

External Examiner's Report on the Dissertation of Lubomíra Ondračka
Charakter nesmrtnosti v jógových textech
The Character of Immortality in Yoga Texts
submitted in 2021 at the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies,
Faculty of Arts, Charles University, Prague

Brief summary of the dissertation

The dissertation of Lubomír Ondračka, titled *The Character of Immortality in Yoga Texts*, is an extraordinary piece of scholarship, whether in the context of Central European Indology or generally in the context of global South Asian studies, and particularly of Yoga Studies. Drawing on linguistic, research and narrative skills, extensive knowledge of state of the art, a vast variety of primary sources and a deep personal involvement in studying the concepts of immortality in yoga texts, Lubomír has convincingly showed his scholarly abilities. The main goal of the dissertation is to argue that, according to majority of yoga texts, a yogi reaches immortality in a biophysical body and not in a spiritual body as the current scholarly consensus has it. This has been achieved by minute and well-structured comparison and detailed philological analysis of the concerned passages of primarily hathayoga texts dated roughly to the first half of the second millennium CE, as well as by discussion of the current scholarly interpretations of the problem. In sum, the dissertation is an important contribution to recent and ongoing scholarly engagement with the different facets of yoga.

Brief overall evaluation of the dissertation

The dissertation meets the highest standards of scholarship. It is logically structured and leads the reader from the general theme of Indic approaches to immortality (as seen, for instance, in older and younger Vedic texts), through a discussion of different ideas of body and its qualities in the Vedas, the mainstream Brahmanical literature, and the ascetic and tantric schools, to more particular hathayoga conceptualizations of immortality and the techniques for achieving it. Lubomír documents his explanations by references to the yogic texts while paying attention to their intertextuality. Grounded in the extensive reading of both primary and secondary materials, the author's argument for the biophysical nature of a yogi's body then progressively gains strength and cogency. The author is well versed in Sanskrit, Bengali and Hindi yoga texts that concern immortality and the ways of achieving it. Some of the texts are indeed rare. Although well aware of the limits to his knowledge of other Indian languages, he also includes evidence from other parts of Hindu South Asia, e.g. Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra, while constantly alerting the reader to the fact that still more material is available. This allows him both to discuss the character of immortality and the ways of gaining it, broadly as well as in deep detail. The quality of Lubomír's dissertation lies, indeed, in his ability to comprehensively show how the medieval yoga authors fruitfully drew on a plethora of earlier intellectual, practical as well as soteriological stimuli collated under the category of yoga and utilised them to explain how to gain immortality in the physical body. What are from my point of view minor shortcomings of the work shall be discussed below. However, these are rather marginal and do not affect the dissertation's overall high quality.

Detailed evaluation of the dissertation and its individual aspects

As stated above, the dissertation coherently and convincingly unfolds its argument applying thoroughly mastered academic standards. By its treating of immortality in (hatha)yoga texts, not only is it a pioneering work worth of praise, but it also deserves serious academic attention and debate.

However, I see three mutually connected lines of interpretations that could be considered before, as I expect, the dissertation is published as a monograph. The first is concerned with the South Asian concept of liberation (moksha, mukti) in the context of yoga practice and the second is concerned with the understanding of materiality and spirituality, as found in Indian in general and in yoga texts in particular. Lubomír has discussed and sufficiently linked liberation to immortality and body, as he vividly documents on the many examples from various, and not solely, yoga texts (particularly in the 4th and 5th chapters). To my mind, however, the discussion of liberation in the biophysical body would benefit from a more detailed exploration of the meanings that Hindu and other South Asian, and particularly yoga, texts apply to the very concept of materiality. Admittedly, the dominance of Samkhya ideas on materiality (in terms of prakṛti) in most Indic conceptualisations of the goals of human existence in the post-Vedic philosophical thought, including that of yoga (which is implicitly mentioned in the 7th chapter), is observable. Therefore, the process of documenting soteriological instrumentality of the biophysical body of a yogi could have started from the discussion of materiality, immortality, liberation and the human body, as well as, by the explanation of the considerable difference between a simple body-soul opposition and Samkhya's take on the problem. It would allow Lubomír to explain what kind of biophysical body is sought after by the hathayogi and what is meant by the body's transformations instead of seeing the transformation only within an opposition between the physical and the spiritual (e.g. 71 -76). He convincingly shows why immortality in yoga texts is achieved in the biophysical body and admittedly does consider the transformation of the yogi's body (e.g. pp. 95, and the whole chapter on the Mahabhūtas). But, if we consider that the meanings of Indian terms used in the context of transformation of bodily qualities may change over time and change due to the philosophical approaches adopted, can the problem of the material versus spiritual be so easily resolved? Paying more attention to the problem could, perhaps, provide also a more nuanced explanation of the apparent inconsistencies in Dasgupta's, Mallik's, Kaviraj's and White's treatment of different bodies (*siddha, vajra, yoga, divya – deha/kaya*).

