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Salvation through Relaxation: Proprioceptive Therapy and its Relationship to Yoga

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ABSTRACT *Relaxation constitutes a primary feature of yoga as it is taught in the West today. However, typical modern practices have no precedent in the pre-modern yoga tradition, but derive largely from techniques of proprioceptive relaxation developed in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe and America. These techniques (along with their assumptions of the soteriological value of relaxation) in turn alter the theory and praxis of yoga itself, such that its fundamental enterprise is significantly modified. Does a transformation constitute a development or merely a corruption of the yoga tradition? This article considers the extent to which Modern Yoga fills the cultural space once occupied by 'relaxationism'.*

Introduction

Virtually everyone who has been to a yoga class today will know that yoga is, among other things, about relaxing. Classes almost always conclude with an extended period of relaxation (with guidance of varying complexity from the teacher) and in some schools, the main part of the practice itself is interspersed with many shorter relaxation sessions. Indeed, yoga in its popular form today is often presented as a simple bipartite system of postural exercises and conscious rest or, as in the title of one DIY manual, as a means to *Stretch and Relax* (Tobias and Stewart). It is marketed as an effective way to combat stress and to cope with the challenges of daily life. Moreover, this secularised model is generally underpinned by notions of a personalised spirituality which can be directly accessed through physical practice and the ensuing relaxation. Yoga not only combats stress: relinquishing tension during formalised relaxation sessions, it is said, leads to self-realisation or at the very least furnishes insights into one's fundamental, true, and eternal nature. I contend that this discourse of 'spiritualised' relaxation in yoga is a relatively new and composite phenomenon. It became part of the credo of 'export brand' yoga during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and is an amalgam of proprioceptive therapies, early humanistic psychology, and a variety of Western esoteric speculations. In the contemporary yoga world, 'relaxationism' draws on the interpretative frameworks offered by New Age religion (as defined by Hanegraaff). This blend of biomedicine, psychology, and esoterica is very generally propagated as 'wisdom of the East' and a critical distinction is rarely drawn between modern relaxation techniques and ancient practices. In fact, the line often seems to be intentionally blurred to lend a method Asiatic cachet. It is the belief in the salvific function of

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proprioceptive awareness in the context of yoga that I am referring to here (adapting a phrase from William James) as "salvation through relaxation" (James, *Varieties* 121).

This study draws significantly on the theorisation of 'Modern Yoga' as a distinct field of scholarship undertaken by Elizabeth De Michelis in her 2004 publication *A History of Modern Yoga, Patañjali and Western Esotericism*. In De Michelis's sense, 'Modern Yoga' refers to a specific body of thought and practice that began to grow from the ideological and philosophical dialogue between Westerners interested in India and English-speaking (and significantly Westernised) Indians during the nineteenth century. It signifies a specific matrix of religious convictions based on assumptions, such as the universality of all religions and the primacy of intuition and experience in the spiritual life. It was from this ideological exchange that emerged the first exponent of what was, according to De Michelis, a properly *modern yoga*: Narendranath Datta, better known as Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902). Vivekananda's *Raja Yoga* of 1896, shaped in part by his sustained dialogue with the esoteric *avant-garde* of East coast America, is possibly the first textual expression of Modern Yoga. Those who followed in his wake tended to emulate a similar philosophical and methodological eclecticism in their own formulations of yoga.

I argue that, in the context of Modern Yoga as defined by De Michelis, relaxation is an alloy of relatively new practices, which do not derive from an ancient yoga tradition, as is often claimed. Although some of the methods find apparent equivalents in pre-modern sources, the theological and ideological frameworks that underpin them tend to remain permeated by assumptions of New Age religion and indigenous Western esotericism. The outcome, as Robert Ellwood has argued with regard to imported 'Asian' religious practices in general (Ellwood 168), is that it makes far more sense to consider 'yoga relaxation', as theorised and practised in Europe and America today, as a home-grown hybrid rather than as an unadulterated scion of any extant, pre-modern Indian tradition (such as the oft-invoked medieval haṭha yoga). As elements of relaxation therapy were assimilated into the lexicon of Modern Yoga, they helped to create a new conceptualisation of the function and goal of yoga itself, both in India and the West.

I will confine my examination to the early decades of relaxation therapy (pre-1960s) and to the ways in which 'relaxationism' in its broadest sense has had an influence on formulations of Modern Yoga. In the first part, I argue that Modern Yoga's assimilation of the techniques of relaxation therapy has had a significant impact on conceptualisations of yoga in the West. I begin by examining the 'secular' origins of the tense/relax approach that frequently occurs in yoga relaxation and continue with an examination of the function of stretching and breathing in relaxation therapy and how this has influenced conceptions of *āsana* (posture) and *prānāyāma* (breathing exercises), as formulated in Modern Yoga. Auto-suggestion has also passed into Modern Yoga via relaxationism and I consider the implications of this in relation to Mesmerism and modern psychology. Finally, techniques of segmental rotation of awareness through the body are examined, both in the context of relaxation therapy and yoga.

