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STANISLAVSKY AND RAMACHARAKA: THE INFLUENCE OF YOGA AND TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY OCCULTISM ON THE SYSTEM

Fin-de-siècle Russia was a culture replete with interest in the occult, spiritualism, and the religions of the Far East. Curiosity about the mystical infused all tiers of society. Among those influenced by the spiritual was none other than Konstantin Stanislavsky himself,¹ who experienced a personal crisis in which he began to doubt his own ability as an actor. In 1906, he took his now-famous trip to Finland, where he sequestered himself for the summer, examined his artistic life, and began to reconsider seriously his process as an actor. While reflecting on his past artistic work, he began to organize years of notes on acting; and several notions drawn from Eastern mysticism in general and Yoga in particular found their way into his “system.” Although a handful of articles that examine Stanislavsky’s use of Yoga have been published in the West,² over the past century scholars and teachers have paid little attention to the spiritual facets of Stanislavsky’s thinking, focusing instead on the psychological aspects of his work. Given, however, the presence of important Yogic elements in the system at its very inception, a full understanding of Stanislavsky’s technique is impossible without knowledge of the intersections between his system and Yoga. Borrowing from Yoga, Stanislavsky offers actors much more than theories about how to be more believable or psychologically realistic in their roles. He adapts specific Yogic exercises in order to help actors transcend the limitations of the physical senses and tap into higher levels of creative consciousness.

What artistic concerns led Stanislavsky onto such a spiritual path as he was constructing his system? What social and cultural influences shaped his understanding of Yoga? From exactly what Yogic disciplines did he borrow and how does his brand of Yoga differ from classical Yoga? Perhaps most important, what texts influenced Stanislavsky’s thinking about Yoga, and, in his published works, does he borrow from them? In this article, I propose to

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answer those questions by demonstrating the extent to which turn-of-the-century occult trends influenced Stanislavsky. Indeed, a collection of books on Hindu philosophy and Yoga attributed to one “Yogi Ramacharaka” were instrumental in shaping Stanislavsky’s understanding of Yoga and, ultimately, the system itself. In examining his system through the spiritual rather than the more familiar “psychological,” I hope to counteract the common and widespread assumption that Stanislavsky’s theories are bound entirely to psychological realism and, consequently, to a Western ideology that separates the mind from the body.

THE SEARCH FOR INSPIRATION

During Russia’s Silver Age (1890–1917), the notion that art could provide a transcendent, spiritual experience for both artist and observer was not unusual. A number of prominent actors preferred to approach their creative work through intuition rather than through studied technique. Catherine Schuler summarizes as follows the assertion made in 1872 by the materialistic critic and dramatist Peter Dmitrievich Boborykin (1836–1921): “before modern science revealed the real truth of human behavior, Russian actors sought truth in a sort of mystical metaphysic of the soul.” For example, two prominent actresses of the period—Polina Antipevna Strepetova (1850–1903) and Vera Fyodorovna Komissarzhevskaya (1864–1910)—worked primarily through methods that seem irrational. Strepetova was popular, in part, because she was “fanatically religious and profoundly superstitious”; and her “austere religiosity strengthened her metaphysical mystique: the intensity of her passion infected spectators who shared with her a primal experience of collective anguish peculiar to the ‘Russian Soul’” (Schuler, 509; 515). Although Strepetova displayed a narrow acting range, she mesmerized her audiences with her fervor, especially when drawing on a character’s “religious mysticism and passion.” Likewise, Komissarzhevskaya, whom Stanislavsky directed at an early point in both their careers, evinced what Schuler describes as a “taste for mysticism and desire for spiritual transcendence through the medium of performance.” In an interview, Komissarzhevskaya even went so far as to declare that

the human mind, the human soul should strive to find in art the key to the knowledge of “the eternal,” to the solution of the profound mysteries of the world, the key which will open up the world of the spirit. The actor should touch on the still unexplored depths of the human in the divine and of the divine in the human.

When she was over forty and wished to play against her established image of the ingenue, Komissarzhevskaya was understandably attracted to the Russian symbolists of the 1905 revolutionary period who were exploring art as a spiritual experience that stretched beyond the limits of orthodoxy. Indeed, for Irina Gutkin, they “saw themselves as mystagogues whose exclusive mission was to penetrate the ontological mysteries and to reveal the path to salvation.” Although Komissarzhevskaya’s physically animated style of acting was unsuited for the motionless stage compositions that were integral to symbolist...
productions,9 she nevertheless coproduced Maeterlinck’s *Sister Beatrice* with Vsevolod Emilevich Meyerhold (1874–1940) and played the title role. Indeed, John McCannon recalls that Maeterlinck himself had embraced alternative spirituality as much as his Russian counterparts: “[R]ejecting the Catholic Church, Maeterlinck turned to a universalist mysticism that derived from Neoplatonic idealism, the Christian meditations of Eckhart and Boehme, Spinozan pantheism, Swedenborgianism, Romantic transcendentalism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Blavatskian Theosophy.”10

Like Komissarzhevskaya, Stanislavsky was drawn to the works of Maeterlinck, and the Moscow Art Theatre produced three of his plays during the 1904 season: *The Blind, The Intruder*, and *The Interior*.11 While working on *The Blind*, Stanislavsky became convinced that his theatre had exhausted psychological realism, recording, in *My Life in Art*, impressions that would lead to the formulation of the system: “our theatre had reached a dead-end. There were no new paths, and the old ones had been destroyed.”12 He also acknowledged that it was nearly impossible for actors to replicate onstage the spiritual content of other art forms, complaining that “it isn’t easy to transfer to the stage what we have seen in painting, music and the other arts that are significantly ahead of us. Good for them! A canvas can assume any lines, forms or fantasies an artist imagines. But what should we do with our material body?” (*My Life*, 1: 361).

