

Yoga and Parapsychology: Empirical Research and Theoretical Studies edited by K. Ramakrishna Rao. Dehli: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2010. 507 pp. \$54.75 (hardcover). ISBN 978-8120834736.

Those familiar with the history and the literature of parapsychology will recognize the name of K. Ramakrishna Rao, director of the Rhine Research Center after Rhine's retirement, and a decades-long contributor to the literature of parapsychology. Now head of the Indian Council of Philosophical Research, Rao is a natural choice to produce a book on the topic of yoga and parapsychology. The 19 papers (plus the Preface to the book) come from a 2006 conference at Andhra University. A helpful glossary is also included.

The theme of the connection between yoga and parapsychology is a natural one, as several authors point out, since, on the one hand, Indian philosophy takes paranormal powers (*siddhi*) to be a natural outcome of yoga practice, and on the other hand, meditation and other noise reduction exercises have proved to be psi-conducive in Western empirical research. Yet, there has been too little cross-cultural fertilization, so a conference on the subject and the subsequent book are welcome.

The title of the book, however, is somewhat ambiguous; it can mean one of three things: 1) how yoga and parapsychology intersect, 2) parapsychology as a separate topic, or 3) yoga as a separate topic. Given the East–West emphasis of Rao, as well being the subject matter that contributes more to new ideas, the first topic is the one that I expected and hoped the book would be about. That is not fully the case, though, as fewer than half of the chapters intentionally inter-relate both yoga and parapsychology (with another several topics relatable by implication), and Rao authored three of these chapters. I could not discern a strong organization of the articles—certainly none is made plain—so for this review I propose to impose my own organization and discuss the articles under the three headings above. I will spend the most time on the articles in the first category since they seem to me the more groundbreaking and integrative. The other articles will be interesting to different researchers more specifically dedicated to Eastern thought or to parapsychology research.

Yoga and Parapsychology

Perhaps it is too much to ask practitioners of yoga and of parapsychology to be well-versed enough in the other subject to combine the views of both East and West. After all, one of the problems the book attempts to

ameliorate is the disconnect between the two worldviews, especially Western knowledge of Eastern philosophy. All three of Rao's contributions (plus his Preface) contribute to the discussion of the interrelation (or lack of it) on the conceptual level. As Rao points out, yoga is a philosophy and a practice, while parapsychology is a Western science, and each has a different set of assumptions and approaches, although parapsychology can be viewed as a science of the *siddhis*. While the East has focused on a science of the inner, the West has focused on a science of the outer, material world. But, Rao wonders whether there is an alternative "to the neurocentric conception of consciousness and the mind that could conceivably bridge the epistemic asymmetry between objective science and subjective experience" (p. xvi). He suggests that yoga might offer a "new paradigm for studying the mind, one that would reconcile the scientific demands as well as spiritual aspirations" (p. xvii). And he further argues that as long as *siddhis* (psi phenomena) are viewed by parapsychology as anomalies (as opposed to being natural events, as they are in yoga), parapsychology will always remain simply a study of anomalies, and it will not gain scientific legitimacy. Rather, parapsychologists must move beyond this traditional Western view and accept that psi is part of a broader psychology, where parapsychology studies exceptional natural phenomena rather than attempting to naturalize the supernatural. Within such a view, Rao points out that an expanded psychology is offered by the *Yoga-sutras* of Patanjali.

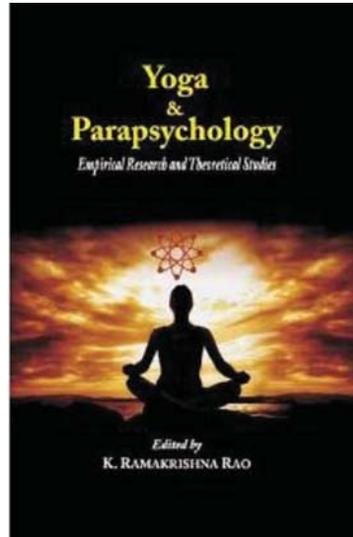
Matthijs Cornelissen's article contrasts the Western mainstream view of consciousness (which he identifies with Searle) with the Vedic view presented by Sri Aurobindo. While the Western view discusses consciousness as being possessed by individual persons, the Vedic tradition examines the spiritual experience of consciousness as Absolute, in which both matter and individual consciousness are manifestations of a larger consciousness, which is the essential nature of reality. Aurobindo's view of reality differentiates a hierarchy of subtle worlds, with consciousness and knowledge penetrating every level of the world. Much like Rao, Cornelissen also makes the point that psi events will cease to be anomalous when they are understood in a more comprehensive view of reality. Richard Hartz offers a study of Aurobindo's diaries which detail putative psi experiences (which it seems to me Aurobindo accepts as paranormal in far too generous a fashion), and his explanation that psi events are simply a conscious experience of processes going on all the time.

William Braud presents a masterful article doing exactly what his title suggests, "Patanjali *Yoga-Sutras* and Parapsychological Research: Exploring Matches and Mismatches." Along with Rao, he seems most at home in dealing with both traditions. After pointing out that studying *siddhis* could

help parapsychologists “elaborate the nature of some psi manifestations already familiar to psi researchers” (p. 247), as well as direct us to other possible psi events, Braud offers a table connecting the eight areas of yogic practices with areas of psi research. Many of the approaches in somatic quietude, sensory restriction, and cognitive quietude have played a prominent role in Braud’s own research and thinking. Braud also concludes that parapsychologists should advance their study beyond a study of more traditional psi manifestations to more spiritual matters.