In the second part, I turn to the esoteric background of relaxationism and show how this has facilitated the assimilation of assumptions about the function of relaxation into Modern Yoga. Modern relaxationism is often envisioned as

a personal and unmediated communion with the divine, very much in the tradition of Swedenborg and the American Transcendentalists. This version of mystical relaxation has continued to predominate in the practice and rhetoric of Modern Yoga, where it should be seen as an off-shoot of these Western forms of esotericism rather than as a direct descendent of the yoga tradition as such. Relaxation therapy grew up, alongside Modern Yoga, in the cultural context of consumer capitalism. It offered, much as yoga does to millions today, respite from the daily grind and a chance to recharge one's batteries for the work ahead. Like yoga in the West today, it contributed to the increased efficiency of the individual worker. This complicity with systems of production and consumption is part of a more generalised shift away from communality in religious life towards a model of introspective, individualised 'spirituality'. In today's late capitalist society, as congregations fragment into consumers, yoga relaxation is heir to the containing function once partially fulfilled by relaxationism.

Techniques of Relaxation

Where Does 'Yoga Relaxation' Come from?

The British Wheel of Yoga (BWY) is the governing umbrella organisation for yoga in the United Kingdom. Although it has no exclusive allegiance to any one lineage of Modern Yoga, it represents in some ways a cross-section of the state of yoga in Britain today. In its Foundation Course Syllabus for 2004, it is stated that each student must be familiar with the following elements of yoga relaxation:

1. Progressive muscular (tensing and relaxing the muscles of the body in turn)
2. Differential relaxation (tensing muscles in one part of the body and being aware of all other muscles being relaxed)
3. Sensory awareness (focusing on the contact or absence of contact between the body and clothes and the support beneath it, etc.)
4. Yoga Nidra (rotation of awareness through the body and the use of *sankalpa*)
5. Using affirmations, such as 'I am confident and aware'
6. Visualisation/guided imagery, such as a picture of a garden or country scene or building a personal safe haven.

The majority of the elements in this list, I contend, can be directly traced to Western relaxation methods and psychotherapy. Progressive and Differential relaxation, for instance, are (simply and unequivocally) techniques developed by the Chicago scientist Edmund Jacobson in the 1920s. The third method is a mainstay of almost all the secular proprioceptive relaxation techniques we will examine. 'Yoga Nidra', a 'tantric' relaxation technique devised by (bearing the trademark of) the contemporary teacher Swami Satyananda Saraswati's Bihar School of Yoga, in fact owes many of its elements, and the ethos underlying them, to Western relaxation therapy rather than to any pre-modern tradition of tantra. The affirmations of point five, although often (as we shall see) hopelessly confused with *mantra*, derive from a particular strand of the mesmeric tradition exemplified by Emile Coué (1857–1926). The guided imagery of number six, not to be confused with tantric practices of visualisation, is in reality a psychotherapeutic method favoured by post-Jungians and a variety of New Age therapists. Although visualisation is an important feature in tantric yoga, the content of the

visualisation is extremely formal and ritualised and involves no element of personal choice: as Eliade has pointed out, exercises such as this one have everything to do with psychotherapy and little to do with yoga (Eliade 20)[1].

It would seem therefore that in spite of the BWY's emphasis on textual study, there is little distinction made in their syllabus between modern therapeutics and ancient soteriology: it is all 'yoga'. This is representative not only of the semantic capacity of the term 'yoga', but also of the critical nebulousness that sometimes pervades its theorisation in Modern Yoga contexts. As the renowned indologist Fritz Staal has, in no uncertain terms, argued, "Yoga is not for relaxation; rather the opposite, it is meant to increase 'restraint' of 'control' (*yoga*)" (Staal 71). If this is so, the function of yoga in the modern world would appear to have been stood on its head. Let us examine in more detail some of the possible ways in which yoga has come to be 'for' relaxation.

Progressive and Differential Relaxation

Edmund Jacobson is one of the most influential figures in the early history of relaxation. The basic premise of Jacobson's method is that trying to quiet the mind directly will be ineffectual if the body remains tense. The individual's musculature must therefore be addressed first, if one is to have an effect, via the nervous system, on mental and emotional states (Jacobson, *Relaxation* 217). Indeed, thought, for Jacobson, is a muscular activity or, as he explains it, "our mental activities [...] essentially involve what might be called faint and abbreviated muscular acts" (Jacobson, *Practical Method* 149). The first step in managing mental states is, therefore, to train oneself to recognise these sites of muscular disruption and accreted tension—for, as Jacobson states, "the areas become known to [the subject] through proprioceptive impulses" (Jacobson, *Relaxation* 195)[2]. The core of his method is to focus away from the *contents* of the mind and towards an awareness of one's own mental and emotional *processes* as they manifest in the body, because "it is precisely these tensions, hitherto ignored, which he will need to relax if the undesirable thought-content is to be deleted" (ibid 199). To this end, Jacobson devises a system of 'progressive relaxation', whereby the patient is instructed to tense various parts of the body, not as an aid to relaxation, but in order to learn *the opposite of relaxation*. Once this has registered, s/he is instructed to relax the body part. A variation of this is called 'differential relaxation', whereby the patient tenses one part of the body while keeping the rest of the body at ease. In both methods, proprioceptive awareness is 'rotated' through various parts of the body.

