employ various theoretical sociological concepts and insights highlighting the deeper structural processes *penetrating and forming the intellectual’s mind and discourse*. But White does not take this further step. Hence in his methodology *agent and culture are treated as separate categories* with the implication that culture, history and society are reduced to a modest background role in the presentation.

### **Are there good and better readers?**

Criticism and a sceptical attitude is central to any scholarship and White is here no exception. However White regrettably drops his sharp critical attitude now and then especially when he deals with pre-modern thinkers. Thus the distinction between modern and pre-modern thinkers in my view highlights some methodological limitations.

On one side we have modern thinkers. Many modern thinkers – like Hegel, Blavatsky, Judge, and Vivekananda (p.172) - are in White’s eyes biased and have “*ulterior motives*” in their adoption of the *Yoga Sutra*. White rightly show how their renditions are framed by personal motives and cultural-political agendas. Further for him many of them typically represent “*dilettante*” readers who mostly neither master Sanskrit nor have studied the classic tradition of commentators of the *Yoga Sutra*. They trust their “*own powers of intuition*” (p. 173). Hence their renditions are at best misleading, according to White.

Before we go further with White’s line of thinking we should stop for a second. I do this because his argumentation at this point represents an unlucky way of thinking which tend to isolate the academic yoga discourse from fertile cross disciplinary exchange. *Why?*

First of all, if people are excluded from participating in critical debate if and when they do not master the language in which the discourse was originally conceived, then the whole world of intellectuals with a stroke has to become very muted. Think of all of us who neither master old Greek or Latin – should we now stop discussing all the old classical philosophers? And was the

Bible not originally written in old Greek? Where does that leave vernacular Christian bible discourse since the renaissance? Should millions of Chinese and South Asian communist remain silent when Marx's writing comes up for discussion leaving the debate to be conducted by German speaking intellectuals?

Further if lay-people are not allowed to use a translation authorised by most experts as the base for their argumentation, then why bother translating holy scriptures and philosophical oeuvres like the *Yoga Sutra* anyway? Finally, and this is a well-documented fact of the history of ideas, sometimes newcomers to a discourse - who are not tainted with its preconceptions and tacit assumption - can *because of this freedom* create interesting new and never thought about insights. Thus knowledge of and training in - in this case the *Yoga Sutra* commentaries - is not always an advantage and can have the effect of the blockage of creativity.

It does not promote our growth of knowledge (K. R. Popper comes to mind here) if a discourse like the academic yoga discourse is closing in on itself in this way. It leads to absurdities, academic isolation and a hierarchy of interpretations (professional "insight" residing above amateurish "opinion").

### **The two conditions**

Let me now return to White's main line of argument. He is in the process of splitting the modern yoga discourse into two camps.

In one camp we have been introduced to a group of modern thinkers who's rendition is often compromised by subjectivity and culture. In "**sharp distinction to this cavalier approach**" (p. 173) (i.e. the biased dilettante reading tainted with ulterior motives like Hegel) White draw our attention to his own peers of "**critical scholars**" (Orientalists like Max Müller). Their interpretations of the *Yoga Sutra* are sincere and enlightening according to White. (Implicitly we must assume that these critical intellectuals mastering Sanskrit are without ulterior motives).

Thus within modernity we find two camps: the dilettantes and the critical scholars. Only one of the camps makes genuine contribution to our growth of knowledge. The distinction seems to be based on *two conditions* being met: (a) you need to master Sanskrit *and* (b) you need to apply critical methodology. Hegel failed the first and Vivekananda failed the second condition.

I find this distinction very unlucky. I have already argued against using knowledge of Sanskrit as a condition. If we turn to the condition of "critical methodology" we of course do not know exactly what White understand by this notion except it is similar to a "judicial approach". Leaving this aside it is a shared view within contemporary philosophy and history of science that *no* critical methodology what so ever can assure or guarantee that we are able to produce "superior" knowledge/interpretations - i.e. knowledge untainted by our subjectivity and cultural socialisation (*habitus*). And this especially holds true for the humanities and social sciences.

Of course White is absolutely right in demonstrating that Vivekananda delivered a shabby rendition not meeting any *minimum* standards for historical investigations. However the point here is that even if Vivekananda had adhered to some critical standards of research this would not have guaranteed a "more truthful interpretation". A critical rendition implicitly guided by biased presumptions and distorted assumptions would notwithstanding all critical methodologies lead nowhere (for instance: an economical model of the stock market *based on assumptions of equilibrium and rationality* would despite mastering advanced mathematics not generate correct predictions - according to complex system theory which disputes such traditional assumptions).