Since the actor’s body is itself the obstacle here, Stanislavsky urged that the actor transcend the physical limitations of matter and body. Envious of acrobats, he wonders,

> Is there really no separation from the material body? And what about gymnasts who, just like birds, fly from trapeze to trapeze? You can’t believe they are of flesh and body. Why can’t we dramatic artists separate from matter, become incorporeal? We must search for this! It must be developed for ourselves. (*My Life*, 1: 356)

In suggesting that actors become “incorporeal,” Stanislavsky distinguishes body from soul, and concludes that great performers must surpass the aspects of their technique associated with the body. At the same time, however, he recognizes the important holistic bond between body and spirit, as when he attributes such acting problems as a lapse in concentration to a flawed relationship between body and spirit. Since an actor is “obliged to outwardly portray what he does not inwardly feel,” then “spiritually the actor dwells in his ordinary, everyday, humdrum concerns . . . but physically he is obliged to express heightened impulses, heroic feelings and passions, and superconscious spiritual life!” (*My Life*, 1: 374). Thus, for Stanislavsky, who expresses the problem in terms that are more Yogic than psychological, concentration is not simply a mental activity:

> It is this spiritual and physical dislocation between the body and soul that actors experience and live through for the majority of their lives: during the day from noon to 4:30 when they rehearse, and in the evening from 8:00 to
midnight when they perform, almost daily.... Ever since I recognized this dislocation the question, "What should I do?" has constantly stood before me like a dreadful ghost. (My Life, 1: 374–5)\textsuperscript{13}

In contrast to both Strepetova (who believed that her talent was God-given and rejected systematic approaches to her craft) and Komissarzhevskaya, who dreamed of founding an acting school in which “theatrical acting will not be taught,”\textsuperscript{14} Stanislavsky regarded rehearsal as a laboratory in which to test his theories. His endeavor to bring Yoga into his system exhibits a desire to join holistically mysticism and science. Yogic and occult philosophy offered him a holism that Western rationalism alone could not.

THE CULTURE OF THE OCCULT IN THE SILVER AGE

A spiritual crisis began to pervade European society in the mid-1800s as a result of both scientific and material progress, inspiring a renewed belief among artists in the unseen and immeasurable.\textsuperscript{15} That crisis affected Russia as well, especially at the peak of Strepetova’s fame when, as Raisa Ben’iash observes, “the power of gold exerts pressure on all areas of life.... Everywhere new factories and railways are feverishly under construction, and joint-stock companies created.... The spirit of commerce seeps into all pores of life, not excluding the art of the theatre.”\textsuperscript{16} By the end of the nineteenth century, apprehension about such capitalistic trends led members of Russia’s cultural elite to explore alternative spirituality as a form of resistance. Roman Lunkin and Sergei Filatov give a vivid account of the spiritual inclinations of the period, recalling that the philosopher Vladimir Solov’yev, the poet Maksimilian Voloshin, the composer Scriabin, and the poet Andrei Bely all “read their way through the classics of the East—the\textit{ Mahabharata}, the\textit{ Rig Veda} and the\textit{ Upanishads}. At the same time, the books of Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda and Yogi Ramacharak [sic] began to be published.”\textsuperscript{17}

Along with the artists and intellectuals noted above, writer Dmitry Merezhkovsky (1865–1941) and his wife, the symbolist poet Zinaida Gippius, also known as “Anton Krayni” (1869–1945), were instrumental in popularizing alternative spirituality.\textsuperscript{18} In 1901, the Merezhkovskys, along with writers Dmitry Filosofov (1872–1940) and Vasily Rozanov (1856–1919), established the Religious-Philosophical Society. Operating out of the Merezhkovsky’s St. Petersburg apartment, the society eventually attracted large Sunday gatherings of intelligentsia interested in a religious mysticism that was to grow into the “God-seeking” movement. In addition, Merezhkovsky and his wife traveled throughout Russia on popular lecture tours, making their first trip to Moscow in 1901.\textsuperscript{19}

Interest in the occult also flourished as a partial result of the 1905 Revolution, for it brought about less stringent censorship rules. Not only did that permit the dissemination of occult publications; it also enabled occult factions to emerge and attract followings.\textsuperscript{20} After 1909, interest in countries of the Far East escalated as well, following Russia’s war with Japan; and other occult ideologies developed that placed great emphasis on the religions of the East and on Yoga.
For example, during this period the self-proclaimed spiritual teacher George Ivanovich Gurdjieff (1886–1949) drew from elements of Islam, Yoga, and even numerology to create his own mystical ideology. Thus, Yoga was not a system in and of itself; rather, followers frequently combined it with other ideologies as they constructed their own occult systems—just as Stanislavsky himself was about to do as he incorporated both psychology and specific Yogic practices into his system.

Occult ideology intrigued certain artists in Stanislavsky’s social and professional circles. As early as 1899, Maxim Gorky (1868–1936) became aware of Theosophy, an occult system based primarily on the philosophies of Brahmanism and Buddhism. Theosophy’s greatest proponent was the controversial Helena Petrovna Blavatskaya (1831–91), who first popularized the movement in America, where she had lived since 1873. More commonly known as Madame Blavatsky or simply HPB, she claimed to have traveled for seven years in Tibet between 1848 and 1858, acquiring secret knowledge from gurus living in the Himalayas. In 1875, Madame Blavatsky, along with Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907) and the lawyer William Quan Judge (1851–96) founded the American Theosophical Society in New York City. Blavatsky gained international fame by publishing *Isis Unveiled* (1877), *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), and *The Key to Theosophy* (1889), which were widely read across America. While her claim of living in Tibet is questionable, Blavatsky nevertheless became a celebrity and eventually captured the Russian imagination when the Russian Theosophical Society was founded in 1908. Although Gorky was initially critical of Blavatsky, by 1912 he called for the Russian publication of her entire body of writing.

