

## Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 3 May 2017

### Studying Tantra from Within and Without

Podcast with **Douglas R. Brooks**

Interviewed by **Daniel Gorman Jr.**

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**

Audio and transcript available at:

<http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/studying-tantra-from-within-and-without/>



**Daniel Gorman** (DG): Professor Brooks, welcome to the Religious Studies Project.

**Douglas Brooks** (DB): Thanks for having me.

**DG:** Could you tell us, briefly, what drew you to the study of Hindu – in particular, Sanskrit literature? Because you went to Middlebury College – a place that you could be trained in any of many languages, and you chose one of the oldest and dearest!

**DB:** I didn't so much choose Sanskrit as Sanskrit chose me. And the same quickly followed up in the study of Tamil and other Indian languages. So, I suppose it traces back to my interest in history and the ancient world, and specifically in religion. I wasn't raised in a religious family, but I think that's always been an advantage to me: I didn't have to undo a great deal. But I made myself religious, as a child, of my own accord, so I suppose that's a kind of peculiar character feature. I mean, what kind of a kid asks to go to church, when his parents are not church-goers at all? Anyway, I got over that, that being itself its own story. And when I got to Mid, I was just interested in History, and the Classics and particularly philosophy and political science – and religion. Religion always struck me as still the subject that let you study all other subjects. So I suppose that was the real hook for me. You could be interested in language, politics, art, music, linguistics. . . . Everything in the study of religion just lets you study culture, lets you study history, all of the subjects. And I still think that as an undergraduate teacher. I think this is the department of the Humanities. And I think that that's a fair assessment. So, India provided a perfect example if only because everything about the Hindus is . . . creates a history and a literature, and a politics and the rest of it. So what really happened was, I took a class that

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introduced Hinduism and Buddhism, from a really wonderful man who, as I look back on now, I see as a very thorough scholar for a fellow who didn't have the languages, who – by my own standards today – would be a well-meaning amateur, in the sense of not having direct access. But he did an excellent job and I got hooked reading early Buddhism and then, particularly, the eclectic prose and verse Upanishads. And the literature just captivated me for its beauty, and for its insight, and for its cultural complexity, and its depth. And I said to myself at eighteen years old, "If this is interesting in these wooden unreadable translations, how much better would it be if you could go after the real thing?"

**DG:** I suppose I'm curious about access, because I'm thinking of the University of Chicago's publication, now, of the Bhagavad Gita in the Mahabharata in English. They're still not done with it! So how much material was available when you were. . . ?

**DB:** That's because nobody wants to do it!

**DG:** So how much was available in the 1970s, before computers?

**DB: (5:00)** Well, you know, there was this amazing emergence of Indology at the end of the 19th-century. And there are astonishing scholars of that era, whose work we continue to rely on. I mean, Maurice Bloomfield, Wilhelm Kalend. The material available in German and French and the early English scholarship – astonishing degrees of erudition! I just don't even know how these guys learned that much about everything. They had their own issues of colonialism, and sexism and their own parochialisms that came out of the era in which they first emerged. But the 19th-century provided an enormous well-spring of philology, and scholarship, and commitment: very serious people. That carried on in the period between the wars in Europe, which was also the period when American scholarship in Indology and the History of Religions, really took off. And because the History of Religions as a kind of German phenomenon – you know Religionsgeschichte, Wissenschaft, that kind of “subject” invented in Europe – translated well here because we're pluralists and because we're almost by nature compelled to study religion, as a subject – which is still a rare subject in a European University. You find Philology, and you find History departments, and you find other ways in which the subject is divvied up, but you don't really find Religion departments. And that, too, was available at Middlebury. So there was a fair amount of – as I said – old, wooden, 19th -century translation material. There was the material that was created in the space between the wars, and then there really was a long hiatus until the '50s and '60s, when another generation came along and took up the work of