Although not all MPY schools make their debt to Jacobson as blatant as the BWY, direct or indirect borrowing from this element of his work is pervasive. Progressive and differential relaxation have passed into yoga via the 'tense/relax' method employed by many teachers. For example, in the extremely popular Sivananda method (as devised and popularised by Swami Vishnudevananda, 1927–1993), students are instructed to "tense and relax the various parts of the body" as an aid to relaxation (International Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centres 18) and some Sivananda teachers insist that it was Swami Sivananda himself who 'invented' this approach. What is certain is that Jacobson's method has become a staple of both relaxation therapy (see also Colson) and yoga (see, for example, Crisp, *Relax with Yoga* 46), although most students, teachers, and teacher trainers

(in the British Wheel and elsewhere) are largely unaware of the actual derivation of these techniques.[3]

Posture and Stretching

It is not particularly surprising that virtually all modern relaxation therapies recommend that the patient assume a supine position similar to yoga's *śavāsana* or 'corpse pose'. *Śavāsana* is a yoga posture mentioned in medieval haṭha yoga texts, such as the *Haṭha* Yoga Pradīpika, as a means to recover one's strength after the exacting physical disciplines of *āsana* and *prānāyāma*. It is also the pose that is generally employed during the relaxation phase at the end of Modern Yoga classes. Except in cases like Autogenic Training, however, where there is clear evidence that its founder J. Schultz (1884–1970) drew considerable inspiration for his method directly from yoga (e.g. Schultz 299), the similarity of the position assumed in relaxation therapy and yoga is not particularly significant for our understanding of where the relaxation discourse of Modern Yoga comes from. Far more important are the proprioceptive activities appended to the pose and the assumptions that are made about the benefits to be derived from them.

The same might be said for stretching prior to relaxation, which today represents the core element of yoga practice in the popular imagination. For many (perhaps a majority of) practitioners, the Modern Yoga class is quite simply a means to 'stretch and relax'. However, as any survey of the literature of haṭha yoga demonstrates, this notion is very far removed from pre-modern formulations of the function of *āsana*. It seems clear that the principle of muscular extension as a preparation for relaxation was well established in the West decades prior to the popular advent of yoga in Europe and America in the 1950s and 1960s and probably paved the way for the popular reinvention of yoga as stretching. For instance, Annie Payson Call's system of relaxation, developed in the 1880s in Massachusetts, which has had a notable influence on later therapists (such as the philanthropist Mrs William Archer in London), is a good early example of how postural work is linked, very much as it is in the Modern Yoga class, to notions of relaxation. The following potted summary of her work would probably not seem particularly out of place as a definition of a yoga class of today: "It is", writes Lockhart Anderson, "mainly based on stretching and balancing movements which induce freedom from deep-seated and habitual tensions." (Caton xiv). Boome and Richardson, who ran local authority sponsored relaxation classes in London during the 1930s and took inspiration from Call via Mrs Archer, outline a number of postural exercises and then advise the reader: "Having finished your stretching, settle to your relaxation" (38–9). Stretching exercises continue to form a central element of relaxation training in years to come and, by the 1950s, messages, such as Herman S. Schwartz's—"To attempt to obtain physical relaxation while your muscles are taut is an error" (27)—had become widespread dicta.

The fact that relaxation manuals often use postures that bear a close similarity with *yogāsana* has also probably facilitated the passage of relaxationism into yoga. For example, in L. E. Eeman's eugenically inclined *Self and Superman* of 1929, we find descriptions of postures that resemble the forward bend called *paścimottānasana* (68) and the backwards bend *setu bandhāsana* (69), which are to

be used specifically as aids to "efficient relaxation" (67). Stretching exercises resembling yoga postures are common during this period. Although much more could be said regarding the influence of Western exercise/relaxation regimens on the creation of a modern posture-based yoga, here is not the place to do so. Suffice it to say that given the already well-established therapeutic link between stretching and relaxation, the conditions were in place for the creation of the popular conception of yoga in the later twentieth century as a more elaborate form of such therapies. While many of the modern *āsana* themselves may bear a resemblance to the practices of haṭha yoga, their function within the context of the Modern Yoga classroom has changed. As Norman Sjoman, a contemporary scholar of yoga, argues, "The therapeutic cause-effect relation [of *āsana*] is a later superimposition on what was originally a spiritual discipline only" (48). Sjoman's rather categorical assertion appears to overlook the therapeutic concerns at times apparent in texts like the *Haṭha Yoga Pradípika* (e.g. 2:17), but it does point to a very clear increase in emphasis on yoga as a primarily therapeutic practice. This shift in emphasis owes a good deal to the practices of relaxation therapy.[4]

Breathing

As the function of *āsana* was never simply to help the medieval haṭha yogi to relax, but to prepare the body for the rising of the *kuṇḍalini* energy, so the practices of *prānāyāma* evolved with ultimately metaphysical rather than therapeutic ends in mind. However, in the Modern Yoga classroom, *prānāyāma* is usually taught as yet another technique of relaxation rather than as the rigorous discipline of breath control it once was. In fact, along with stretching and relaxing, breathing might be said to form the third element of yoga in the popular imagination. Annie Payson Call's early instructions for breath-based relaxation, for example, are proto-typical of the majority of later therapeutic approaches which have almost certainly had an influence on the development of Modern *prānāyāma* methods.

