YOGA PHILOSOPHY

Bridging Two Philosophies of Mind: A Review of Freud and Yoga: Two Philosophies of Mind Compared by T. K. V. Desikachar and Hellfried Krusche

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Abstract

This review examines *Freud and Yoga: Two Philosophies of Mind Compared*, a dialogue between the yoga teacher T.K.V. Desikachar and the psychoanalyst Hellfried Krusche. Held in Chennai between 2000 and 2005, the conversations take the opening sūtras of each chapter of Patañjali's Yogasūtra and read them against classical Freudian psychoanalysis. The book is organised around four questions: what yoga and relationship have in common, what steps change requires, what can be achieved, and how inner freedom is gained. The review summarises the four chapters and the afterword, assesses the dialogic method, and evaluates the book's contribution to yoga studies. It argues that the book's main strength is its demonstration that transformation, in both traditions, rests on three conditions: a sustained guiding relationship, time, and personal effort. Its main limitation is the narrow selection of sources, namely one yoga lineage, one psychoanalytic school and a limited set of sūtras. The review concludes that the book is a valuable and readable text for yoga students, yoga therapists and researchers interested in comparative psychology.

Keywords: Yoga; Psychoanalysis; Yogasūtra; Patañjali; Sigmund Freud; Krishnamacharya tradition; Transformation; Comparative psychology; Book review

1 Introduction

Yoga is now among the most widely practised disciplines in the world, yet its popular image as physical exercise hides the fact that, in its classical form, it is a method for understanding and disciplining the mind. Patañjali's Yogasūtra, the foundational text of the tradition, is in essence a compact manual of psychology. It is therefore natural that scholars have long asked how it compares with the psychological systems of the modern West. Coster's *Yoga and Western Psychology* (1934/2000) was an early attempt of this kind.

Freud and Yoga: Two Philosophies of Mind Compared by Desikachar and Krusche (2014) takes up the same question in a very different manner. Instead of a comparison written by a single author, it presents a sustained conversation between a yoga master and a practising psychoanalyst, each speaking from within his own tradition. The book is the English translation, by Anne-Marie Hodges, of the German original *Das verborgene Wissen bei Freud und Patañjali* (2007), and it was published in the United States by North Point Press. This review describes the origin and method of the book, summarises its four chapters and afterword, and evaluates its strengths and limitations from the point of view of yoga studies.

2 The authors and the making of the book

T.K.V. Desikachar (born 1938, Mysore) was the son and long-time student of T. Krishnamacharya, one of the most influential teachers of modern yoga. He founded the Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram in Chennai in 1976, became widely known for the therapeutic application of yoga, and withdrew from active teaching in 2013 (Desikachar and Krusche, 2014). Hellfried Krusche (born 1951, Aachen) is a psychotherapist and psychoanalyst. He is a training analyst and supervisor for the International Psychoanalytical Association in Germany and has a private practice in Cologne.

According to Krusche's preface, the book grew out of discussions held during several visits to Chennai between 2000 and 2005. Desikachar wished the conversations to reach a wider audience, and the two men realised that readers would need a basic grounding in the vocabulary of both disciplines. Krusche, trained in classical Freudian psychoanalysis, discussed each selected sūtra with Desikachar from that perspective, while the English renderings of the sūtras follow Desikachar's translations in *The Heart of Yoga* (Desikachar, 1995).

3 Structure and method

The book opens with a preface and an introduction by Krusche, in which he sketches the shared roots of healing and philosophy, the development of psychoanalysis, and the position of yoga among the six Vedic darśanas. The main text, titled "The Dialogue," begins with Desikachar's introduction to the Yogasūtra, the Vedas and Patañjali, and is followed by four chapters corresponding to the four pādas of the Yogasūtra. A short afterword by Krusche closes the work.

The authors set a clear methodological limit. They discuss only the first nine to eleven sūtras of each pāda, and on the psychoanalytic side they restrict themselves to schools based on Freud's teaching as represented by the International Psychoanalytical Association. The text is arranged as alternating speeches by the two authors, marked D and H. This form is deliberate, because both traditions are transmitted through dialogue: between teacher and student in yoga, and between analyst and patient in psychoanalysis. The central questions are whether human transformation is truly possible within culturally constructed systems, which methods each system uses to support it, and what such change looks like.

