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Is our body the temple of the soul?

Contemporary yoga practice as a psycho-sociological phenomenon

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Short summary of the book

Reflections and conclusions presented in this book are based on **empirical qualitative research**. Principles applied in this study coincide with the qualitative sociology model (see Introduction to Konecki, Chomczyński 2012), elucidating that both explaining and understanding of social phenomena constitute the underpinnings of qualitative sociology.

Research over the yoga practice – that took place from 2007 to 2011 – started with a participant observation conducted in a yoga studio located in a

voivodeship's capital, where the researcher took yoga classes at least once a week.¹ The researcher also conducted four observations of an out-of-town yoga workshop. One of them took place in 2008, when the researcher participated in a one week time stay in the mountains, where yoga was practiced in seclusion for approximately 7 hours a day. The workshop at hand also included meditation and mantra singing. What is more, while conducting this study (2008-2009) the researcher took part in several 3 day out-of-town intensive yoga trainings, where yoga was practiced all day long with only a 4 hour brake (plus meditation in the evening). Thus, the researcher was an active participant of the examined social world. Not only he spent time with individuals being studied, but he also practiced hatha-yoga according to teacher's recommendations. Therefore, his psychical and bodily experiencing of the practice impacted upon the way research questions were formulated during the study. Perceiving all the things that happened during the practice, he started empathizing with other yoga practitioners. The empathizing in question applied to the work over the body while practicing the hatha-yoga positions, the instructions given during the practice, the group meditation, and the joint mantra singing evoking both bodily and psychical experiences. What took place during the joint practice was both the close observation of researcher's experiences and taking the roles of others, thus, the **interpersonal empathy**, which occurred, facilitated researcher's perception of hatha-yoga notion from others' perspective. Also, the researcher's experiences appeared to be of use while interpreting other kinds of data, which constituted the mainstay for further analysis (e.g., interviews, photographs, video recordings of hatha-yoga practice, observations). Notwithstanding the importance of researcher's participation in the social world at hand, the understanding of both bodily and mental experiences, which emerge during the practice, needed to be deepened by applying another techniques of data collection. However, putting my experiences in time perspective, I can ascertain that practice and incarnated immersing oneself in the social world of hatha-yoga were both prerequisite for analysis

¹ **Exercising yoga** is to be understood as a purely physical approach to the activity engaging yoga positions (asanas). **Practicing yoga** is about paying closer attention to both physical and partially spiritual effects of doing certain exercises, and gaining knowledge from the field of yoga philosophy.

regarding the universe where corporeality seems to act such an important role. Thus, the observation technique entails an outright experiencing of the study participants' world.

During the study 60 interviews were conducted, including 38 unstructured interviews, 13 narrative interviews, and 9 movie-based interviews with, both male and female, students, employees, and yoga instructors. The interviews were conducted at the turn of 2008 and 2009. The participant observation is being conducted by the author of this book since 2007 till the present day (May, 2012). Moreover, in 2012, 172 websites of yoga studios located in Polish cities were analyzed, exploring employed autopresentation tactics and strategies, especially connected with visualization of the practice.

The book begins by presenting a view on yoga from the perspective of Mircea Eliade – the scholar of religion, and the perspective of B.K.S. Iyengar – the great practitioner and contemporary hatha-yoga guru (**Chapter 1**). Both yoga authorities represent, however, different approaches to the activity at hand – first of them distinguishes metaphysical and religious aspects of yoga practice, while the other points at yoga's role in improving one's health, and thus, in putting one's everyday life in a certain order. By reason of everyday asana practice, recommended way of nutrition (vegetarianism), calming down one's mind, and eliminating negative emotions and, as a consequence, violence, yoga becomes a sort of "an everyday life religion." Contemporary hatha-yoga may be thus perceived and interpreted as para-religion, which in spite of being focused on ultimate concerns is not about faith in Act of God influencing one's life. Given that issues of transcendence and one's transformation are defined by oneself, it seems that referring to yoga, we are in fact dealing with "a privatized para-religion."

In **Chapter 2** the social world of yoga practice is described – who interact within this universe, how the justifications of this participation are constructed, and finally, what kind of arenas take place within the world in question? The arenas within the universe of yoga practice pertain to the

problem of whether yoga should be more focused on the physical or the spiritual aspects of the practice, who can become a yoga teacher (certification issue), and what is the origin of contemporary hatha-yoga? Participants of the social world of yoga often theorize on the activity at hand, looking for reasons for further practice, but they also point at its spiritual dimension, and, what is more, they analyze and diagnose the condition of Western culture. In this chapter there are also presented the focal points in which different social worlds intersect (e.g., social world of climbing, conventional and alternative medicine, business, popular culture). Moreover, a broad historical outline of the contemporary hatha-yoga universe formation was depicted in this chapter.