The third line of interpretation is concerned with, in my opinion, a somewhat too decisive classification of differences between adepts of yoga according to their sectarian, or sampradayik affiliation and philosophical, world-and-practice-construing background. On the one hand, such division clearly helps Lubomír to focus on hathayoga texts, which is perfectly justifiable and reasonable. It also helps him to identify precursors of yoga practices, particularly the tantric ideational and textual substrate and also explain the differences between the two. In fact, this is clearly documented by several references to intra- and inter-sampradayik textual borrowings observable in yoga texts. Lubomír's orientation in the networks of various yoga and tantra schools is truly admirable. On the other hand, given the well-documented possibilities of sectarian permeability in South Asia as well as claims of appropriation of religious figures within various and often philosophically opposed traditions, which results also in sharing of ideas and practices, poses a problem for such a decisive classification. After all, it poses a problem for the understanding of yoga itself.

Let me elaborate. On p. 29, and in footnote no. 94, Lubomír briefly hints at the terminological problems regarding the emergence of the tradition, which is today known as hathayoga, or Nath sampradaya. He refers to the sceptical view of James Mallinson regarding the time when the tradition emerged and explains that in the light of early Marathi literature such a sceptical position is unjustified. It is evident that early Marathi texts, particularly Jnaneshwari and the Yoga songs attributed to Jnanadev bring in the hathayogic themes and terminology. However, as also Catharina Kiehnle seems to suggest (1997, pp. 201-203) these texts rather belong to the Advaita Vedantins of the early Varkari sampradaya (Bhagavata dharma). After all this is clear from Jnaneshwari itself where even if (hatha)yoga is recognised as a valid means for gaining mukti, liberation is understood in Advaita -Vedantic terms as a realisation of the only reality (Brahma) and bhakti is clearly preferred to yoga which is seen as a difficult path (Jnaneshwari chapters 6 and 12). How does this stand in line with Lubomír's exclusion of the Advaita Vedantins out of the hathayoga circles, or as the usurpers of yoga for their own shastric purposes (p. 22)? Furthermore, a similar understanding of yoga can be found in other Marathi texts such as Eknath's Bhagavata, a commentary on the 11th Skandha of the Bhagavata Purana and Sheikh Muhammad's Yogasangram. Not only do these three texts share a sectarian affiliation and preference for Advaita -Vedantic interpretation of liberation, but also show the continuity of Advaitic treatment of yoga in Marathi texts. Eknath discussed yoga and liberation in several parts of his voluminous commentary, and included references to *hathayoga* and *hathayogis, chakras, kundalini, mudras* (like *khechari*), *nadis, pranayama*, and *siddhis* (e.g. EBh 3:278, 20:250-268, 27: 82-92, 28: 654, 669-670). However, he disregards the yogic means to liberation, unless these are not subservient to mukti in the Advaitic sense (e.g. EBh 28:651-655). Sheikh Muhammad, again with similar kind of references to yogic practices and ideas (e.g. mudras *chachari, khechari, bhuchari*...YS: 18:39), also prefers the Advaitic framework, even if that might be a translation of the Islamic concept of *tawhid*. Yet importantly, to my mind these three texts rather offer explanations of yoga within the framework of their preferred discourse than teach yoga practice as such. Even if some passages may resemble instructions. Given the continuity of their intellectual efforts to explain Advaita and bhakti and the fact that all three authors have been for a considerable time popularly considered to be also yogis (as the jivanta samadhis of the first and the last, where they are said to meditate in their biophysical bodies testify), why, as it would appear, there would be a clear-cut division between Jnanadev on one side and Eknath and Sheikh Muhammad on the other? In a similar vein, Jason Schwartz (2017) argues that a turn to yoga is observable in the Advaita texts of Sringeri Math acharyas and their disciples. Hence, on what grounds does the hathayoga tradition which shows such permeability of ideas and practices allow an exclusion of those who worked in a similar textual and ideational milieu, as were the Advaitins, Tantrikas or the Tamil siddhas (the latter referred to by Lubomír as the only ones who speak about the non-material body)?

References

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Questions for the author

What is the difference between the concepts of material and non-material in hathayoga texts in the context of mukti?

In what ways is the transformation of the yogi's biophysical body in the process of sadhana different from the transformation of a Tamil siddha body to a divine body (divyadeha)?

Would the claim of attainment of mukti in a non-bodily state (videhi) be a disqualification for being a yogi?

On what grounds does the hathayoga tradition which shows permeability of ideas and practices, allow an exclusion of those who worked in a similar textual and ideational milieu as, for example, the Marathi yogis and Advaitins, and the Tamil siddhas?

Conclusion

The submitted dissertation meets the requirements laid down for the dissertation work, and therefore I recommend it for defence and preliminarily classify it as *passed*.

Předložená disertační práce splňuje požadavky kladené na disertační práci, a proto ji doporučuji k obhajobě a předběžně ji klasifikuji jako *prospěl*.

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