The danger of imagining that critical methodology enable us privileged access to "better interpretations" is that we become less sensitive to the social bias - the *doxa, habitus* and subjectivity - inherent in our own reading as well as that of others. In other words the critical yoga reader in this way is risking to unchain himself and his subject from his and its social and historical fetters.

### **The emotional connect to the 'pre-modern thing'**

According to White the modern critical scholars mastering Sanskrit are not alone in their judicial methodology which assures them impartial and sincere readings. If we move to *pre-modern* India we will following White find a group of people who often in similar ways are conducting a neutral and sincere reading of the *Yoga Sutra*. These are the *classical commentators* who also are floating above the contamination of history and society. "...these **great classical commentators were brilliant, immensely, cultivated individuals possessed of a thorough grasp of India's**

traditional treasury of knowledge” (p.6-7) . In other words the commentators are imagined as *experts* and specialists in the Sanskrit cultural knowledge of pre-modern India.

White clearly emotionally connects with the commentators: “In many respects critical Yoga scholars are the modern-day homologues of the classical commentators whose work they study.” (p.8). In this way a bridge has been erected across history: a linkage between modern yoga scholars and pre-modern commentators. Both camps are praised for their critical skills in handling Sanskrit texts.

Thus in White’s appreciative imagination the commentators become brilliant thinkers who without representing any social interests (due to their earnest attitude and linguistic skills) are producing new excellent interpretations of the *Yoga Sutra* ( - translations which strangely enough often utterly contradicts each other despite all are employing “judicial styled” methodologies). The commentators are implicitly in this imagination – like modern days scholars – primarily *motivated by untainted intellectual and rational concerns*. They are first of all interested in excavating the truth – the hermeneutical correct understanding of the *Yoga Sutra*. It is assumed that they have left at the door to the temple of truth not only their shoes but also their motives, agendas, cultural internalisation, socialisation, historical situation, cultural conditioning, ways of thinking, implicit assumptions - i.e. their *doxa* and *habitus*.

Hence firstly it becomes irrelevant according to this imagination to look for how far their yoga discourse is a reflection of and is permeated by culture and politics. Secondly and closely related it is anticipated that the commentators are indeed guided by critical methodologies. This is a very dubious assertion because in my experience the methodology of the commentators cannot be classified as based on ‘critical philosophy’ but rather on ‘theology’. Their aim is not to merciless scrutinise and take apart existing prepositions and arguments. Instead their aim is to build up and strengthen new sectarian points of views and apparently align them with old recognised positions and dogmas.

If the commentators had been imagined as theologians it would have allowed White to explore historically and socially the sociological roots of the commentators’ conflicting readings of the *Yoga Sutra* – explain the “gradual shift” in interpretation “altered sometimes beyond recognition” (p. 8) . By not choosing this imagination we end up with commentators – like their modern academic counterparts but unlike many modern pundits – mostly being presented as free floating agents with a consciousness and mind-set which is more or less devoid of social, political and economical origin.

This uncritical and appreciative imagination of pre-modern thinkers is typical for most of the academic yoga discourse. There seems to be a kind of admiration and veneration for the old stuff - a kind of emotional identification. *However in this way the yoga historian becomes seriously biased and compromised*. “The modern thing” is perceived as intellectual biased (except the critical scholars, of course) and intermingled with society while the “pre-modern thing” is transcendent and is representing an agent bereft of motives and socialisation.

In this way the modern (romantic) reading of the “pre-modern thing” easily ends up as theology.

### **Bringing the commentators back to earth**

However we should not forget that White’s critical comparison – his *meta-reading* - of the interpretations of scholars and commentators clearly indicate that none of “the specialists” agree. Each expert, his reading. Thus their expert skills does not bring about consensus but rather the opposite. And in the end who can tell a good interpretation/translation from a better one? Is a radical new and different interpretation a ‘piece of genius’ or ‘utterly misguided’? There are no objective criteria and whatever scholarly consensus there might be today this will be different tomorrow. This is clearly the conclusion we must draw from White’s meta-reading of the various interpretations.

And further, reading the older and oldest commentaries does not secure any impartial point of observation bringing us closer to “the genuine meaning” of the *Yoga Sutra*. Most commentators stand solid on the shoulders of the earliest extant commentator – Vyas - and no one really know who Vyas was and what he did to the *Yoga Sutra*, according to White. Vyas certainly gave the 192 yoga aphorisms a strong Samkhya twist and interpretation. But was he correct in doing so? Or perhaps he even tried to highjack the *Yoga Sutra* for his own theological cause? Thus it is questionable if Vyas’ presumed Samkhya version is in line with prior accounts which might have been much more Buddhist in character. Thus Vyas and the following millennium of

commentaries are so to say a 'Samkhya giant on clay feed' often trying to squeeze the Samkhya giant's feed into Vedanta shoes - which do not fit at all .

