U.Va. Welcomes a Traditional Yoga Program to Campus

Naomi Worth

Last semester, UVa’s Contemplative Sciences Center (CSC) launched its first official program: Mysore-style Ashtanga yoga. The following is some insight into ashtanga yoga as a practice, how ashtanga qualifies as a contemplative science, and a brief introduction to the key figures of UVa’s ashtanga initiative.

While the physical benefits of stretching and breathing can be agreed upon by almost everyone, yoga teachers and ancient sages alike invariably extoll yoga’s mental and spiritual benefits as foremost. But even that doesn’t make yoga distinct from other forms of exercise; sport science research clearly demonstrates that most forms of physical exercise have mental health benefits. So what makes yoga different?

To answer this and other questions about ashtanga yoga, I looked to sources both near and far. Here on campus leading the ashtanga program are Professor John Campbell, PhD., co-director of the CSC and faculty in the Religious Studies department, and John Bultman, M.Sc., principal instructor for the UVa Ashtanga Initiative. Dr. Campbell is a Certified Ashtanga teacher, a rare title bequeathed by his teacher, K. Pattabhi Jois, given to only a handful of his closest students worldwide. John Bultman is heading up the actual yoga instruction, a level II Authorized ashtanga teacher by the K. Pattabhi Jois Ashtanga Yoga Institute (KPJAYI), an elite certification bestowed after years of dedication to the practice, trips to Mysore, India, and a certain level of mastery of ashtanga.

Ashtanga yoga purports to be a science that leads to both physical and spiritual attainments.

Previously hatha yoga, which ashtanga is a form of, was thought of as an endeavor attempted solely by renunciates, people who gave up the luxuries of daily life to exclusively pursue spiritual attainments. K. Pattabhi Jois is one of a handful of Indian teachers that brought yoga into the mainstream, breaking the bonds of India’s caste system to make yoga accessible to anyone inclined to take it up.

Jois’s ashtanga system is physically and mentally demanding, and requires a somewhat consuming commitment to daily practice to experience its benefits. It is, however, encouraging to students that both physical and mental benefits begin unfolding immediately and continue throughout the life of practice.

Pattabhi Jois was very clear that yoga does not belong to any
A Note from the Director, John Nemec

It is my pleasure to introduce, thanks to the extensive editorial work of Natasha Mikles, the first issue in our revived series of South Asia newsletters. Twice a year, “South Asia News” will highlight not only the current activities of Virginia’s South Asia Center, but, as in the present issue, it will also offer brief reviews, opinion pieces, biographies of Virginia faculty, and the like. We hope you find a moment to peruse these pieces, which represent the current initiatives and ideas of our students and colleagues, and of course I hope you feel free to contact us directly should you like to contribute to a forthcoming issue. In the mean time, let me call attention in particular to a one-day event planned for the 6th of April, 2013. “Contemplation and Medicine in South Asia and Beyond” is an interdisciplinary conference that engages four Schools of the University: Arts and Sciences, Architecture, Medicine, and Nursing. It represents a new, more integrated approach to South Asian Studies, one we plan to pursue in various ways with various Schools and Departments in the coming semesters. We hope to see you at the conference, and I hope you will enjoy the first issue of our revived newsletter.

According to R. Sharath Jois, K. Pattabhi Jois’s grandson and director of KPJAYI, the process of self-transformation starts on the days when you don’t want to wake up early to do the practice. It is at those pivotal moments that, if practice is undertaken, you come face-to-face with and challenge your own limitations. The obstacles are traditionally enumerated as starting with physical health: freeing the body from sickness and its causes. When the body becomes healthy, the obstacles overcome pertain more to the mind. Practitioners work through their pride, attachment, anger, jealousy and greed. Freedom from those restricting states of mind extends into daily life.

R. Sharath also speaks about building concentration through use of a dristi, or a gazing point. Each pose has a specific dristi prescribed to it. The practice becomes a moving meditation that develops day-by-day, year-by-year, as the practitioner gets stronger in body and mind. This is one of several key aspects of practice where yoga moves beyond the realm of benefits of traditional physical activity.