Another prominent artist of the times who was deeply devoted to Eastern mysticism was the painter and poet Nikolai Konstantinovich Roerich, also “Rerikh” (1874–1947). A member of the Russian Theosophical Society, Roerich worked as a scenic designer for numerous theatre companies prior to the 1917 Revolution. In 1912, Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko hired him to design Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt*, directed by Konstantin Mardzhanov. Like other artists of the times, Roerich was profoundly disappointed with the spiritual apathy that he perceived to be a product of materialism and industrialization. In 1918, Roerich and his wife, Helena Ivanovna (1879–1955), left Russia never to return, and from 1923 to 1928 they traveled extensively in India, Asia, and Tibet, seeking the key to spiritual enlightenment. During this period, they wrote *Agni Yoga*, their own interpretive doctrine of Yogic philosophy named after the Hindu fire god.

Clearly, Stanislavsky was not alone in his desire to explore the spiritual aspects of art; and a variety of sources were available to him from which to glean information on Yoga and Eastern spirituality. In fact, by 1913, Russia had thirty-five functioning occult organizations, and the country saw upward of thirty esoteric journals published between 1881 and 1918. The Moscow Art Theatre itself even presented an opportunity for Stanislavsky to learn about Yoga and Hinduism in 1916 when it began production on a play by the Bengali writer Rabindranath Tagore. Director Nemirovich-Danchenko arranged for a Yogi
to speak on Hinduism to the members of the company, before the production was canceled.29 The question remains, however, as to how Stanislavsky discovered Yoga as well as if and how he came to apply its principles to acting.

According to A. L. Fovitzky, Stanislavsky drew on Yogic practices to enhance concentration on the stage as early as 1906, while playing Astrov in a Hamburg tour of *Uncle Vanya*, at which time

[Stanislavsky] found a hint in the practices of the wise men of the Buddhist religion—and thenceforth he required his actors to practice long psycho-physical exercises as a means of cultivating concentration of attention.... Following these teachings of Oriental metaphysics, his followers strove to visualize the elusive “ego”—to live, while on the stage, the life of the spirit and to become acquainted with strange phases of spiritual life.30

Fovitzky further notes that Stanislavsky’s students and colleagues appreciated his exercises inasmuch as “there is an Oriental element in the Russian soul” (42) which dates back to the age of the Scythians and the early invasions of the Huns, Avars, and Khazars. In so doing, he reminds us that, while Russia is geographically a portion of Eastern Europe, certain aspects of Far Eastern spirituality are embedded within its culture.

Where Fovitzky implies a kind of Russian cultural receptivity to Eastern holistic spirituality, however, Stanislavsky tells a different story about his colleagues’ reaction to his newfound techniques: “I tormented them; they were angry and said that I was turning rehearsal into a laboratory, that artists were not rabbits for experimental studies” (*My Life*, 1: 376). Still, despite such resistance, Stanislavsky continued to include Yogic techniques throughout the following years. In 1908, he held sequestered rehearsals of *A Month in the Country* in which he focused on how to convey the inner life of the characters through the “invisible emanation of creative will and feeling” (*My Life*, 1: 406). Olga Knipper-Chekhova, who played Natalya Petrovna, greeted the spiritually minded method with suspicion and even fear, recalling that “at one of the rehearsals I broke down, decided I couldn’t play, and went home.”31 Be that as it may, Stanislavsky was to have greater success three years later when working with the younger, more impressionable actors of the First Studio.

THE FIRST STUDIO AND THE SPIRITUAL UNDERPINNINGS OF THE SYSTEM

Stanislavsky founded the First Studio of the Moscow Art Theatre in 1912 as a laboratory in which to develop the system by conducting practical experiments in the context of rehearsal. He appointed Leopold Antonovich Sulerzhitsky (1873–1916) as the artistic and administrative director, remarking with positively monastic language that “Sulerzhitsky dreamt, along with me, of creating something like a spiritual order of artists” (*My Life*, 1: 437). In his autobiography, First Studio member Alexei Diky even went so far as to note that Sulerzhitsky “was not a director in the traditional sense of the word” in that he operated by means of a kind of “spiritual prompting.”32
Familiar with Eastern religions, Sulerzhitsky was a pacifist and a “fervent Tolstoyan” (My Life, 1: 390) who was so dedicated to Tolstoy’s teachings that, in 1898, Tolstoy selected him to act as his representative in organizing the emigration of over one thousand Dukhobors (a persecuted Christian sect) from the Caucasus to Canada. The Dukhobors’ meditative practices, reminiscent of Eastern spirituality, certainly influenced Sulerzhitsky. In his account of the journey from Russia to Canada, Sulerzhitsky depicts the atmosphere just prior to an early-morning prayer meeting in Winnipeg: “The solemn silence before the beginning of the service seemed to be the fulfillment of a special, mysterious idea. Each one in the group, and the whole group itself, was now engrossed with the idea of the soul, of God. Each was absorbed in spiritual contemplation.” One “feared to move,” he continues, “lest one disturb this deep contemplative mood, when people lose touch with everything earthly and material, and live only in the spirit.”

Sulerzhitsky drew upon his experience with the Dukhobors in creating a communal summer retreat for the First Studio ensemble near Evpatoria on the Black Sea, during which “Sulerzhitsky repeated the methods he used with the Dukhobors in Canada; he established a strict regimen. Each member of the Studio had a communal responsibility; one was a cook, another a coachman, a third a housekeeper, a fourth a boatman, etc.” (My Life, 1: 439). In that respect, the structure of the First Studio under Sulerzhitsky’s direction reflects the monastic lifestyle associated with “a spiritual order” rather than the daily operations of a traditional theatre company. Not only did the First Studio reflect spiritual practice in the lifestyle of their summer retreats, but the members also drew from Yoga in their acting exercises. First Studio member Vera Soloviova recalls:

[W]e worked a great deal on concentration. It was called “To get into the circle.” We imagined a circle around us and sent “prana” rays of communion into the space and to each other. Stanislavski said “send the prana there—I want to reach through the tip of my finger—to God—the sky—or, later on, my partner. I believe in my inner energy and I give it out—I spread it.”