A third article by Rao examines the question of postmortem survival. After an examination of the empirical evidence, which concludes with the general consensus that empirical evidence is at best suggestive, he asks the question, “What could survive?” Contrasting the Western view of the survival of individual consciousness with the Indian view of underlying consciousness as non-individual and as devoid of content, Rao suggests that the Western view of survival does not make sense, or at least it needs recasting in light of yogic and Buddhist literature. Arseculeratne approaches a similar task, asking how we can explain Stevenson’s findings about reincarnation, and he argues that the Buddhist conception of *annata* (absence of a soul) might suffice.

Two other articles fit nicely into this category, but rather than being conceptual they are reports of empirical studies. The first is a reanalysis of data collected on psi success and yogic practice by Jerry Solvin and Serena Roney-Dougal. These post-hoc explorations are meant to be helpful for future research. As expected, swamis scored better than novices on a psi task, but only based on effect size and the fact that less-practiced meditators scored in the psi-negative direction. They list a number of methodological improvements and suggestions that future researchers should employ. The other empirical study, carried out by Rao on Indian students, seeks to see if there can be large-scale group screening to select good subjects for further psi research. In particular, Rao sought to figure out which variables might be appropriate in selecting subjects, using a number of psychological instruments. Rao draws two conclusions: a) the students were led in a relaxation procedure before performing the psi task, and he believes that



this procedure was responsible for the positive scores, and b) it is possible to screen subjects on a mass scale, even on a free-response test.

Parapsychology

Two kinds of article fit into this category. Four articles can be thought of as transition—they deal with empirical psi research, but they have broader implications for consciousness studies or for religion, but they don't specifically tie their research to yoga. The other two articles present purely parapsychological research. Roger Nelson summarizes the results of the Global Consciousness Project, which suggests some sort of universal mind; although Nelson thinks that Bohm's theory of active information may explain the results, one suspects that an Eastern approach might also suggest contending explanations. Two further articles, by Fernandes and Marwaha, and by Hill-Clark, study the relationships among religion, personality, and paranormal experiences, seeking to see the interrelations among them. The first study uses Hindu students as subjects, while the second uses American students from a conservative southeastern U.S. university. Neither paper finds a strong interrelationship among these three topics. J. E. Kennedy examines the capricious nature of psi, such as psi missing and decline (or loss of) effects, and he suggests these cannot be overcome with any statistical analyses, even meta-analyses. Rather, he proposes that psi experiences may be intended to wake us up, as it were, to a greater sense of interconnectedness and meaning in life, and a greater spirituality.

Two chapters that are purely empirical are included. Suitbert Ertel argues that his ball-drawing methodology (drawing ping pong balls out of a bag) done privately by individuals is a sound methodology to investigate individual differences in ESP. He argues that post-cautionary controls are sufficient to meet concerns about fraud, and these studies have supported the psi-star hypothesis, that psi is unevenly distributed among the population. May, Paulinyi, and Vassy argue that Decision Augmentation Theory (where someone chooses non-random sequences within a larger random set to begin the experiment) rather than presentience is the best explanation for success in pre-stimulus tests.

Yoga

Finally, four chapters early in the book focus exclusively on Eastern thought and are only related to parapsychology because they give an alternative view of reality to the Western view, a view focused on consciousness (as opposed to a focus on the individual mind). They tend to offer more of an exegesis of Indian thought than an argument for it. Insofar as many of us

in the West are not sufficiently familiar with these approaches, the chapters offer a window into specific ways of thinking about reality, although the articles can seem didactic.

Sangeetha Menon explicates the *yoga-sutra* of Pantanjali. Discussing *purusa* (pure consciousness) and *prakrit* (matter), five mental planes, five cognitive modes, and five pains, among other things, Menon explains that yoga can settle the afflictions and dysfunctions of mind, and thus yoga leads to systematic health and well-being.

Arjuna DeZoya examines four cases of alleged reincarnation in Sri Lanka and Thailand and argues that the Vedic and Buddhist conceptions of a continuing consciousness, albeit not individual, could be a better starting point for explaining reincarnation than Western notions of “Abyss of Nothingness” at death.

H. R. Nagendra argues that a consciousness-based approach to understanding the world offers greater possibility for answering questions in science than a matter-based one. Such a view articulates five layers (sheaths) of existence, as well as a level of pure consciousness (*Brahman*). In such a world, the *siddhis* arise naturally and are ultimately meant to promote social harmony.

Contrasting consciousness as the primal state versus the mind, viewed as a modification of consciousness, K. M. Tripathi elucidates the components of cognition in Pantanjali, arguing that yoga aims to lead to a transcendental state of the psyche.

In summary, the book offers a wide variety of articles, many of which attempt to bridge the gap between East and West. Rao argues that both yoga and parapsychology can benefit from such engagement, and the articles give sufficient reason to support this point. Depending on one’s initial cultural and research orientation, some articles will be more enlightening than others, but the collection offers food for thought for people in both traditions. The book can be a useful tool for a number of researchers, although the rather substandard binding may require repair if the book is used often.

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