U.Va.’s ashtanga yoga program meets in the AFC Mon-Fri from 7-10 am and Sun 9-12. Your starting time is flexible. Allow 45 minutes for your first day. For information visit http://www.virginia.edu/ims/fitness/ashtanga.php.
The New Directions in Buddhist Studies Conference: Believing in the Impossible

Nick Trautz

To take a new direction in Buddhist studies, we must become better at looking back. This was the message of Professor Gregory Schopen (UCLA/Brown) in his keynote address to the 2012 Graduate Student Conference in Buddhist Studies, commencing on September 14th at the University of Virginia. The conference, entitled Buddhist Traditions: New Directions, brought together sixteen graduate student panelists from across the United States, seven Virginia faculty members, and many more participant observers to share original research and reflect on the future of interdisciplinary Buddhist Studies. The following is a summary of Professor Schopen’s remarks.

Schopen’s address, entitled “The Cheshire Cat, the Queen of Hearts, and new directions in Buddhist Studies”, gave participants an opportunity to hear directly from one of the most highly regarded living scholars of South Asian Buddhism. Schopen’s scholarship revolves around careful attention to scriptural, economic, and legal documents from Buddhist India, and has signaled a shift away from the exclusively doctrinal interest in Buddhist sources that has largely defined Buddhist studies. In his famously provocative style, Schopen began by alerting his audience to the varieties of nonsense that have hitherto passed for Buddhist studies, targeting scholarship that “makes assertions about what the Buddha said”, assertions about “what the Buddha meant”, and, worst of all, assertions about “what the Buddha ‘really’ meant”. Schopen remarked: “We don’t have a clue about what the Buddha said, only much later evidence of what other people said that he said”. Schopen also urged the audience to refuse the use of “Buddhist hybrid English to talk about people who never knew that kind of language”, referring to the tendency for scholars of Buddhism to casually employ Sanskrit vocabulary (or “jargon”, as Schopen would have it) in discussing the ideas of people who actually did not know or write in Sanskrit. To properly execute the historical study of Indian Buddhism, then, Schopen reminded us of the need for skill in working not just with scriptural sources, but also with legal, economic, and governmental documents, as well as expertise in interpreting archeological evidence. “The study of Buddhism is not just about ideas and literature”, Schopen remarked, “and without knowing historical reality, we cannot proceed to understand how people operated
within the tradition”. Schopen’s most interesting injunction came next: “Avoiding the unimaginable leads to bad history and lying. Believing in the impossible opens the door to good history”. Reading against the grain of easy assumptions, according to Schopen, opens the door to discovering what may by have been historically true. Schopen cited his recent work in which careful analysis of archeological and inscriptive evidence suggests that Indian Buddhist nuns were learned, respected, and held much authority within 5th century Buddhist institutions. An easy acceptance of apparently doctrinal “Buddhist ideas” about women could never support such a finding, but Schopen takes his evidence to illustrate that Buddhist lives often bear little resemblance to the assertions of Buddhist doctrines. Similarly, Schopen’s work has shown that “only kings lived a more luxurious lifestyle than did Indian Buddhist monks”, a far cry from the ascetic communitarianism imagined by most scholars of Indian Buddhism. A more complete understanding of Indian Buddhism, then, requires careful and well-trained attention to evidence for how people really lived, and not just what Schopen characterizes as the “doctrinal imaginaire” – an idealized version of Buddhist thinking that has been built by Western scholars out of rare doctrinal materials to which living Buddhists essentially had no access. To take a new direction in Buddhist studies, Schopen asked the conference to understand our obligation to read our scriptures in light of historical reality (not vice versa), and to produce data out of “believing in the impossible”.

The Graduate Student Buddhist Studies Conference was organized by the Buddhist Studies Group at U.Va.

Karen Lang chairs a panel of visiting graduate students at the New Directions conference.
Teaching Nepal in the American Classroom

Andrew Nelson

‘Ever heard of Nepal?’ is a question I often ask undergraduate classes when introducing a case study from my research in Nepal. On bad days, the next moment will be filled with silence. More often, a few students will raise their hands and voice a range of expected references. Inevitably, someone mentions ‘Mt. Everest,’ ‘the Himalayas,’ or ‘Sherpas.’ Perhaps someone will mention ‘Buddhism,’ even ‘Tibet’ might come up. If I’m lucky, I’ll hear ‘Maoists’ or ‘royal massacre.’ And if I’ve hit the jackpot, someone will mention the ‘Gurkhas.’