In her invocation of prana, the Hindu concept of vital energy, Soloviova indicates that the actors of the First Studio were experimenting directly with Yogic techniques. Nor can it be coincidental that a number of the Yogic exercises used in the First Studio (particularly the exercises in directing the flow of prana) come from a particular book in a series attributed to “Yogi Ramacharaka.” The Studio members, records Elena Polyakova,

delved into Stanislavsky’s still-unpublished works and did the concentration exercises recommended in Yogi Ramacharaka’s Hatha Yoga. In the less than spacious quarters that Stanislavsky had rented for them on Tverskaya
Street... they “radiated” and were “irradiated,” “closed the circle,” developed their powers of observation and fostered their “creative self-awareness.”

That spirituality appears to have made a lasting impact on some of the First Studio members. Years later Michael Chekhov, who became a devoted student of Rudolf Steiner’s anthroposophy, includes similar exercises for “Radiating Movements” when instructing the actor as follows: “While radiating strive, in a sense, to go out and beyond the boundary of your body. Send your rays in different directions from the whole body at once and afterward through its various parts. . . . You may or may not use the center of your chest as the mainspring of your radiation.” Beatrice Straight, Chekhov’s student and cofounder of the Michael Chekhov School, even claims that Chekhov was often “criticized as being too spiritual” and describes his radiating exercises as “beaming an aura, sending out qualities, in an almost mystical sense.” Likewise, Richard Boleslavsky (1889–1937), who immigrated to America in 1922 and founded the American Laboratory Theatre with fellow First Studio member Maria Ouspenskaya (1876–1949), devoted significant attention to the spiritual side of the acting process. As film historian Foster Hirsch points out, “Boleslavski stressed the actor’s spiritual training as the most important part of the work, and he developed a series of what he called ‘soul exercises’. . . .” Ouspenskaya continued to embrace Yoga after immigrating to America. She became a member of the Self-Realization Fellowship (SRF), founded in 1920 by Paramhansa Yogananda (1893–1952), the Yogi responsible for introducing numerous Westerners to Kriya Yoga through his popular book Autobiography of a Yogi.

In an informal talk to the Hollywood SRF congregation shortly after Ouspenskaya’s death in 1949, Yogananda opens with a prayer for Ouspenskaya’s soul, calling her “one of our very devoted followers” and “beloved student.” Since Ouspenskaya never wrote a memoir or book on acting, the degree to which she incorporated Yoga into her own teaching is unknown.

Although Stanislavsky’s most detailed study of Yoga occurred in the first quarter of the twentieth century, like Chekhov, he apparently continued to find it useful, devoting Chapter 10 of An Actor’s Work on Himself, Part I to identical exercises. In this chapter on communication (obshchenie), Stanislavsky poses the question, “What should we call this invisible path of communication? Radiation and Irradiation? Emanation and Immanation? For lack of any other terminology let’s settle on these words, since they graphically illustrate this process. . . .” In the corresponding chapter of the 1935 typescript that he sent to Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood as she prepared her own translation, Stanislavsky states explicitly that “I have read what the Hindus have to say on the topic. They believe in the existence of so-called prana, a vital energy, a force that gives life to all of our body. According to their notions, the main supply of prana is located in the solar plexus, from where it is sent out to every organism.” Here, he invokes Hatha Yoga, in which Ramacharaka defines prana as “the active principle of life—Vital Force” and identifies the solar plexus as “the great central storehouse of Prana” that “radiates strength and energy to all parts of the body.”
addition, Stanislavsky refers to *prana* in order to clarify his meaning of “self-communication” (*samoobshchenie*), a process in which the actor establishes an inner connection between the intellect and the emotions, or physiologically between the brain and the heart. Much as he did in his work at the First Studio, he views *prana* as a unifying messenger between the actor’s mind and emotions. In asserting that *prana* is dispersed outward from the solar plexus “to every organism,” he shares Ramacharaka’s understanding of the Yogi as a life force who is “able to absorb and control a greatly increased amount of [P]rana, which is then at the disposal of his will. He can and does use it as a vehicle for sending forth thoughts to others. . . .” Although Hapgood retains the reference to *prana* in *An Actor Prepares*, she omits Stanislavsky’s phrase “from where it is sent out to every organism”—and, in so doing, obfuscates Stanislavsky’s use of such energy to establish unspoken external communication with one’s partner and the audience.

Abridgment and lack of scholarly notes also obscures Yoga’s presence in Hapgood’s translation of Stanislavsky’s second acting manual, *Building a Character*. In Chapter 5, “Plasticity of Motion,” Stanislavsky describes in detail an energy “heated by emotion, charged with will, directed by the intellect” that “flows down the network of your muscular system, arousing your inner motor centres. . . .” But the Soviet edition, entitled *An Actor’s Work on Himself, Part II*, includes an endnote explaining that Stanislavsky had originally used the word “*prana*” throughout the chapter, but then replaced it in the manuscript with “muscular energy” and “energy.” In typical Soviet fashion, however, the unidentified author of the note undermines the influence of Yoga by referring to the revised terminology as “more accessible and scientific.” The fourth volume of the *Collected Works, An Actor’s Work on the Role*, provides substantial annotation in support of Stanislavsky’s use of Yoga and even identifies Ramacharaka as one of his sources. At the same time, however, the editor disparages the Yogic vocabulary—specifically the word “superconscious”—as terminology that “Stanislavsky uncritically borrows from idealistic philosophy and psychology.” Thus, through the lens of Soviet ideology, Stanislavsky is inaccurately portrayed as favoring the scientific over the spiritual, creating the illusion that, after exploring Yoga, he dismissed it as “idealistic.” But the fact that he explicitly invokes *prana* in his typescript to Hapgood twenty-three years following his experiments in the First Studio provides evidence that Stanislavsky continued to regard Eastern spirituality as an element of the system. Ironically, however, the Eastern wisdom that Stanislavsky gleaned from Ramacharaka came not from a distant ashram in India but from Chicago, Illinois.