4 Summary of the chapters

4.1 Chapter 1: What do Yoga and relationship have in common?

The first chapter takes up the opening sūtras of the *samādhi pāda*. Desikachar reads the first sūtra, *atha yogānuśāsanam* (YS I.1), as a statement of mutual commitment: the teacher offers lived experience and the student offers sincerity. He stresses that the word *anuśāsana* implies something that is followed and practised rather than an order that is imposed. Krusche responds that a relationship of this kind is also the working instrument of psychoanalysis, and that analysts themselves undergo a long personal analysis before they treat others. He notes, however, an important difference. What yoga asks for at the outset, namely trust and openness, psychoanalysis often regards as a hoped-for result of therapy rather than its starting condition.

The chapter then turns to the definition of yoga as *citta-vṛtti-nirodha* (YS I.2), the five movements of the mind, and the states of waking, dream and deep sleep. Desikachar presents pure consciousness as the constant background that is only clouded by the changing states of the mind.

4.2 Chapter 2: What steps must we take to change?

The second chapter deals with the *sādhana pāda*. Its centrepiece is *kriyā yoga*, made up of *tapas*, *svādhyāya* and *Īśvara-praṇidhāna* (YS II.1), which Desikachar explains through the image of cleaning a neglected cooking pot. Krusche observes that psychoanalysis has no notion of "impurities," but finds a counterpart for each element. Regular attendance and the sacrifices it demands resemble *tapas*. Understanding one's own behaviour while it is happening is the heart of analytic work and corresponds to *svādhyāya*. The capacity to give up control, and to accept that the analyst lives differently from what one had imagined, echoes *Īśvara-praṇidhāna*.

The discussion of the five *kleśas* is especially rich. Desikachar likens them to a tree whose root is *avidyā*, whose trunk is *asmitā*, and whose branches are *rāga*, *dveṣa* and *abhiniveśa*. Krusche first equates *asmitā* with narcissism, then revises this view and recognises it as a wider process of identification, which he connects with the analyst's use of his own feelings as clues to the patient's unconscious world.

4.3 Chapter 3: What can we achieve?

The third chapter follows the *vibhūti pāda* and the three stages of meditation: *dhāraṇā*, *dhyāna* and *samādhi* (YS III.1–3). Desikachar describes the first as choosing a focus, the second as entering into a relationship with it, and the third as an intense union with it. He explains that attentive breathing (*prāṇāyāma*) prepares the mind for this work. Krusche asks whether the extraordinary powers described in this chapter are real or imaginary. Desikachar answers that qualities are acquired through focused association with the chosen object, and he warns practitioners not to be distracted by such powers on the way to inner freedom. The chapter also introduces *viniyoga*, the adaptation of practice to the individual, which is a hallmark of the Krishnamacharya tradition. It further prepares the contrast, spelled out in the afterword, between the yogic idea of a light-like, supra-individual consciousness and the psychoanalytic view of consciousness as a function tied to language.

4.4 Chapter 4: How can we gain inner freedom?

The final chapter discusses the *kaivalya pāda* and asks what change actually is. Desikachar names five sources of transformation listed in YS IV.1: inborn potential (*janma*), substances (*oṣadhi*), sacred sound (*mantra*), discipline (*tapas*) and absorption (*samādhi*). He relates *oṣadhi* to modern psychiatric medication and illustrates *mantra* with the case of a woman who gained the confidence to lecture in public by reciting a mantra to Hanuman for forty days. The discussion then turns to *kaivalya*, understood as independence. Desikachar insists that a good teacher aims to make the student independent rather than dependent. Krusche adds that, in therapy as well, the fear of dependence can keep a person from ever opening up to anyone.

4.5 Afterword

In the afterword Krusche gathers the threads of the dialogue. Both traditions, he argues, rest on methodical systems of knowledge, recognise unconscious motives, and regard identification with the external world as the point at which inner freedom is lost. Both also hold that real change needs three conditions together: a significant guiding relationship, sufficient time, and sustained personal effort.