My initial urge is to launch into a diatribe against the dangers and inaccuracies of romanticized images of Nepal as a mountainous and isolated Shangri-la removed from the modern world. The lecture in my head continues as follows: “First, Nepal has just as much real estate lying on the flat Gangetic plain as it does in the high Himalaya. Moreover, Sherpas, along with Nepal’s other mountainous ethnic groups, account for less than 1% of the country’s population. (I blame Jon Krakauer and Sherry Ortner for the popular conception of Nepal as comprised solely of mountains and Sherpas.) Second, only a slight minority of Nepalis consider themselves Buddhist, while the vast majority of the country ascribes to Hindu religious practices. And no, Nepal is not Tibet, in fact, we will spend much more time talking about the influence of Indian society on Nepal than about anything Tibetan. (I blame the Beastie Boys for this one.) Finally, as for the references to Maoist insurgency, Prince Dipendra murdering his family, and Nepalis in the British military, I say ‘well done,’ but even these topics are now fading into political obscurity. The Maoist insurgency ended in 2006, the monarchy in 2008, and the size of the Gurkha regiments is dwindling.”

But, then, I remind myself that the majority of the class didn’t raise their hand at all. Perhaps I could exploit these few tidbits to garner more interest in the place. Just as showing a Hindi film is going to draw greater interest in Indian cinema than showing a Satyajit Ray film, I try and think how the more sensationalized references can deepen interest in what I really want to cover. Starting with the Sherpa and Tibetan references, I turn to Goldstein’s explanation of the delightfully exotic practice of polyandry. Sure it’s only practiced by a hand-full of people, but it’s a provocative entry point for discussing the fascinating world of Himalayan agriculture and trade. As for Buddhism, I point out that although Hinduism is the demographically and politically dominant religion, there exists considerable grey area between the two practices. To prove this point, we explore the syncretic world of Newar ritual and architecture in Kathmandu. Finally, I can think of no better way to start a discussion about the turbulent political history of Nepal than the Gurkha, Maoists, and royal massacre. The Gurkha example so nicely illuminates the historical role of British-Indian political and economic intervention. The royal massacre of 2001 lets us return to the even bloodier Kot massacre of 1846 which precipitated the 105-year run of the repressive Rana who left Nepal with a legacy of circumventing democracy at every opportunity. Which brings us to Prachanda and Babu Ram. Catch the students’ attention with the anomaly of Maoist revolutionaries in the 21st century, and then springboard into the devastative impact of feudalism, neo-liberalism, and caste discrimination.

The purpose of discussing Nepal in the American classroom can be related to any academic exercise regarding other people and places. Will any of the students ever visit Nepal? Or even pursue any formal or informal engagement with its society or history? I would like to imagine that my instruction inspires at least a few to do so, but in all likelihood most will care just as little about Nepal as before the class began. What, then, is the point? Like a good New York Times film review that uses a particular film to say something meaningful about the world, teaching Nepal will hopefully lead to an appreciation of larger social and historical themes that allow students to conceive of the world in a novel way.
I prowled along through the angry mechanical herd on my 1991 Bajaj “Super” until the road opened up, the riot of color and people beside the road becoming a blur as I opened up the throttle. I rushed by street side stalls overflowing with flower garlands, coconuts, cheap radios, and pirated DVDs. As I passed an elephant adorned with flowers and tika paint, a cow wondered into the street in front of me and I instinctually swerved around it, eliciting a flurry of beeps from my fellow motorists. Finally I turned onto a wide tree-lined boulevard, and soon pulled into the leafy compound of Deccan College (“Deemed University” as its sign proudly proclaims) to begin another day of intensive Sanskrit study at the American Institute of Indian Studies summer intensive Sanskrit course.