### RAMACHARAKA, A DISTINCTLY AMERICAN YOGI

Turn-of-the-century occultism not only seized the Russian imagination; its mysteries captivated Americans as well. Indeed, interest in spirituality had been increasing since the mid-nineteenth century just as faith in organized religion was decreasing, fostering a climate for spiritualist movements. Perhaps one of the most significant events that contributed to American interest in Eastern spirituality was the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago, where
Americans were introduced to the charismatic Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902). A disciple of Ramakrishna, Vivekananda became an instant celebrity after delivering a series of lectures on Hinduism at the Parliament. If Peter Washington posits “an enormous and enduring public appetite . . . for new and exotic forms of religious belief to supplement or even replace orthodox forms of Christianity” (25), then one person who satiated that appetite was the “lawyer-turned-metaphysician” William Walker Atkinson (1862–1932).

After abandoning the legal profession, Atkinson moved from Pennsylvania to Chicago around 1900. That year, he was hired as an associate editor for Suggestion magazine, and during 1901–5 he was the editor of New Thought magazine. In addition to his editorial work, Atkinson was a prolific writer and published several books on metaphysics and occultism through the Yogi Publication Society of Chicago. He also wrote a collection of twelve books from 1903 to 1907 on Hinduism and Yoga under the pen name “Yogi Ramacharaka,” which gained international reputation and all of which remain in print today.

Atkinson’s Ramacharaka series covers a wide range of topics including life after death, clairvoyance, psychic healing, Christian mysticism, general introductions to Yogic philosophy, plus translations of and commentaries on the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads. Hence, Atkinson-as-Ramacharaka does not favor one specific school or philosophy of Yoga over another, as an actual Yogi might. Instead he gives even-handed attention to a variety of disciplines, devoting certain books to particular branches of Yogic practice. For example, when referring to the teachings of Hindu masters throughout the series, he uses only the most general terminology such as “the Yogis” or “the Yogi Philosophers” and never grounds his teachings in a specific source. Also, the practice he outlines differs fundamentally from classical Patanjala Yoga, which underpins Hindu Yogic practice and mandates that the aspirant sequentially master the eight stages or “limbs” of Yoga, many of which bear a distinct resemblance to acting exercises, in order to attain higher consciousness and unification with the divine. The limbs, in order, are yama (moral decrees), niyama (a series of self-purifying disciplinary practices), asana (posture), pranayama (control of vital energy through rhythmic breathing), pratyahara (withdrawal of the senses from objects of desire), dharana (concentration), dhyana (meditation), and samadhi (superconscious ecstasy). By contrast, Atkinson-as-Ramacharaka never addresses the first two limbs of yama and niyama, electing instead to combine popular occult ideology with various aspects of Yoga from the Yoga Sutras and the Bhagavad Gita. He writes, moreover, from a distinctly Western point of view, saturating the Ramacharaka books with references to Western writers, philosophers, and scientists whose teachings are consistent with those of ancient “Yogi Philosophers.”

Stanislavsky’s personal library contained at least three of the Ramacharaka books. Since Stanislavsky neither spoke nor read English, he relied on Russian translations of Hatha Yoga; or, The Yogi Philosophy of Physical Well-being, Raja Yoga or Mental Development, and Teachings of Yoga about the Mental World of the Person. We are thus newly able to understand Burnet Hobgood’s remark...
that Stanislavsky’s Yogic concepts are “curiously watered-down as if second or third hand.” As Helena Roerich observes, it is the Ramacharaka books themselves that offer such secondhand information and present a diluted version of Yoga aimed at a curious but largely uninformed readership: “such writers as Ramacharaka, while giving not a bad exposition of some systems of Indian Yoga, at the same time speak with the light-mindedness of a dilettante about the ease of mastery of the highest achievements of the Raja Yogis.” As a comparative analysis of Stanislavsky with Ramacharaka clearly reveals, even if Stanislavsky did not receive all of his information on Yoga from Atkinson’s Ramacharaka series, he drew significantly from it in conceiving his exercises for actors.

**HATHA YOGA, RAJA YOGA, AND THE SUB- AND SUPERCONSCIOUS**

The first book that Stanislavsky cites repeatedly from the series is *Hatha Yoga; or, The Yogi Philosophy of Physical Well-Being*, which is concerned with the third and fourth limbs of Patanjala Yoga: *asana* and *pranayama*. Mastery of postures is designed to facilitate physical health, strength, flexibility, relaxation, and ultimately, the *pranayama* associated with seated meditation. Through *pranayama*, the aspirant is said to cultivate awareness of the motion of vital energy (*prana*) in the body, and directs its movement through mastery of rhythmic breath control. In *Hatha Yoga*, however, Ramacharaka does not use the term *asana*; nor does he include any of the familiar Yoga postures associated with the discipline. Instead, he offers general “Yogi Physical Exercises,” a series of simple stretches and bodily motions designed to facilitate relaxation, which are accompanied by a series of authentic breathing exercises for controlling *prana*. Although he never refers to any of the exercises as *pranayama*, he consistently emphasizes *prana* over the physical exercises; and, as Carnicke has documented, Stanislavsky displays a deep understanding of *prana* in his rehearsal notes (written between 1919 and 1920):

(a) **Prana**—vital energy—is taken from breath, food, the sun, water, and human auras. (b) When a person dies, *prana* goes into the earth through maggots, into microorganisms. (c) “The Self”—“I am”—is not *prana*, but that which brings all *prana* together into one. (d) As *prana* it travels in the blood and nerves, with the chewing of food through the teeth, with breathing, with the drinking of fresh water, with the sun’s rays. . . . [I]n order to receive more *prana* inhale—6 beats of the heart—exhale; 3 beats of the heart—hold the breath. Progress up to 15 beats of the heart. . . .

The comparison of that passage from Stanislavsky’s notebook to Ramacharaka’s discussion of *prana* immediately reveals striking parallels:

Man obtains Prana as well as nourishment from his food—Prana as well as a cleansing effect from the water he drinks—Prana properly distributed as well as mere muscular development in physical exercises—Prana as well as heat from the rays of the sun—Prana as well as oxygen from the air he breathes. . . . (*Hatha Yoga*, 149–50)
When Stanislavsky gives further instructions for drawing vital energy into the body through a rhythmic breathing that corresponds with the heartbeat, he again invokes Ramacharaka, who prescribes the same exercise in order to absorb more prana:

1. Sit erect, in an easy posture. . . .
2. Inhale slowly a Complete Breath, counting six pulse units.
3. Retain, counting three pulse units.
4. Exhale slowly through the nostrils, counting six pulse units. . . .