Think about a contemporary equivalent: Would I as newcomer to political economy get a better understanding of Karl Marx's *Grundrisse* by ploughing through a mountain of dense writings from the *Kapital-Logik school* who all perform a *Hegelian dialectical reading* of Marx, or could I spend my time better in order to gain insight into this opaque oeuvre? I believe most will agree I could spend my time better – one or two Hegelian readings would do because a Hegelian reading of Marx might be a *mistaken starting point* (as many believe it actually is).

So I suggest that intimate knowledge of the commentators' writings do not necessarily give us any "better" interpretation of the dense yoga aphorisms. There is a possibility that the commentators – *all biased by Vyas' reading* – are not necessarily better than a skilled dilettante "trusting his own powers of intuition". Basically, when we think about it, the commentators were in exactly the same situation.

Thus if neither the mastering of Sanskrit nor the knowledge of a hard accessible commentary tradition (skewed by Vyas) necessarily secure us the ultimate (or "better") interpretation of the *Yoga Sutra* then first of all we need to stop treating some groups – the Sanskrit scholars and the commentators – as untainted in their interpretation of the *Yoga Sutra*.

Which White does and not does. Basically as mentioned his critical mind realises that their interpretations varies to a degree they become incompatible. He then identifies some black holes in Indian history where there appears to be very little engagement with and knowledge of the *Yoga Sutra*. He therefor concludes there is not a continuous "classical yoga tradition" as modern yoga sympathisers love to believe.

However he does not ask if there *ever* was such a "classical yoga tradition". My suspicion is that because of his identification and emotional connect – his bias - with the commentators and pre-modern India, White does not take this final critical step in his de-construction. He realises that the commentators have opposing and contradictory interpretation but he does not systematically investigate these antagonisms and their roots in history and society. This methodological weakness is share with most yoga and Tanta academics: their clinging to hermeneutics and the lack of insight into contemporary sociology. Let me expand on this.

### **The iron cage of hermeneutics**

So what does White's historical overview of a range of irreconcilable interpretations learn us about the *methodology of interpretation - hermeneutics*? In short: it is an iron cage! It has its utility but certainly left alone it also has severe limitations. There will *never* arrive THE final interpretation of the *Yoga Sutra*. Each interpretation is bound by subjectivity, social conflicts and historical horizon. Actually, it is not paramount to have the state-of-the-art interpretation of the *Yoga Sutra*. *Only theologians and propagators need this*. As *yoga historians* our gaze should be re-directed. What should guide us at the present stage of research is to identify what role the text play in society – the intricate *dialectics between discourse and society*.

In general I find that the present days yoga scholar – rightly proud of his Sanskrit skills and knowledge of ancient scriptures - need to realise that 'the road of ever more truthful interpretations/ translations' of the ancient texts (an old commentaries on these texts) does not lead much further. It seems to me that White's meta-reading – his reading of readings - has reached and implicitly shown the limits of this approach. Hence he wisely does not try to construct a new interpretation of the *Yoga Sutra*.

Thus this is how far White's meta-reading – the reading of readers - can bring us. We have reached the limits of hermeneutics and if we do not turn to other disciplines, hermeneutics become a cage. How to progress? In my experience the key to the cage door is the insight that even commentators are *social* biased. Their difference is rooted in and a reflection of social conflicts and social transformation. *So in order to understand the difference between the commentaries* we have to bring cultural-sociology into the equation.

Which does not happen because yoga scholars for various reason give very low priority to *general social theory*.<sup>1</sup> Some even *a priori* dismisses it as 'reductionism'. But this leaves them caught in the hermeneutic iron cage: an endless chase of reading and mapping the conflicting commentaries and their founding texts. Metaphorically such scholars are categorising and surveying each individual tree but never grasping the *systemic context* the tree is growing out of (and without which the tree – individually or as a species - would never have existed): the wood,

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<sup>1</sup> For a general introduction to the subject: H.J. Joas and W. Knöbl (2010): *Social Theory*.

the habitat, the ecology, the climate, other species, adaptation, survival, evolution etc. These *systemic notions* are what cultural-sociology brings to the table but regrettably they are not adopted by today's yoga historians.