The course, which took place from June-August of 2012 in the city of Pune in the state of Maharashtra in India, was a fantastic opportunity to delve deeper into a language and a culture, which up to that time, although I had studied it for two years in college, still completely baffled me. Sanskrit literature represents one of the world’s great literary traditions, encompassing ancient Epic poems, plays, courtly poetry, as well as a massive body of texts on philosophy, astronomy, politics, and, of course, religion. The course requires at least two years of prior Sanskrit study and, although I technically had those qualifications, I soon discovered that this course would test the limits of my endurance and my sanity. The morning began with a personal tutorial session with a wonderful retired professor of Sanskrit named Usha. We would spend an hour reading slowly through my chosen text, the Buddhacarita, an early Sanskrit biography of the Buddha written in verse by the 2nd-century Indian philosopher-poet Ashvaghosha. The rest of the day was usually a blur of paradigm and conjugation memorization and recitation, śloka (verse) chanting, more textual reading, and the often-comical spectacle of me trying to comprehend and speak spoken Sanskrit (I will always remember the phrase na spaśtam “it’s not clear” as that was usually my response to every question). After classes, we were treated to a fantastic lunch of local Marathi dishes cooked by a wonderful woman who, without any English, made us feel like we were her own children. I would then hop on my two-wheeler and once again brave the 5-miles of beauty and chaos back home to do the required 3-4 hours of homework.

Instead of finding my own apartment or staying in a hotel, I decided to take the option, arranged by the program, to stay with an Indian family for the duration of the course. I was anxious about this at first as I value my own space and I worried that the cultural differences might make living in someone else’s home difficult. The reality though turned out to be one of the best and richest experiences of my life. Autie-ji and Uncle-ji (ji is a polite suffix used to show affection and respect in India) and Prateek and Pooja—their son and his wife, who also lived in the home—were simultaneously warm, and respectful of my privacy, treating me like a member of their family without being overwhelming. Every morning Autie-ji, had a breakfast of khichdi (rice and lentils), idli (steamed rice cakes), or Dosa (savory crepe made from rice or lentil flour) waiting for me. In the evening before dinner, I would often be invited by Uncle-ji to join him to watch his favorite show, Law and Order, which often included a glass of “Officer’s Choice” Indian whiskey and a running commentary of the various twists and turns of the episode’s plot. After a late dinner, Prateek and Pooja would often invite me to go out with them and their friends for ice cream or a drink.

By the end of the course, the daily reading, chanting, memorizing, and speaking began to have an effect. Sanskrit, while still being somewhat of a deep well of confusion, was no longer something that I was constantly confused about; the course gave me the knowledge and resources to slowly and systematically decode
and understand Sanskrit passages that I would never have been able to do before, and prepared me well for my Ph.D. studies in Religious Studies here at the University of Virginia. But the biggest benefit of my experience in Pune this summer, what I will remember the most, are the people: the rickshaw driver with no teeth who refused a tip from me, saying “No, no, it is my pleasure”; the director of the program, Anil Anamdar, who picked me up from the airport with his son and who, weeks later, rushed across town at 1 a.m. to help me after I got into a motorcycle accident; the kindness and warmth of my host family; the patience and professionalism of the course instructors; and the shy smile of a little girl in the back of a rickshaw in that moment of stillness before the green light and the chaos of the open road.

The American Institute of Indian Studies offers intensive summer and semester-long language courses in over fifteen South Asian languages in multiple locations throughout India. Some languages (such as Sanskrit and Hindi) are only taught at the advanced level and require two years of prior study while other languages are also offered at the beginner level and require no prior study. Scholarships for language study are available from AIIS as well as through a number of other scholarship programs at U.Va. AIIS:
http://aiilanguageprograms.org/

South Asia Center Events
Spring 2013

January 25th, Anne Rademacher
"Human Habitats and Ideologies of Sustainability in Kathmandu and Mumbai"

January 25th, Bharati Jagannathan
"Places and Stories: Pilgrimage in Tamil Srivaisnavism"

February 1st, Naveeda Khan
"Dogs and Humans and What Silt Wants to Be: The Claims and Limits of the Non-Human in the Jamuna"

February 1st, Salman Akhtar
"From Delight to Wisdom: the Nature of Poetry and its Healing Effect "

February 22nd, Anand Yang
"Chin aur Hind: An Indian Subaltern in China, 1900-1901"

March 1st, Christi Merrill
"The Ethics of Non-equivalence: Inequities in Marketing Dalit Narratives of Suffering"

March 6th, Ashok Rajput
A Screening and Discussion of his recently completed film: “The Sorrow and the Joy: Remembering Hussein’s Martyrdom in Hyderabad, Pakistan.”