> Begin then to take a deep breath. Inhale through the nose quietly and easily. Let it seem as if the lungs expanded themselves without voluntary effort on your part. Fill first the lower lungs and then the upper [. . .] As the air leaves your lungs, try to let your body rest back on the floor more heavily [. . .] Repeat this breathing exercise several times; then inhale and exhale rhythmically, with breaths long enough to give about six to a minute, for ten times, increasing the number every day until you reach fifty. (Call 67)

The insight that deep breathing induces a state of relaxation is as central to therapy as it is in Modern Yoga. As the London-based therapists Boome and Richardson point out, "It is impossible to overestimate the importance of breathing as part of therapeutic relaxation" (39); one must question how far the therapeutic function of breath-work in relaxationism has actually shaped modern conceptions of *prānāyāma*. When it was already well established in the Euro-American popular imagination that "Every period of relaxation should [. . .] start with stretching and breathing" (ibid 41), it is far from surprising that 'yoga breathing' should be easily conceptualised as a therapeutic rather than soteriological method.

Auto-suggestion

Suggestion, as it operates in therapeutic and 'modern yogic' relaxation, is virtually always a second- or third-generation heirloom of Mesmerism and mesmerist-inspired positive thinking movements like American New Thought.[5] In Autogenic Training, for example, standard "auto-suggestive formulae", such as "My right arm is heavy" (Schultz 14), betray the very close connection that Schultz maintained with Mesmerism in the development of his method. In Modern Yoga relaxation, the same kind of auto-suggestion is prevalent. For instance, the standard relaxation in one of the most popular forms of yoga in the West, Sivananda yoga, usually features a series of formulae, such as "I relax my right arm [Pause] My right arm is relaxed", which are explicitly referred to as "autosuggestion" (Vishnudevananda 202). Although debts to Mesmerism and Autogenic Training are never acknowledged in the Sivananda system, it seems clear that this is their source rather than the yoga tradition *per se*.

However, suggestion is not only used to encourage the patient—or the yoga student—to relax. It is also commonly used to evoke positive frames of mind once within the state of relaxation and the historical relationship that these techniques bear to hypnotic suggestion is beyond doubt. For example, during the relaxation sessions of the Swiss therapist Vittoz (1863–1925), the "brain-control" patient makes a wilful resolve to change habit patterns and uses positive statements of intent, such as "I will control myself" (Vittoz 84). Similarly, in the popular system of deep relaxation known as 'yoga nidra', relaxation-based suggestions put to similar use through the central element of *sankalpa*,[6] which function as positive suggestive formulae like those used in hypnosis. Consider, for example, this nut-shell description of the technique: "If you know a person with bad habits, instruct him in the practice of yoga nidra. Wait until he is completely relaxed, then make some positive suggestions" (Satyananda, *Yoga Nidra* 19). Although the author—a successful international guru with centres in many countries—is keen to insist that yoga nidra and hypnosis are "totally different sciences, because they proceed in different directions" (31), it seems clear that they actually derive from a common pool of Mesmeric speculation.

Coué's enormous influence on techniques like yoga nidra and on Modern Yoga in general should also be noted. His doctrine of positive suggestion and mental healing enjoyed enormous popularity in Europe in the first decades of the twentieth century and his two books *My Method* of 1923 and *Conscious Auto-suggestion* of 1924 did much to spread his message abroad, where it was eagerly embraced by positive thinking enthusiasts and yoga students alike. In her 1934 study *Yoga and Western Psychology*, Geraldine Coster gives an interesting insight into the early assimilation of Couéism into yoga. Although she is largely supportive of the Coué method being used in conjunction with yoga practices, deeming the two entirely compatible, she warns against the potentially repressive effects of choosing the wrong suggestive formula: "a considerable number of western students who have been interested in yoga and have seriously used [Coué's] method as a means of altering habits and character have been cramped and stultified rather than aided by the practice" (Coster 212). Leaving the cautionary moral of Coster's tale aside, her statement is evidence that *at least* by the 1930s, yoga was being uncritically equated with techniques of positive

suggestion, such as Coué's, a trend which has continued unabated to this day, through teachers such as Satyananda and Vishnudevananda.

