

“It gets me to the same place”: Sanskrit in modern postural yoga teaching

Thursday 23 May 2024 11:45 (30 minutes)

Most practitioners of modern postural yoga (MPY) are white, non-South Asians who do not identify MPY practice with Hinduism or with religion. And yet, as Lucia (2020) discusses, many seek “authenticity” by appealing to (exoticised) South Asian religious and cultural forms, and experience this authenticity as grounds for authority. This paper contributes to this discussion through a case study of the use of the Sanskrit language by UK-based MPY teachers. Drawing on original ethnographic research, the paper additionally considers the subjective experience of Sanskrit usage for MPY teachers. Considering this experience alongside dynamics of “authenticity” and exoticism enriches the discussion by complicating the picture thus presented.

Sanskrit usage represents a fruitful avenue for exploring the dynamics of exoticism, authenticity and authority in MPY. Sanskrit use in MPY is both widespread, involving experiential dynamics that implicate most MPY practice, and also varied, permitting the exploration of a variety of experiences within MPY.

This paper explores three examples of Sanskrit usage among teachers of MPY that illustrate the range of that usage. Drawing from ethnographic and autoethnographic data, the paper applies the tools of affect theory (Schaefer 2015) to examine the subjective experience of Sanskrit usage among MPY practitioners. It considers how Sanskrit use among MPY teachers may be evidence both of dynamics of exoticism and also of committed personal, even religious, practice. This research furthers the discussion of the dynamics of exoticism and power within MPY, and contributes to understandings of the experiential dimension of MPY practice.

Samuel Horsley is a second-year PhD student at the University of Edinburgh researching the teaching of Hindu philosophy by MPY teachers. He previously completed undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in religious studies at the University of Oxford.

Author: HORSLEY, Samuel (The University of Edinburgh)

Presenter: HORSLEY, Samuel (The University of Edinburgh)

Session Classification: Introspection