

Jeanne Varenne,

Yoga and the Hindu Tradition,

(Derk Coltman, Translator), Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1976, x+253 pp; \$ 12.50.

In recent times Yoga has gained an extraordinary popularity in the West. New books on "how to meditate", or "how to relax" appealing to Yoga techniques are making their appearance almost every day in the bookstores. But in spite of their reference to ancient Indian systems and the Yogis and Maharshis of India, what is laddled out in them are merely physical exercises or psychic practices with a good mixture of techniques drawn from psychiatry and counselling, with very little reference to the metaphysical and religious view point on which Yoga was based. This distortion is abetted and encouraged by the numerous Western style, expensive yoga centres even in India, where with all the ceremony and ritual of guru worship people can come nowhere near authentic yoga. In this book under review, published first in French in 1973 Jeanne Varenne protests against this dishonesty and tries to present to the general reader the correct perspective.

The book is divided into four parts. The first part presents the metaphysical and religious vision on which Yoga is based, the second the theoretical conception of Yoga as the search for liberating knowledge, the third a brief indication of the physical practices in the taming of the body and the different stages leading to concentration and realization, while the fourth is on extra yogic schemes like Kundalini and Tantrism. The summary presentation of the Hindu Weltanschauung beginning with the Vedas and the Upanishads shows clearly the religious and philosophical background of Yoga. This vision is centered in the concept of Brahman, the absolute reality, realized as Atman, the ground of reality and being in each individual. This Brahman is the felly of the cosmic wheel and unifies in itself all multiplicity symbolized by the thousand spokes and the circumference; it is identical with Dharma, and even the world, which is only a transitory form of it. Rooted in this Real, the life of man, the microcosm, his individual actions and social order should conform to the immutable order of the microcosm. This is a good presentation of Hindu thought, except for Varenne's references to Western thought bringing in quotations from people like Nietzsche or comparing Vishnu to God the Father of the Gospels, which are less than fortunate and often inaccurate. Though he says that the Hindu outlook like that of Buddhism is essentially pessimistic in the body of the discussion he shows that it starts with a happy and positive approach to the bright side of life and of the world at large

and ends in the optimistic view of everything being ultimately rooted in Brahman.

The second part explains the centrality of knowledge and realization in attaining liberation, for which Yoga is a means. Though the different schools of Indian religious thought propose different methods for the attainment of knowledge, Yoga presented in the Yoga sutras of Patanjali is the universally acknowledged Yoga. Any method of procedure used in the quest for the Absolute is acceptable provided it is in harmony with the basic principles of Yoga as such.

The third part begins with an interesting discussion of the sanyasa system, though not wholly relevant to the discussion of Yoga, may be considered useful to bring out the religious context in which Yoga is practised. *sanyāsa* is directly opposed to the caste rules of Hindu society, still, the life of total renunciation is looked upon with admiration by the people and exerts great influence on the people in promoting the discipline of Yoga. The eight members of yogic discipline that prepares for spiritual liberation corresponds to the psycho-somatic and spiritual structure of man; the first six including restraint, posture and breath-control refer to the psycho-corporeal level, while the last two *dhyāna*, meditation and *samādhi*, concentration, refer to the spiritual plane. Varenne explains in detail the various stages of these yogic methods and stages. Of these *dhāraṇa*, fixing of the mind through a metaphysical consideration effectively dissolving the mental activity, *dhyāna* or meditation proper, which is beyond all reasoning, and *samādhi* which is perfect interiorisation of the supreme object of the contemplative search, form the three most important functions of yoga.

In the fourth part on the Eternal Feminine the author gives a general description of Kundalini, Tantrism, and other mystical practices which are methods of spiritual realization like Yoga, instructing people to make use of the hidden forces in man's body to attain the highest realms of the spirit. An English translation of Yoga Darshana Upanishad, a classic on yoga in the Saivite tradition is also included in the book.

It is evidently a very useful manual to correct the present distortions of Yoga in the West. The book brings out clearly the spiritual and religious implications of Yoga. But, on account of the limited space the author cannot achieve anything more than a general information on the various aspects of the topic. Though Varenne's admiration for and sympathy with Yoga is evident in every page, his position as of an outside scholar discussing an esoteric system brings in a tone of condescension that does not favourably impress an Indian reader. But the wealth of material he has brought together in this modest volume is really remarkable and deserves praise.

J. B. C.