In **Chapter 3** the common definitions of yoga are presented. How people who only exercise and those who practice define this activity? These definitions are individually constructed for one's purpose only. They often represent justifications for further yoga practice. Unconsciously, these terms and meanings of what yoga is frequently derive from classic manuscripts concerning yoga, from which the knowledge regarding this practice is distributed within many socially defined milieus, e.g., mass media, yoga studios – during yoga classes or informal conversation with a teacher, etc.

Chapter 4 refers to a broad phenomenon of becoming a hatha-yoga practitioner, which is linked to the work over the body and one's defining practices in question, one's specific perceiving of the body and its experiences.

Becoming a hatha-yoga practitioner constitutes a specific process. In this chapter, respective phases of the process at hand are described: 1. Introductory phase – constructing the motives and first steps; 2. Phase of the deeper recognition of psycho-physical effects of yoga practice and of attributing them with adequate meanings; 3. Phase of the deeper recognition of hatha-yoga spiritual aspects.

At the moment of significant involvement in hatha-yoga practice and defining corporeal practices in terms of being bodily and mental at the same time, the mind – body rapport compound. The work over the body may transform the Western perspective of defining the body as an substantial element of human existence (Cartesian vision) into treating it as a spiritualized

matter (vision of Eastern philosophy). If, however, the tenets of other religions are maintained as one's own (e.g., catholic religion), the transformation at hand will not proceed. In that case, in order to reconcile the conventional religion tenets with new spiritual experiences, changes in body and mind need to be defined in any other way, and a specific linguistic explanations of these changes (often adopting the scheme of constant linguistic formulas) need to occur.

In **Charter 5** I contribute to research issues regarding problems of communicating the body experiences, and pertaining to the phenomena involving corporeality. And that, in a nutshell, is why I investigate how people answer to a general question: "What do I see and what do I feel while practicing yoga?" In the study over experiencing the body within the yoga practice the internet, instructional movies of hatha-yoga practicing were applied. These movies reflected on how to exercise a specific asana and, sometimes, pertained to the issues regarding its influence on one's organism in a realistic, „objective," and, as it were, illustrating the physical reality of the movements. During the interviews the interviewees described their feelings and experiences accompanying both one's own practice, and one's reception of the movies at hand. My goal was to conceptualize how communicating the knowledge of hatha-yoga practice, in the context of experiencing one's body, is being constructed by yoga practitioners. In this chapter the issues regarding the visual communicating of yoga practice are also raised.

In **Chapter 6** a careful consideration is given to the work on emotions, effectuated through the agency of specific physical practices engaging body, which is to be done in order to attain the emotional stability, eliminate negative emotions, and reach inner calming. The work on emotions appear as an internalized ritual of "contemporary religion," which not only is hardly perceived by an incidental observer, but is also barely brought to one's, actually working on emotions, attention. The work on emotions within the hatha-yoga practice is thus of *an initiatory nature*, and may only begin if and when an individual undergo an inner change ascertained by one's new interpretations of one's emotions and one's experiencing of these emotions.

In this chapter, I set out the work on emotions within the hatha-yoga practice, analyzing its nature. Also, I attempt to interpret the phenomenon at hand in view of processes taking place within the contemporary Western societies.

Given teacher's key role in practitioner development, **Chapter 7** provides an overview of his/hers part in yoga practice. According to one of the yoga gurus, B.K.S. Iyengar, a student must put endless trust in his teacher. The foregoing student – teacher rapport represents, to some extent, a rather idealized vision. Nevertheless, in practitioners' opinion, the teacher is prerequisite in hatha-yoga practice – both as a physical exercises instructor, and, sometimes, as a life guide.

For many practitioners, hatha-yoga became a way of life. This lifestyle is mostly about paying regard to one's both physical and mental condition, but many practitioners extend its ken by giving mind to spiritual condition. Advanced practitioners are often devoted to their teachers or specific yoga studios. Their daily routine is subjected to yoga that impacted upon their identity and is now regarded as an instrument through which one copes with everyday life that is most often defined by the Western values. This two cultures collision give rise to so-called contemporary hatha-yoga – a remarkably popular art of relaxation, physical exercises, healthful practice, and, sometimes, spiritual practice. Each of us may choose from this mosaic of interpretations one's own definition of yoga practice, and further adapt it to one's need.