If academic yoga specialists do not feel sufficient trained in such methodologies an obvious solution would be to invite social scientists to contribute and cooperate. However a short overview of for instance recent years' production of yoga compilations<sup>2</sup> show that these publications of collaborating scholars are utterly dominated by people from religious departments mainly trained in hermeneutics and Sanskrit.

### **An alternative example**

So what I have said until now is that writings of academic yoga scholars are *not guided and structured* by a *general social theory* when analysing modern yoga. Some of the most popular cultural-sociological jargon is adhered to and some fragments of historio-sociological insights are introduced only when convenient. In the end these scholars are utilising a voluntaristic and biographical model. At the core of this model we find an autonom social agent whose mind, acts and discourse is (lightly) informed by certain social cultural processes. The main effort is then hermeneutical: to interpret texts using the agent's culture as staging and background information.

To illustrate an alternative methodology outside the hermeneutical iron cage which is utterly immersed in history and sociology, I would recommend the yoga academics to read K.T.S. Sarao *The Decline of Buddhism in India – A Fresh Perspective* (2012). In opposition to academic yoga studies the Buddhist academic field is conducting a total open co-operation with the social sciences and contemporary philosophy so it is no coincident that we have to turn to the studies of Buddhism to find a role model. One will see that Sarao in his analysis of the decline of Buddhism *never relies on interpreting texts, nor counting them nor mapping biographies*. He breaks his historical analysis down into regions and investigates then the sociological processes and structures of each region and its historical development. How is Buddhism aligned with some groups and who are the groups it is fighting with? How do Buddhism organise and how is it integrated in the lives of various social groups? Sarao's conclusion – based on his purely sociological approach – is that Buddhism was in deadly decline much earlier then previously assumed by historians.

### **How *not* to identify a vibrant tradition**

Compare now Sarao's approach with for instance White's claim that the era between 7<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> Century was the high tide of the *Yoga Sutra*. This observation is based on the numbers of extant texts White has been able to track. White's investigations of the number of yoga texts and their share of other religious texts is admirable and very welcomed. However the few treatises and discussions of the *Yoga Sutra* he finds in this period stretching over 500 years (!) does not constitute a vibrant "classical tradition" in my view. Rather it seems to represent the opposite: dull scholasticism and theological manoeuvring.

Some observations: 1. The works discussing the *Yoga Sutra* adds up to only a tiny portion of total extant works on religio-philosophy so rather talking about a pulsating branch we should talk about a dehydrated twig. 2. We do not know if there is any direct and unbiased relation between extant treatise and real historical volume of texts written. 3. Because a handful of intellectuals – mainly theologians - are writing about yoga does imply there is a general interest or understanding of the subject. The commentaries need to be linked to institutions, organisations and social groups showing what role these played in their daily life. 4. The writings could be motivated by religious and sectarian motives – re-aligning and legitimating new religious discourses with old ones without having any intellectual interest in the underlying content. Symbolic gestures.

So the few writings – spread over several centuries - could mainly be theological and political motivated. As said perhaps they are mainly about generating symbolic noise and sending certain signals to a certain audiences? Thus we need to know what was going on politically and culturally in the given period. What forces do the texts align with and why? What was a stake, what were

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<sup>2</sup> Diamond D. (ed.) (2013): *Yoga The Art of Transformation*, Jacobsen K. (ed.) (2005): *Theory and Practice of Yoga*, Jacobsen A. (ed.) (2012): *Yoga Powers*, Singleton M. & Byrne J. (eds.) (2008): *Yoga in the Modern World*, Singleton & M. Goldberg E. (eds.) (2014): *Gurus of Modern Yoga*, Whicher I. & Carpenter D.(eds.) (2003): *Yoga – The Indian Tradition*, White D.G. (ed.) (2012): *Yoga in Practice*

the lines of conflict? Why was it important to refer to the *Yoga Sutra*; was it primarily a social (and incomprehensible) icon charged with symbolic power and if yes what were the social and political conditions for this?

So perhaps the *Yoga Sutra* was only a hostage – a symbolic icon kidnapped by theologians in their internal struggle for supremacy and favours from the political rulers? Who knows? What is sure is that White's data does not allow to conclude the existence of a lively "classical tradition". Thus White's critical methodology – bereft of sociological foundation – in my opinion is not able to determine if there was a "classical period" or not.

Perhaps he has been misled by the imaginations of Vivekananda and his lot – their "dilettante speculations" about a "classical yoga tradition"?