Rotation of Awareness

Proprioceptive awareness of the body is central to the majority of modern relaxation therapies. Whether or not they involve tensing and relaxing various muscles, such as in Jacobson's method, there is most often a 'rotation' of subjective awareness through the parts of the body, either as a preliminary or the main element of the relaxation, such as in the "topographic orientation" exercises of Autogenic Training (Schultz 20) or the "Brain Control" method of the Mesmerism-inspired Vittoz. The latter, for example, involves a significant element of segmental bodily proprioception in which the patient "should try to determine in his mind the exact feeling of his right hand, then of his left, then of the right and left foot alternatively, afterwards thinking of his elbows, knees, ears and different fingers etc." (Vittoz 57). Signs of success in this exercise include "tingling" in the body parts under focus.[7] The physician may place his finger on various points of the patient's body and ask the patient to focus there in order to assist with the process of proprioception (ibid). Vittoz's exercises bear a more than occasional resemblance to many Modern Yoga relaxation techniques, such as the "rotation of consciousness" which constitutes "the characteristic feature of yoga nidra" (Satyananda, *Yoga Nidra* 3). In both methods, awareness is 'rotated' around the different parts of the body, with the result that one undergoes "a subjective experience of relaxation, release or 'letting go'". In fact, each of Vittoz's exercises matches so closely a component of the yoga nidra session that one must question whether Satyananda drew directly on the Swiss therapist as much as he drew on any Indian tradition, if not more. Vittoz continues to have a significant influence in European conceptualisations of yoga.[8] In later relaxation manuals, rotation of consciousness is almost always a feature, as, for example, in Rippon and Fletcher's *Reassurance and Relaxation* of 1940, a textbook to help psychoanalysts deal with overly anxious patients. The instructions given to the patient are largely indistinguishable from a typical Modern Yoga relaxation, such as that outlined in the BWY syllabus presented above. Strikingly similar indications can be found in Boome and Richardson and to some degree in most of the relaxation therapies mentioned here, suggesting a high degree of consensus (prior to the Western yoga boom of the 1950s and 1960s) as to what constitutes a relaxation session.

Psychology

Relaxation therapy and Modern Yoga came into being at roughly the same moment in history as modern psychology and their growth and elaboration are inextricably entwined with the nascent psychological worldview. From very early on, yoga tends to be categorised as a type of psychology, as the large number of books on the subject (among them Coster's) attest.[9] In the same way, relaxation methods like rotation of the awareness through the body are often used as an adjunct to the psychotherapeutic process of unblocking repressed memories or emotions, which are then used as material for the therapy itself. One clear example of this is the psychotherapist partnership of Rippon and Fletcher and their *Reassurance and Relaxation* of 1940. Other examples include Autogenic Training,

in which relaxation is used as a means to penetrate the unconscious and liberate repressed material (Schultz), and the method of L. E. Eeman, where relaxation is a weapon for the mastery of the unconscious mind (Eeman 51). It is not surprising, therefore, that Modern Yoga relaxation tends to assimilate these psychotherapeutic ends, to the extent that expressions of the function of yoga are sometimes indistinguishable from the discourse of psychotherapy. Thus, for example, the modern-day yoga writer Tony Crisp recommends that deep yoga relaxation be "done with a therapist of some sort" who can help with strong repressed emotions like grief that may come up" (Crisp, *Relax with Yoga* 47). A little later, on the topic of early trauma, he exhorts the reader to "Resolve to re-suffer these hidden pains, that they may be surfaced and dropped" (ibid 51)—advice that seems far more likely to have issued from an Arthur Janov or a Fritz Perls than from the pre-modern yoga tradition. Once this work is successfully accomplished, the unconscious can then be yoked into the service of the voluntary mind, as can be seen in Satyananda's yoga nidra or in the work of another prolific writer of the 1970s and 1980s, James Hewitt. Indeed, it is enough to glance through the long list of the benefits of relaxation adduced by this latter (Hewitt 23) to understand that his book represents a thoroughly Western appropriation of Eastern techniques, the goal of which is far closer to American mind-cure than to *mokṣa*.

Harmonialism and Proprioception

Harmonial Relaxation

There is a strong current in early therapeutic techniques that identifies individualistic proprioceptive relaxation with accession to divine knowledge and grace. This current has also passed into the discourse of Modern Yoga, beginning with Vivekananda and continuing to this day. That rest and relaxation can open a conduit for an unlimited supply of divine energy is a notion that is prevalent in virtually all esoterically inspired versions of relaxationism. In this view, relaxation is not an end in itself, but—on the contrary—a form of embodied worship. As Annie Payson Call puts it:

> In exact parallel to the spiritual laws upon which all universal truth, of all religions, is founded, are the truths of this teaching of physical peace and equilibrium. As religion applies to the needs of the soul, so this applies to all the needs of the body. (Call 101-2)

In Call's belief framework, the physical body becomes the locus of a new religion, with proprioceptive relaxation as its principal form of prayer. In fact, it is only by relaxing the muscles of the body that the heart and mind can be quieted, because thoughts and emotions are stored within the physical frame (ibid 15). Therefore, instead of subjecting our emotions to unwholesome (proprioceptive) scrutiny, we should instead turn the "microscope" to "the relaxation of the external tension which has helped to hold [that emotion]" (ibid 38).[10] If we were to rid ourselves of physical (and thereby emotional and mental tension), "We should grow faster spiritually, because we should not make conflicts for ourselves, but should meet with the Lord's quiet strength whatever we had to pass through" (ibid 60). Call believes that by relaxing fully and with awareness, we align ourselves with God's and nature's 'law'.[11] If, however, we are full of tension, we will not be receptive to

this influence. Thus, paradoxically, by slackening the pace of our physical and mental drives, we enter a fast track to spiritual growth.

