

Review of *The Great OOM*, by Robert Love, Viking, 2010.

This book is a biography of Pierre Bernard (born Perry Baker in Iowa in 1876. He was one of the rare and early teachers of the kaula tantric yoga tradition. This teaching seemed to have been passed on through his nephew Theos who was shot dead while travelling into Tibet. After that, the tradition went into eclipse.

From the Preface:

...I first learned...about...the yoga club that flourished for decades...and its founder , Pierre Arnold Bernard...called 'the father of yoga in America.' There were rumors of sex and romance at Bernard's club, whispers of heiresses and great wealth."

Pierre Bernard taught hatha yoga, the yoga familiar to more than 100 million Americans today. But he didn't stop there. He taught the philosophy behind hatha yoga as well...they called themselves Tantrikas or Tantriks and used the word *Tantrik* to describe their organization, beliefs and activities...

From the Prologue:

...men and women came to his ashram on the Hudson River, two hundred acres...that included a zoo, a yacht, airplanes and a dozen mansions...and his students made up a who's who of American life: college presidents, medical doctors, ministers, a spy or two, theologians, heiresses, a future congresswoman, famed authors and composers – some of the wealthiest and most influential people in the world.

This book is a record of the yoga in America prior to the present boom of health-food goodygoody yoga and academic digression. Indeed this tradition has been largely unknown except for the books of his nephew Theos Bernard whose most well-known book, *Hatha Yoga*, is the only systematic documentation of a serious tantric practise. This book allows us to construe some of the background of that although the traces of the actual yoga tradition are far from clear. The story is told from the point of view of the reaction to this rather than from inside the movement itself.

Referring to the interest in yoga after Vivekananda, Love states (p.25) ...'the work of the westernized swamis differed from Bernard's on a fundamental point: their yoga was not of the body, but rather an ascetic, Christianized yoga, influenced by British Victorian morals and the ideas of the Theosophical Society'.

The tone of the book is often sensational and jocular – a tone that will surely be prevalent when we come to regard the yoga hucksters of today with eyes that have lost the tepid fever of adulation. But that tone is part of the zeitgeist of today – the scandals in the saint and godmen circles, the denunciation of 'phonies' and so on often used to establish credibility, the dubious certifications of yoga

teachers and the wholesale appropriation of Sanskrit terms and texts to authenticate and market practises and products, to say nothing of the sex and drugs in the backrooms.

Love states on Page 2:

Pierre Bernard may have been one of the most celebrated Americans of the 1920s and 1930s, but early in the century he bore the burden of notoriety as “the Omnipotent Oom, Loving Guru of the Tantriks”, the very model of the licentious, greedy Svengali. In those days he was labeled a big-city charlatan, a fraud, a seducer of young girls, a spiritual con artist. He was accused of orchestrating sexual orgies, performing abortions, hypnotizing wealthy female benefactors (and beautiful poor ones too), and fleecing veterans of their savings. The police raided his yoga schools and clubs on numerous occasions and the federal government kept his dossier on file.

On the other side, page 3:

...The Hindu scholars who who'd come to meet ... (him) praised their host as the most learned and generous Sanskrit student in America. In India, his reputation as a gifted theologian never went into eclipse, he had befriended and sponsored more than a few Brahmin students who had come to the United States to study...(and they) sent him a wall of honorary degrees from Indian Universities. ...Reverend Charles Francis Potter said Bernard possessed “all the earmarks of a genius. He is the greatest authority in this country on Yoga teaching and practise.”

At that time, according to Love, “yoga was labelled a criminal fraud and an abomination against the purity of American women. It was associated with sexual promiscuity and kicked to the fringes of society.” Wendy Doniger in *The Hindus*, page 196, states ‘the 1891 census listed yogis under “miscellaneous and disreputable vagrants” and to this day villagers express ‘considerable scepticism about yogis in general in Hindu society’. To bring it up to date here one need only recall Rajneesh and his escapades.

The tradition that Pierre Bernard followed stems from a meeting with a ‘Syrian Indian’ from Calcutta, Sylvais Hamati in 1889 sparked by an interest in the occult (page 12). Perry studied under him for 18 years. It is indicated in the book that his father was Syrian and his mother Bengali which might indicate that the kaula (specific tantric lineage) yoga lineage came from his mother. This was, for me, the most significant information in the history.

Theos Bernard’s book *Hatha Yoga* gives us detailed information on the practises that must have been taught but he attributes them to a guru in India who does not wish to be known. This book gives us some information about Theos’s background and his character however, particular events can be filled in from other books as the book was sanitized to present it as a thesis to Columbia. The only other information is from Theos’ other books.

On Page 185 Love, speaking of Pierre, states:

He taught them what he knew of the mental concentration and autonomic mastery that enabled him to still his breathing and soar off into what was called Samadhi, the cosmic connection. "God consciousness", Bernard called it...

In spite of this loaded language, one can infer a serious spiritual discipline. In fact, the biography gives rather short shrift to the sophistication and value of the teachings while catering to the sensational and satirizing what are perennial philosophy teachings as in the above... 'soar', 'what was called', 'the cosmic connection' and so on.

The machinations and events are most entertaining, comparable to the stories of Rajneesh, Madame Blavatsky, Gurdieff, Ouspensky and so on who have been recorded in serious tell-all biographies literary gossip. We need to examine our ideas of spirituality, the values that our culture imparts to us when we are so fascinated with the wild escapades associated with them and their teachings. Serious practises and art have been transformed into gutter entertainment by our 'enlightened' cultural predisposition – witness Bharatanatyam transformed into Nautch titillation. A shift in perspective might consider the substance of a person's contribution first while understanding that, like all of us, he too is human.