### **Cultural memory founded on historio-sociology**

Thus it is probably not a coincidence that it is first in the very last chapter of the book that White introduces some of the various groups who were contesting the cultural field in which we find the *Yoga Sutra* as it emerged. It is first in this noteworthy chapter that (1) we hear about the *Sramanas*; (2) that we are told the yoga aphorisms show many and strong signs of emerging out of Buddhist discourse; (3) that we fully realise all the possible identities of authors and commentators and their relations (which all are highly contestable); (4) that Samkhya intellectuals (*Sramanas*?) are causing much confusion, and that (5) on top of all adding even more complexity do we find the (gnostic and ritualistic) Brahmins (who had a very ambivalent relation to the competing "yoga rituals").

I can see why White for narrative structural reasons introduce much of this at the end of the book as it gives the reader a powerful finale. But I find it a very unlucky choice. It is exactly here, among these groups and their antagonism we do find the sociological key to unlock the *Yoga Sutra*. It is here we find what role the text played in the cultural fields of holy men and in the political sphere of ruling political and military strata. Sadly White's interesting account only manage to skim the surface of this historical situation. This is where his book should have started and then stayed loyal to such an historio-sociological approach. This would have thrown a different light on the centrality of conflicts surrounding the *Yoga Sutra*: it was and is a symbolic relic often used in ideological and religio-cultural clashes.

Following an historio-sociological approach in my book on yoga's cultural history (*Why Yoga – A Cultural History of Yoga*) it led me to the conclusion that there never was a "classical yoga" tradition and if there ever was a "Yoga Sutra based groups and discourses" then we should probably imagine the *Yoga Sutra* as a *testament* of something which was on the verge of extinction.

Further such an sociological guided approach also suggest that if we want to study the early pre-modern "engine" of yoga then we have to study social groups who never labelled their philosophy and practice 'yoga': the Jains and the Buddhist, the inventors and torch carriers of yoga except that they never used this label.

The label 'yoga' must probably emerged as their Sramanic practices were copied by the ruling political and economical classes; but as the Jains' and Buddhists' universal ethic did not fit into the life of the violence and exploitation which underpinned these strata, hence they then coined the label 'yoga' and made it to their own.

### **The problem of seeing the ground our feet are standing on**

All methodologies have their strength and limitations. This is one of the reasons I am a strong believer in cross disciplinary research. I find that despite White's methodological limitations he still due to his critical and historical attitude manage through his meta-readings to produce a very interesting book which should be read. Yes, his de-construction of ruling cultural memory of yoga could have cut deeper. But for many devoted and "serious" yogis – frequently found among the Ashtanga and Iyengar tribes in metropolises worldwide – White's critical account of the *Yoga Sutra* will most probably be seen as too negative and deemed heretic anyway.

The question is if his critical words will ever reach them. Perhaps – and most probably according to my experience - they will just shrug him off with: "Oh, he is just another intellectual who does not follow a guru, so what does he know!". Embedded in this attitude is a reading – an interpretation – of yoga and the *Yoga Sutra* which I as a social scientist find is closely related to *identity building*. For such yoga sub-cultures there is an *emotional* connect to yoga *fuelled by unconscious cultural and social processes* (I am here thinking in the terms of P. Bourdieu). So yoga and the *Yoga Sutra* for them is much more about symbols – the symbolic power with which the



discourse charge their life - than about truthful interpretations. In my view yoga is - on a deep psychological and social level - for them about a meaning in life and overcoming the alienation of contemporary metropolitan modernity. And in such a context critical voices like White's or mine does not play a significant role.

Finally, we as academics can clearly sense that some groups like the contemporary yoga sub-cultures are social biased and rooted in their reception of yoga and the *Yoga Sutra*. We sense their readings are based in their sociology and can only be grasped by highlighting this connection.

What we however should learn from this insight is some humility: namely that the notion of 'social bias' does *also* apply to ourselves - even if we are intellectuals and scholars. We are also steeped in sociology. Society and culture is not just something *outside* us but like apps empowering our smartphones they are discourses structuring our mind. A way to contain the worst effects of the social bias of our thinking and perception is through what Bourdieu calls 'sociological self-reflexivity' combined with what Popper calls 'critical debate'.

So White and other yoga scholars should not perceive a review like this as a hostile and destructive attack on their writings. It is rather about enabling us to experience our intellectual horizon and boundaries - our social bias - and in this way expand our ever existing hermeneutical cage. Realising the irony that in order to look deeper into ourselves - our bias - we need to look deeper into society. This also holds true for the *Yoga Sutra*.