Call's work is a clear expression of what I call 'salvation through relaxation', in so far as for her, bodily passivity and proprioception supersede contrition and repentance as the indispensable condition of one's personal relationship with God. This somatic soteriology belongs to a cluster of religious beliefs that Sydney Ahlstrom has called "harmonial piety", "in which spiritual composure, physical health, and even economic well-being are understood to flow from a person's rapport with the cosmos" (Ahlstrom 1019). Instead of petitioning the Lord with prayer or atoning for sins, one should instead seek to align oneself with the cosmic will in order that the divine life force might flow through the individual frame. For Call, and for many who embraced such doctrines, the principal means to accomplish this harmony is through proprioceptive relaxation.

William James and Harmonial Relaxation

William James, the father of modern humanistic psychology, is in many ways emblematic of the modern tendency to equate psychological inwardness with religious experience (see Fuller, *Americans* 79). James was himself a great advocate of the creed of harmonial relaxation and considers techniques, such as Call's, as the centrepiece of the truly spiritual life (see especially James, "The Gospel of Relaxation" 126). In the Gifford Lectures of 1901–2 (later published as *The Varieties of Religious Experience*), James insists that the capacity for "regeneration by relaxing" (James, *Varieties* 122) is what distinguishes the truly religious person from "the merely moralistic character" (ibid 121) and contends that mind-cure methods of relaxation lead to a state that is "psychologically indistinguishable from the Lutheran justification by faith and the Wesleyan acceptance of grace" (ibid 122). James hereby situates relaxation at the heart of both Protestant piety and the nascent discipline of psychology and paves the way for an assimilation of the therapeutic methods and esoteric axioms of relaxation enthusiasts into the Modern Yoga discourse. For, as he argues later, relaxation of body and mind is "the fundamental act in specifically religious, as distinguished from moral practice" and "capable of entering into the closest marriage with every speculative creed" (James, *Varieties* 285). The radical ecumenical potential of such a belief provided the conditions for the creed of 'relaxationism' (along with its characteristic psychological outlook) to be taken up in the Modern Yoga discourse.

James and Vivekananda

James was greatly interested in yoga and, perhaps inevitably, tended to view it through the lens of humanistic psychology and indigenous American spirituality. He was, moreover, acquainted with the first exponent of Modern Yoga, Swami Vivekananda and, as De Michelis points out (171), moved in the same intellectual circles of the Boston area. James was even asked to write the preface to the first textual expression of Modern Yoga, *Raja Yoga*, published in 1896, although this never materialised (ibid.). Vivekananda on his part was greatly impressed with James's psychology and drew heavily on the latter's theoretical observations in the formulation of his yoga philosophy. For example, Vivekananda's emphasis on proprioception, which has had a profound effect on subsequent expressions of

Modern Yoga, is clearly inspired by empirical psychology. For Vivekananda, "mind studying mind" can bring a person

> to the basis of belief, the real genuine religion. We will perceive for ourselves whether we have souls… whether there is a God in the universe or more. It will all be revealed to us. (qtd. in De Michelis 174)

Like James, Vivekananda placed great faith in the power of proprioceptive awareness. His belief in the epistemological potential of empirical investigation and subjective interiority is evident, along with the notion that sensory auto-cognition can provide a path to grace or gnosis. Self-scrutiny alone clears the way for a direct perception of the numinous or of God, not doctrinal testimony or faith. However, as De Michelis demonstrates (176–7), Vivekananda's emphasis on experiential cognition has no parallel in the classical Vedantic tradition that Vivekananda claims to represent and has far more to do with a psychology born in the context of esoteric Protestantism. Ironically (since Vivekananda arguably derived many of his theories from James in the first place), the Swami and his work subsequently become James's own authority on yoga and James quotes him whenever he speaks or writes about such matters.[12] The apparent theoretical compatibility of Modern Yoga on the one hand and psychological speculation on religion on the other hand is therefore not so much proof of the universality of human nature (as is often argued) as an indication of the historically determined character of both.

Discovering Tradition in Modernity

It is useful to note that behind the general willingness, on the part of early Indian Modern Yoga authorities, to incorporate eclectic elements of Western relaxationism into their teaching lies a profound sense of alienation from the tradition itself and a conviction of the pertinence and efficacy of Western techniques for the modern Indian yoga practitioner. These techniques came from therapists, psychologists, and mind-curists of varying stripe, whose work was retroactively used to illustrate the deeper truths of the yoga practice itself. In the process, of course, something new was created, although this was rarely, if ever, acknowledged. Consider this revealing statement by the influential early teacher of Modern Yoga, Pandit Pratinidhi, the Rajah of Aundh, in his 1938 publication on the practice of *suryanamaskar* (salutations to the sun):

> It took Coué to teach us the virtue of *Japa*, or constant meditation upon a certain idea, or Haddock to instruct us in the importance of will-power, or William James to enlighten us on the significance of mental control. Any one who reads the works of these men even cursorily and compares their teachings with those of ancient Indian sages will not fail to be struck with wonder at the resemblance. (Pratinidhi 105)

Pratinidhi has been lamenting the desuetude into which certain traditional yoga practices have fallen and here expresses his gratitude to the West for stimulating renewed interest in yoga. For instance, *japa* (i.e. the ritual repetition of *mantra* or the names of God) appears, according to him, to have undergone a revival, thanks mainly to Coué's influence. As we have seen, to equate the affirmative, positive-thinking formulae of Coué with the practice of *japa* is something of a parody.