After a little practice you will be able to increase the duration of the inhalations and exhalations, until about fifteen pulse units are consumed. (Hatha Yoga, 162–3)

Stanislavsky’s inclusion of that exercise in his notes is of particular significance because it brings to light his interest not only in prana but also his awareness of the importance of rhythmic breathing. Because rhythmic breathing in Yoga must be mastered before concentration is possible, the two skills are inextricably linked, which explains Stanislavsky’s corresponding interest in the exercises of Raja Yoga.

As early as a lecture delivered between 1918 and 1922 to the students of the Bolshoi Opera Studio, Stanislavsky was keenly aware of the correlation between breathing and concentration:

Let’s ask ourselves: is there an analogy between concentration and breathing? Not only is there, but every person, if healthy, breathes rhythmically. . . .
Your breathing is strictly rhythmic. And only then does it replenish all the creative functions of your organism; the heart beats evenly and clearly and harmoniously responds to the rhythm of the breath.

What happens to you if you are distressed, upset, irritated or become enraged? . . . Not only are you unable to contain your passions, but you cannot even command the rhythm of your breath. . . . You don’t inhale air through the nose, but through the mouth, and that disrupts even more the entire operation of your organism.63

For Stanislavsky, so crucial are respiration and concentration to unleashing the artist’s creativity that he describes them as the forces that “engender all of a person’s creativity” and claims that the actor “must learn to control them as centers of primary importance.” Respiration and concentration, he continues, are interdependent: “calm breathing—healthy thoughts, healthy body, healthy feelings, easily collected concentration; disturbed rhythm of breathing—always a disturbed psyche, always painful sensations and always completely scattered concentration.”64 With those observations, he echoes the principle outlined in Hatha Yoga that the mind, body, and emotions are interconnected by the thread.
of the breath: “in addition to the physical benefit derived from correct habits of breathing, man’s mental power, happiness, self-control, clear-sightedness, morals and even his spiritual growth may be increased by an understanding of ‘The Science of Breath.’” Stanislavsky even stresses breathing through the nostrils as opposed to the mouth—a point to which Ramacharaka devotes a chapter of *Hatha Yoga* (127–31).

Having thus drawn on the *Hatha Yoga*’s rhythmic breathing as a foundation for establishing concentration, he then turns to the discipline of Raja Yoga to cultivate further that important skill. Raja Yoga addresses the sixth and seventh limbs of Patanjala Yoga: *dharana* and *dhyana*. The aspirant who practices Raja Yoga begins with exercises designed to perfect concentration, after which he or she learns to focus on the object of concentration for longer and longer periods. Eventually, the aspirant reaches the stage of meditation. In *Raja Yoga or Mental Development*, Ramacharaka focuses on the subconscious as he offers twelve lessons on how to sustain concentration and to tap into higher consciousness through meditation.

Stanislavsky includes detailed Yogic exercises for developing concentration in Chapter 5 of *An Actor’s Work on Himself, Part I* (1989), entitled “Stage Concentration” (*Tsenicheskoe vnimanie*). Not coincidentally, Ramacharaka devotes the fifth lesson of *Raja Yoga* to “Cultivation of Attention”; and his influence on Stanislavsky is palpable. Both Ramacharaka and Stanislavsky offer traditional beginning Yoga exercises, which involve concentrating on objects and retaining their details once those objects are removed from view. Stanislavsky, however, adapts the exercises to the stage, incorporating them into his famous exercises in “Circles of Attention” (*krugi vnimanii*), which are designed to cultivate the “public solitude” (*publichnoe odinochestvo*) necessary to both concentration and the eradication of an actor’s self-consciousness. Stanislavsky identifies self-consciousness as a problem earlier in the chapter when he points out that, “in life you know how to walk, and sit, and talk, and watch, but in the theatre you lose the ability and ask yourself ‘Why are they looking at me?’” By suggesting that the solution to that problem is the ability to concentrate, Stanislavsky follows Ramacharaka’s own advice to anyone who must communicate with an audience: “The actor, or preacher, or orator, or writer, must lose sight of himself to get the best results. Keep the Attention fixed on the thing before you, and let the self take care of itself.”

Ramacharaka and Stanislavsky highlight the same key ideas regarding the cultivation of attention, the former observing, for instance, that “there are two general kinds of Attention. The first is the Attention directed within the mind upon mental objects and concepts. The other is the Attention directed outward upon objects external to ourselves. The same general rules and laws apply to both equally.” For his own part, Stanislavsky distinguishes between outer and inner attention as well. Outer or external attention, he explains, is “directed toward objects we find outside of ourselves.” When he explains internal attention, however, he refines the concept for the actor: “the greater part of the actor’s life on stage, during creativity, proceeds on the plane of creative dreams and fantasies, the imaginary given circumstances. All of this is invisible, lives in the
actor’s soul and is accessible only through inner attention.”71 In that respect, Stanislavsky identifies the Yogic principle of concentration as a pathway to the actor’s imagination. So closely linked are the two that he goes on to state that the exercises used to cultivate imagination “are equally valid for concentration.”72 Finally, Stanislavsky appropriates from Raja Yoga the crucial notion of the superconscious, which, for Carnicke, permits him to divide the actor’s unconscious into two realms: “the ‘subconscious’ (that lies within each person) and the ‘superconscious’ (that transcends the individual).”73 In Raja Yoga, Ramacharaka provides several examples of how to tap into both the sub- and superconscious planes, which Stanislavsky then integrates into the cultivation of actors’ inspiration, especially in what came to be known as An Actor’s Work on the Role.