The differences are equally clear. Yoga aims at *kaivalya*, a profound inner freedom, whereas psychoanalysis aims at relieving symptoms and making life feel more worth living. Yoga posits a supra-individual consciousness, whereas Freudian psychoanalysis treats consciousness as a function tied to

language. Yoga asks for trust in the teacher from the beginning and transmits knowledge through a hierarchical lineage, whereas psychoanalysis treats doubt and ambivalence as material to be worked through and develops its knowledge through open scientific debate. The authors conclude that the two systems can complement each other, and they warn that in an age of efficiency and cost reduction the human relationship must not be forgotten.

5 Critical evaluation

5.1 Strengths

The most obvious strength of the book is the authenticity of its two voices. Desikachar speaks as a direct heir of the Krishnamacharya lineage and Krusche as a trained analyst, so neither tradition is explained second-hand by an outsider. The dialogic format also suits the subject. The sūtras are famously compressed, and the exchange of questions, analogies and anecdotes, such as the cooking pot, the tree of *kleśas* and the cone of light from a lamp, makes them easier to grasp than a conventional commentary would.

Second, the authors are honest about difference and do not force equivalence between concepts. Krusche's revision of his first reading of *asmitā* as narcissism is a good example of a comparison that refines both sides. Third, the book places relationship at the centre of transformation. This theme is under-emphasised in popular, exercise-centred yoga but is crucial for yoga teachers and therapists, and Desikachar's point that a teacher's task is to produce independence rather than dependence deserves the attention of every yoga professional. Finally, the afterword's identification of relationship, time and effort as conditions of change is a clear and useful conclusion for scholars of comparative psychology.

5.2 Limitations

The book also has limitations, most of which follow from its own design. First, its coverage is selective. By discussing only the opening nine to eleven sūtras of each *pāda*, the authors leave much of the Yogasūtra untouched, and the practical limbs of yoga, such as *āsana* and *prāṇāyāma*, receive comparatively little systematic treatment. Second, the interpretive base is narrow. Desikachar's reading is the single reference point, so readers will not find a comparison with other commentarial traditions, and the psychoanalytic partner is confined to Freud-based schools. Other influential approaches, including analytical psychology, are not discussed. The authors explain these choices, but they limit how far the book's broader claim of transcultural validity can be generalised.

Third, empirical support is uneven. Krusche refers to research on the outcomes of psychoanalytic treatment, but the evidence for yoga's effects, and for the claimed benefit of combining the two approaches, rests mostly on practical experience and case anecdotes. Readers looking for clinical trials or a research methodology will need to look elsewhere. Fourth, the conversational form leads to some repetition, and the density of Sanskrit terms may challenge readers new to yoga philosophy, since no separate glossary is listed in the contents.

6 Relevance and recommendation

For students and teachers of yoga, the book offers a disciplined way of thinking about the teacher–student relationship, self-study and the limits of personal effort. For yoga therapists and counsellors, it shows where the two traditions might be combined, with psychoanalytic insight supporting a yoga

student's inner work and yoga supporting a patient's inner stability, as the authors suggest. For researchers, it offers a proposition worth testing: Krusche cites psychoanalytic outcome studies showing that the length and intensity of the therapeutic relationship influence the stability of change, and yoga researchers could examine whether the same holds in their own settings. For university departments of yoga and psychology, the book is a suitable supplementary text for courses on yoga psychology and comparative philosophy.

7 Conclusion

Freud and Yoga does not claim that yoga and psychoanalysis are the same, and this restraint is its greatest merit. It shows instead that two systems born in different cultures and centuries arrive at strikingly similar views on how the human psyche changes: through a guiding relationship, through time, and through the person's own inner effort. At the same time it keeps their differences in view, especially the yogic goal of *kaivalya* and its notion of a supra-individual consciousness.

Its limits, namely one lineage, one psychoanalytic school and a partial selection of sūtras, are real, but they are openly acknowledged and do not diminish its value as a thoughtful, readable introduction to a conversation that is still unfinished. The book is warmly recommended to yoga students, practitioners, therapists and researchers who wish to understand yoga as a psychology of transformation rather than only a system of physical exercise.

References

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