March 22nd, Kumkum Sangari
"TBA "

March 29th, Danielle Widmann Abraham
"Beyond Charity: Poverty, Gender, and Local Islam in Contemporary India"

April 6th, Contemplation and Medicine in South Asia and Beyond: A One-Day Conference
Featuring Frederick M. Smith, Dagmar Wujastyk, Roshi Joan Halifax, and many others

April 12th, Miles Kahler
"Rising Powers and Global Governance: Reforming a Resilient Status Quo"

April 19th, Jessica Vantine Birkenholtz
"The Making of Modern Hinduism in Medieval Nepal"

For more information and the latest on CAS Events, see:
artsandsciences.virginia.edu/soasia/index.html
The South Asia Center at the University of Virginia is devoted to promoting community-based activities and discussing current topics of interest for the community of South Asia. Among these, I think we can safely include the arts. So, I must insist for those of you who are fans of the South Asian art of narrative, go see Life of Pi. The virtuoso director, Ang Lee, has produced a technicolor flower-garland in his cinematic rendering of Yann Martel’s novel, a treat that should not be missed.

The Life of Pi is a spellbinding adventure, a tale about a young Tamil boy, Piscine (Pi) Patel, whose childhood as the son of a zookeeper in South India’s French Riviera, Pondicherry, conjures paradisiac sentiments. And yet, Pi certainly endures the folly of youth. What is significant to the story, he also experiences an enduring spiritual curiosity, that in him takes the form of a religious pluralism. But all of this comes to an end when Pi’s family decides to move their zoo from India to the West. What is worse, in a tragic turn of events, Pi finds himself trapped on a lifeboat with a wild Bengal Tiger, lost at sea, and struggling to survive an incredibly difficult journey back to civilization.

This journey exposes him to numerous wonders, and frequently turns his mind to matters of spirit, beauty and terror.

The film is a lavish pleasure, magnifying, with electrifying visual effects, all of the masterly craft with which Martel weaves together into a dense and highly significant narrative the ancient and the new, providing a remarkably enjoyable vista into the same ancient craft that produced much of India’s most important and enduring spiritual literature. One can see woven throughout the entire film riddles and hints echoing the Upaniṣads, the Purāṇas, the Epics, and more. The story portrays Pi as a very gentle-minded, earnest spiritual seeker, who finds genuine wisdom in every spiritual tradition he encounters, though not to the exclusion of critical thought! His persona and story appeals to the heart, suggesting the tested wisdom, that well-crafted narrative, even if only true by virtue of what it seeks to signify, can offer us a ray of peace and hope, even in the maelstrom and flurry of life’s chaotic dance. Martel’s novel and Lee’s film demonstrate, moreover, that India’s narrative culture is just as relevant to us today--in our highly multicultural, highly networked, and relentlessly critical lives--as it has been to India Herself from Time immemorial. Ancient riddles, paradoxes, and metaphors pervade this narrative through and through, so that one may well leave the theatre wondering just how much one might have missed! Yet the feeling of having been witness to something courageous and inspiring, something compelling, is sure to stay with one for some time to come.

As a student and researcher whose work consists of analyzing, translating, and relating South Asian philosophical and spiritual literature, there was much in the film that spoke to me, with the numerous ancient narratives and themes that it recalled. I have for a while now been hopeful that Hollywood would eventually produce films that do full justice to the power of India’s narrative imagination, and in this respect, I was not in the least bit disappointed. Indeed, Life of Pi is so persistently rich with symbols and references to older stories and debates, that it might not always be entirely clear what Martel is up to! So, for everything that I noticed, I am still left wondering how much I failed to see!

If you would like to arrange a group-viewing of Life of Pi, or if you’ve already seen it, and would like to arrange a discussion of the film’s various themes and tropes, contact me at bam7d@virginia.edu, and perhaps we can set up a group event or two. I’d personally love to discuss it with interested students and U.Va. community members, so that we might all get more out of the film!