Pratinidhi's assertion is illustrative of the way in which non-indigenous practices were being uncritically assimilated into Modern Yoga and in which this process effected a linguistic and conceptual torsion in the diction of yoga itself (e.g. *japa* becomes *affirmation*). Also striking is how William James's admiration for mind-control is taken by Pratinidhi as a teaching on concentration and the restriction of the fluctuations of the mind, such as that described in Patañjali's seminal *Yoga Sutra*. As well as showing the extent to which James's philosophy continued to have a formative influence on the creation of Modern Yoga, it demonstrates the readiness with which authors like Pratinidhi accepted such teachings as lessons in yoga philosophy. Pratinidhi does not acknowledge that the assimilation of the messages of James and Coué into the discourse of Modern Yoga represents a departure from indigenous traditions and is therefore unable to recognise that the retrospective endorsement of this message by these 'ancient Indian sages' is not logically defensible. It is this confusion that continues to influence Modern Yoga today.

The ideological exchange initiated by Vivekananda and those, like Pratinidhi, who built on his work, has shaped the way in which we think about yoga and relaxation today. Yoga and the goal of yoga are often described as "spiritual relaxation" (see, for instance, Vishnudevananda 203) and there is often very little to distinguish either the methods or the philosophical framework from psychological harmonialism. Consider, for example, the definition of contemporary writer Tony Crisp of 'Yoga relaxation', in his book *Relax with Yoga* (40):[13]

> Through it one can drop away many of the things that destroy the harmony of our lives [. . .] Without any other philosophy, Yoga relaxation can help us find wisdom and understanding in rising to life's challenges.

'Yoga relaxation' not only puts us in harmony with the world around us, but furnishes us with a complete existential survival kit. Crisp's view of relaxation clearly has far more in common with the this-worldly, esoteric relaxation in the tradition of Call and James than with the other-worldly discourse of liberation from suffering and ignorance codified in Patañjali's seminal *Yoga Sutras*. As is typical for exponents of Modern Yoga relaxation, Crisp identifies relaxation as the essence of all religion, as much as James made it the defining feature of the truly spiritual life. A similar picture appears in Satyananda's yoga nidra: the individual who can relax, "knows the reality, the truth [. . .] And knowledge of truth only comes when you are free of tension" (Crisp, *Relax with Yoga* 16). Relaxation leads to an inviolable epistemological certainty and wisdom, whereas tension, like ignorance, prevents it. As in the harmonial discourse of Call and James, grace is to be sought nowhere but in the practice of relaxation and only the relaxed soul enters the gates of heaven.

Conclusion

Relaxation therapy was born in an age of both unprecedented technological advancement and growing nervous disease. In the relaxationists' view, the febrile and time-tabled life of modern cities has sapped people of their natural force, leaving them subject to a nervous exhaustion and listlessness that Annie Payson Call termed "americanitis" (11). Virtually all of the therapies and 'yoga'

techniques considered here are prefaced by a more or less romantic lament regarding the pace of modern life. Whether or not times had in fact become more frantic is in a sense immaterial: they are perceived as such and modern relaxationism develops explicitly in response to this perception. However, techniques of rest and streamlined activity are not conceived as challenges to this oppressive order, but are enlisted into the service of efficient labour. One need only consider the illustrations in Edmund Jacobson's popular self-help manual *You Must Relax!* of 1934 to understand the essentially ergonomic function of modern relaxationism. Although he issues the requisite lament on the frenzied pace of modern life—in contrast to "the patient toil of our forefathers" (*Practical Method* 141)—Jacobson's enthusiasm to demonstrate how his novel, scientific relaxation techniques can get more out of the worker is typical of the ideological current of early relaxationism. It is no coincidence that at the same moment, industrial psychologists were busying themselves with assessing the effects on workers of regular periods of relaxation. In the 1920s, for example, The British Industrial Health Research Board found that with regular relaxation, "The work curve is not only raised in height but it is also improved in form" (Myers, qtd. in Caton 144) and a later series of tests in a textile factory revealed that "organised" relaxation pauses yield far more "output" than informal ones (Burtt, qtd. ibid).

Modern Yoga texts very often show the same dialectic of nostalgia and ergonomics that we find in early relaxation manuals. To take just one example, Swami Vishnudevananda, in one of the most influential pictorial DIY yoga manuals of the twentieth century, complains vehemently about the pace of modern living that has made "the civilised man of today" forget "nature's way of recharging the body during relaxation and rest" (Vishnudevananda 199). As a result, the "efficiency" of the body and mind "in performing their natural work diminishes" (ibid). He stresses the necessity not to "confuse relaxation with laziness" (ibid 202) and indicates that the practices he outlines are in order that we might emulate the industriousness of figures like Napoleon (who slept on horseback) and "great statesmen and sages" like Gandhi (ibid). Agehananda Bharati ("Hindu Renaissance" 271) has argued that such a respectful emphasis on work is a feature of the 'Hindu Renaissance' and of its exponents (such as Gandhi) rather than of any indigenous Indian tradition, such as yoga. This emphasis, he continues, is "a purely Western import, like so many ideological items" (ibid) and, in the light of our current discussion, it seems reasonable to view Vishnudevananda's message as contiguous with that of the relaxationists we have considered.