In 1957, Russian editors pulled together various manuscripts dating from 1916 to 1936 in order to fashion the third of Stanislavsky’s An Actor’s Work manuals, and in which Stanislavsky includes a detailed discussion of the superconscious in which he frequently paraphrases the Raja Yoga.74 For example, in his discussion of the actor’s unconscious creative process, Stanislavsky quotes from two of Ramacharaka’s own Western sources. We read that “Professor Elmer Gates says: ‘At least ninety percent of our mental life is subconscious,’” and that “[Henry] Maudsley claims, that ‘consciousness does not possess even one-tenth of the functions usually attributed to it.’”75 And yet, transmission of Stanislavsky is such that this sort of intertextuality is obscured. Hapgood includes Stanislavsky’s discourse on the superconscious in Creating a Role (81–4), and she retained his references to Gates and Maudsley in the typescript.76 However, Hapgood’s editor, Hermine Popper, deleted the revealing citations, claiming in a margin note that “he’s already proposed this equation earlier in the text.”77

Elsewhere, in his 1916 rehearsal notes for the Village of Stepanchikovo, Stanislavsky invokes Ramacharaka’s “subconsciousing,” a term that denotes an individual’s transfer of the work of the conscious mind to the subconscious for processing. Ramacharaka devotes the tenth lesson of Raja Yoga to that meditative process, and Stanislavsky highlights how an actor can use it to nurture creative inspiration. “The seeds of poetry are sown, and the invisible work of the subconscious begins,” he observes, and the work of the conscious mind is “material” or “food” to fuel the “creative work of the subconscious.”78 Here, he echoes Ramacharaka’s belief that those engaged in subconsciousing “saturate their conscious mind[s] with a mass of material, like stuffing the stomach with food, and then bid the subconscious mind assort, separate, arrange and digest the mental food. . . .”79 For Ramacharaka, the material thus turned over to the subconscious is a “bundle of thought which is being bodily lifted up and dropped down a mental hatch-way, or trap-door, in which it sinks from sight.”80 Citing that same section, Stanislavsky identifies the subconscious as a pathway to superconscious inspiration when he asserts that “to establish communication with his superconscious an actor must know how to ‘take a bundle of thoughts and toss them into his subconscious sack.’”81 Additionally, Stanislavsky characterizes the superconscious realm as the actor’s ultimate destination, writing that
“the superconscious above all elevates the human soul, which is exactly why it
must be valued and guarded above all else in our art.”

In placing such enormous value on the superconscious, Stanislavsky
affords it a Yogi’s reverence; for, in Yoga the superconscious refers to an inspired
state through which aspirants eventually enter the eighth and final limb of
Yoga called *samadhi* (normally translated as “ecstasy” or “bliss”). Multiple
levels of *samadhi* exist; and the highest state of consciousness is that in which the
aspirant is aware of the object of meditation alone. For the Yogi, the object of
meditation is God. For Stanislavsky, the object of meditation is the role.

With theological resonance, Stanislavsky illustrates that principle with his
concept of “I am” (*la esm’*), when the actor is completely immersed in the
circumstances of the play and is at one with the role, which is the object of
contemplation. In reaching the state of “I am” in performance, “you have
experienced a portion of yourself in the role and the role in yourself.” Thus,
Stanislavsky’s “I am” is a unified state of actor and role that echoes the Yogic
*samadhi* in which the aspirant is unified with the divine; and, for Carnicke, its
“implicit spiritual overtones” hark back to Old Church Slavonic. Moreover,
Stanislavsky would have been familiar with that spiritual context from his
own Orthodox upbringing: his family attended church regularly and always
observed religious feast days. Significant, however, Ramacharaka himself
identifies a powerful state of “I am” in *Raja Yoga*. Here, the aspirant must attain
“two degrees” of understanding regarding the “Real Self” and the nature of
spiritual existence:

The first [degree], which they [the Yogi Masters] call “the Consciousness of
the ‘I’,” is the full consciousness of real existence that comes to the
Candidate, and which causes him to know that he is a real entity having a life
not depending upon the body. The second degree, which they call “the
Consciousness of the ‘I AM’,” is the consciousness of one’s identity with the
Universal life, and his relationship to, and “in-touchness” with all life,
expressed and unexpressed. (vi; his emphasis)

Here, Ramacharaka addresses some of Stanislavsky’s own early concerns
regarding the actor’s inability to separate creative expression from the realm of
physical matter. For he describes an inspired state of awareness in which the
aspirant realizes that consciousness not only exists separately from the
material body but also outlives it. More significantly, just as Ramacharaka uses
“I am” in order to define the aspirant’s cultivated spiritual communion with
universal vital energy, Stanislavsky invokes “I am” in connection with the actor’s
communion with the role (in which self-consciousness and preoccupation
with the physical body subside). Once in that state, “the actor’s spiritual and
physical apparatus works on stage normally, in accordance with the laws of
human nature, just as in life, in spite of the abnormal conditions of doing creative
work in public.” Stanislavsky even includes the term in his notebook
definition of *prana*, asserting that “‘I am’—is not *prana*, but that which brings
all *prana* together into one.”

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Finally, Ramacharaka explains in *Raja Yoga* that these two degrees of consciousness—namely “of the ‘I’” and “of the ‘I AM’”—“come in time to all who seek ‘The Path.’ To some it comes suddenly; to others it dawns gradually; to many it comes assisted by the exercises and practical work of ‘Raja Yoga’” (vi). Stanislavsky himself exhibits a similar respect for the Yogic path of accessing the unconscious through conscious means:

The Hindu yogis, having worked marvels in the spheres of the sub- and superconscious, offer much practical advice in these realms. They too move toward the unconscious through conscious preparatory techniques, from body—to soul, from real—to unreal, from naturalism—to abstraction. And we, actors, must do so as well.88

In the final analysis, there is a spiritual dimension of Stanislavsky’s system that has yet to be recuperated. From 1906 until his death in 1938, Stanislavsky continually experimented with a variety of techniques and worked with numerous students who inevitably developed their own interpretations of the system. As a result, a large body of second- and thirdhand lore has generated a fragmented image of Stanislavsky’s work, seemingly full of contradictions. Just as Soviet-era censors distorted Stanislavsky’s system to conform to Marxist materialism, many modern scholars, in focusing on the alleged science of his theories, have neglected the fact that Stanislavsky granted equal importance to spirituality. The system is a holistic approach to acting, and, if taken as such, it addresses the actor’s entire apparatus—mind, body, and spirit.

The beginning of the twenty-first century is a perfect time to defragment our notions of Stanislavsky. Indeed, further research on the spiritual elements of Stanislavsky’s work not only expands Westerners’ perspectives of the system but revives some of its fundamental elements that have remained dormant over the past century. A heightened understanding of Stanislavsky’s spirituality, itself ever subject to change and development, offers a means by which to breathe new life into Stanislavsky’s teachings in the new millennium.

ENDNOTES

1. In this essay, I transliterate our subject as “Stanislavsky” but reproduce other spellings in the endnotes exactly as they appear in the cited sources. Likewise for variant spellings of Ramacharaka, etc.

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3. Here, “occult” refers to ideologies founded in the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries by charismatic leaders who claimed to possess mysterious knowledge leading to spiritual enlightenment. Thus, “occult” does not include the general practice of Yoga insofar as Yoga is an ancient philosophy of the Hindu and Buddhist religions and is not connected to a single leader (even though Yoga has indeed been incorporated into occult ideologies).


10. McCannon, “Passageways to Wisdom: Nicholas Roerich, the Dramas of Maurice Maeterlinck, and Symbols of Spiritual Enlightenment,” Russian Review 64.3 (July 2004): 449–78, at 453. Komissarzhevskaya later counted Sister Beatrice among three productions of which she was especially proud (Borovsky, Triptych, 181).


13. Though Stanislavsky’s observation is rife with spiritual overtones, he also urged that actors not only analyze but “test and develop their powers scientifically” (cited in Borovsky, Triptych, 52).

14. For Strepetova, see Schuler, “Materialism,” 515; and Komissarzhevskaya is cited in Borovsky, Triptych, 211.


Andrei Bely [sic] and the Symbolist Movement in Russia (1901–1909)” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1942), 172.


21. Ibid., 21.


29. Carnicke, Stanislavsky in Focus, 140.


31. Sergei Melik-Zakharov and Shoel Bogatyrov, Stanislavskii: pisateli, artisty, rezhissery o velikom deiatele russkogo teatra [Stanislavsky: Writers, Actors, Directors on a Great Figure of the Russian Theatre] (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1963), 51.


33. Sulerzhitsky, To America with the Doukhobors, trans. Michael Kalmakoff (Regina, Canada: Canadian Plains Research Center, 1982), 97.

34. Mel Gordon identifies Sulerzhitsky as Stanislavsky’s original source of information on Yoga in his unannotated The Stanislavsky Technique: Russia (New York: Applause, 1987), 31.


44. Yogi Ramacharaka, Hatha Yoga; or, The Yogi Philosophy of Physical Well-Being (Chicago: Yogi Publication Society, 1904), 151; 158.

45. Ibid., 161.


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50. Stanislavskii, Rabota aktera nad roluiu [An Actor’s Work on the Role], vol. 4 of CW8V (1957), and vol. 4 of CW9V (1991); for information on Yoga see CW8V (1957), 4: 495–9n, esp. notes 71–7.

51. CW8V (1957), 4: 495, n. 71.

52. For a historical overview, see Washington, Madame Blavatsky’s Baboon, 7.

53. Although substantive information on Atkinson is scant, see Hal May, ed., Contemporary Authors (Detroit: Gale Research, 1987), 120; and the various entries on Atkinson in Who Was Who in America (Chicago: Marquis, 1973); in Gordon Melton, Religious Leaders of America, A Biographical Guide to Founders and Leaders of Religious Bodies, Churches, and Spiritual Groups in North America (Detroit: Gale Research, 1991); and Melton’s entry on “Yoga” in the New Age Encyclopedia (Detroit: Gale Research, 1991).

54. For purposes of clarity, I use the name “Ramacharaka” when citing the books attributed to him.


57. Carnicke, Stanislavsky in Focus, 72.

58. For a list of the Russian titles of Stanislavsky’s Ramacharaka books see Actor’s Work on the Role, CW8V (1957), 4: 496n. For other references to Ramacharaka, see CW9V (1991), 4: 387; 395. See also Stanislavskii, Stanislavskii repetiruet: Zapisi i stenogrammy repetitsii [Stanislavsky Rehearses: Rehearsal Records and Transcripts], ed. I. Vinogradskaiia (Moscow: Souz teatral’nykh debeletei, 1987), 73, and Carnicke, Stanislavsky in Focus, 212n.


61. See Ramacharaka, Hatha Yoga, 195–204; 101–26; 159–68.


64. Ibid., 62–3.

65. Ramacharaka, Hatha Yoga, 103.

66. Ramacharaka, Raja Yoga or Mental Development (Chicago: Yogi Publication Society, 1906).


69. Ramacharaka, Raja Yoga, 111–12.

70. Ibid., 100.

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72. Ibid., 2: 171.
73. Carnicke, Stanislavsky in Focus, 181.
75. Actor’s Work on the Role, CW9V (1991), 4: 140; compare with Raja Yoga, 149, 174, and 176.
76. Typescript of Creating a Role, trans. Hapgood, The Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood Papers, *T-Mss 1992-039, Series II: Translations, 1930–1973, Box 9, Folder 4, 274. (Note that the same manuscript number applies both to Stanislavsky’s Russian-language typescript of Rabota aktera nad soboi, Chast’ I and to Hapgood’s typescript of her translation as Creating a Role.)
77. Ibid.
78. Stanislavsky Rehearses, 72.
79. Ramacharaka, Raja Yoga, 226.
80. Ibid., 230; his emphasis.
82. Ibid., 4: 140.
84. Carnicke, Stanislavsky in Focus, 175.
87. Cited in Carnicke, Stanislavsky in Focus, 141.