In many ways, yoga fulfils the same function for the postmodern city dweller as early relaxationism once did. It is no coincidence that the boom in popularity of yoga in the West has occurred mainly in heavily populated cities, such as London and New York, where life is often relentlessly hectic—nor that many businesses and corporations now organise intra-departmental yoga classes for their employees. In fact, Modern Yoga not only borrows from the techniques of early relaxationism, but feeds the same cultural demand that gave rise to it and is (socially) its direct successor. Relaxation is not valued in and of itself, but only insofar as it can enable the worker to continue functioning under increased amounts of tension. In other words, the ideological dyad of harmonialism and labour (embraced by relaxationists and yoga practitioners alike) is a component part of the spiritual and economic privatisation of the subject in capitalist society.

In both spheres, the individual has moved away from community and towards self-management and market individualism. Indeed, as Carrette and King argue, the 'spiritual' has itself become largely engulfed in the tide of profit-motivated neo-liberalism. Modern Yoga's capacity and willingness to incorporate a highly eclectic array of therapies and New Age credos moulded to the individual gives it high commodity value, as, for example, the success of the recent 'Yoga Show' in London attested. With industrial-scale merchandising and the franchising of 'Eastern wisdom', yoga has become hot property. Relaxationism, as it manifests in Modern Yoga, is far less (as some would have us believe) an integral package despatched through the millennia by Indian sages than a symptom of the religious and economic crisis of our time.

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NOTES

1. In tantric visualisation, the aspirant must only visualise images from the traditional iconographic canon that have been "prescribed and codified by the masters" (Eliade 208). There is "no question of abandoning oneself to a pure spontaneity and passively receiving the content of what, in the language of Western psychology, we should term the individual or collective unconscious" (ibid 207). This is a distinction that is often far from clear in Modern Yoga practices of visualisation.
2. The first usage of the term 'Proprioception', according to the Oxford English Dictionary (1989), is from C. S. Sherington's *Integrative Action of Nervous System* of 1906: "Since in this field the stimuli to the receptors are given by the organism itself, their field may be called the proprio-ceptive field" (vol. iv. 130).
3. It is worth pointing out that the method of differential relaxation attributed to Jacobson is anticipated 38 years earlier by Annie Payson Call: "First learn to withdraw the will from the muscles entirely. Learn, next, to direct the will over the muscles of one arm while the rest of the body is perfectly free and relaxed" (Call 86).
4. James Hewitt, a popular contemporary yoga writer, declares that "In the East, poised posture is taught as a psychotherapy as well as a main technique of spiritual unfoldment" (114) and he presents the reader with a table of psychological states associated with posture. Hewitt's statement is typical of the confusion of Western psychosomatics in general (and post-Reichian bodywork in particular) with yoga—a confusion consolidated by the emergence of some highly therapeutised forms of yoga, such as Phoenix Rising (cf. Lee).
5. See Jackson for an excellent account of New Thought in relation to Eastern thought.
6. A Sanskrit term meaning "wish; volition; resolution; will; determination; intention" (Grimes 281).
7. Interestingly, when the patient concentrates on his right hand, Vittoz says that the physician feels a corresponding vibration on right side of the brain rather than the left (Vittoz 57). There is no 'cross-over' as we might expect, given the model of right/left brain in popular usage today.
8. For example: "Tous ces exercices [de Vittoz] on le voit aboutissent, tout comme notre méthode, qui en utilise d'ailleurs la plupart, à un rassemblement de tout l'être dans l'unité et convergent vers la maîtrise de soi. [...] Les indications sont donc les mêmes que celles du yoga et l'efficacité doit se rapprocher de ce que nous constatons en yogathérapie" (Auriol).
9. Trisha Lamb Feuerstein has compiled a comprehensive 70-page bibliography entitled "Yoga Psychology and Psychotherapy", which can be viewed in PDF form at <www.spiritrisingyoga.com/ Yoga%20and%20Psychotherapy.pdf >.

10. Call anticipates here a central postulate of twentieth-century psychosomatic medicine and post-Reichian bodywork that emotions are stored or 'held' in the physical frame and must therefore be addressed somatically in the first instance.
11. The conflation of grace and nature is commonplace in nineteenth-century American Protestantism: "Natural theology was based on the assumption that God has revealed Himself to humankind through two mediums: Scripture (special revelation) and nature (general revelation)" (Fuller, *Americans* 22).
12. See, for example, the address "The Energies of Man" of 1906 and the essay "The Powers of Man" of 1907. See also James, *Varieties* 386, 489.
13. First published as *Yoga and Relaxation* (1978).

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