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that generation that was, in fact, trained before World War Two. So, my principal Sanskrit Professor at Harvard, Daniel Engels, was a code-breaker during World War Two. He was a Harvard undergraduate in the '30s, and I was studying with him in the '70s and '80s. The '80s, I suppose, was our real time together: '79-'86. He retired in '84. So he came from a different era. He came from a whole different world. And then, what happened in the '60s and '70s kind of reshaped me. Because I came out of that rebellious world of looking for alternative voices, and subversive models, and other kinds of “How do you discover yourself?” questions – which were very much still not part of my History of Religions programme. Let me say one more thing about that. When I entered the doctoral programme at Harvard . . . . I guess that was '81 after my first master's. I graduated at the Divinity Schools and you had to reapply and then get into the Doctoral programme. There, the expectation was that we were Christians, or that we were Jewish and that we were studying these “other” religions. The Comparative Study of Religion meant that you were a committed religious person of your own Western persuasion, and that these were the subjects you studied. It hadn't occurred to the directors of that programme that any of us had, what they would call, “gone native”, or that we weren't particularly avowed or created by our own Western religions. We weren't using that as our home base, or our focal point for the study of religion, and yet that was still very much the model. You know, my secondary field in the Comparative Study of Religion, when I passed my general exams at Harvard, was Christianity – which had long since passed being of any personal connection to me.

**DG:** And that brings me to Dr Sundaramoorthy, if I'm saying his name correctly.

**DB:** Yes, you said it perfectly. So I arrived in India in 1977, on the University of Wisconsin's College Year programme, looking for “the wonder that was India”. (10:00) Romantically, still very much a seeker, I didn't know that I was seeking Hinduism, but I was seeking those sources and those ideas and commitments. And before I met Dr Sundaramoorthy I'd tumbled down that flight of stairs that makes you realise that you missed everything: that this was over, that the “wonder” that I had romanticised, and created this ancient India, and I had worked through this vision of what I thought it would be, or could be. . . . And I arrived there and it was 1977. And from the standpoint of that romanticised vision, that party was over. Now, I was blessed because I came late enough into the “East comes West” story to miss the Beatles. Does that make sense?

**DG:** Yes.

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**DB:** I didn't really get the Hare Krishna Beatles bug. I didn't get caught up in one of the Swamis coming West – any Maharishi, Mukundananda – that wasn't my gig. I was too young for that. I wasn't going that way. None of that ever seemed to be the real thing that I was looking for. So, when I went to India looking for the real thing, rather than some distilled version of hippy culture – I wasn't averse to that, it just wasn't what I wanted for myself – I got to India and it didn't seem to be there anymore. It seemed to be long gone. India was definitely on its own mission of economic development, but it had culturally decided not to do that, go in that direction. Every kid I knew or met, was studying medicine or engineering. They were headed into our world. They were headed into First World global consumerist science and medicine. And you can still see that in diaspora Indian communities. That's where the energy still is in education. So there wasn't this rich, deep, academic culture of the study of India *in* India. That's not what you found. And then, out in the temples, or out in the liturgical worlds, or in the practical worlds, or in peoples' religious lives you didn't really find that level of scholarship, or that level of deep erudite commitment, that I had kind of romanticised and hoped for. And then, at my wits end with really very little other recourse, I was introduced to Dr Sundaramoorthy, who was a Reader and Chair of the Sanskrit department at Madurai University. He was eventually elevated to Professor. And he actually was that character I was looking for. Because he had this serious academic training that traversed through Indian Universities and Oxford and other places where his work had been reviewed and he had learned his subject. He was a linguist and a comparativist. His English was elevated – immaculate, really. But he had also been raised in an ultra-orthodox Brahmin family. So his heritage was the stewardship of a tradition of Sanskrit erudition and Tamil culture. He was just as magnificent in Tamil as he was in Sanskrit. And yet he also had the capacities and the training of Western scholarship. So meeting him was, again, just pretty much serendipity. Like, I walked in and met the right guy at the right time. He had just, in fact, returned from a long stint in Malaysia and Singapore working at the university in Kuala Lumpur. If I had come a year earlier, he wouldn't have been there. So I just got lucky, I mean. And then, as those years moved on – I was supposed to spend nine months, I spent two years – and as our studies moved on, *he* was the one who encouraged *me* to go to Harvard and to continue my doctoral work and my more advanced work here, and then to go back and study with him. (15:00) Which is what I did. And when I won the Fulbright, in '84, that's technically my Fulbright year . . . . I wrote a PhD proposal for the grant that I won before the professorial committee approved my proposal. So I had the Fulbright to write my PhD before the professorial committee had given me approval, and I applied and actually

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won the grant before I passed my general exams for the PhD! And the grant essentially landed on Dr Sundaramoorthy's desk, so I was paid to go home! And then, I had leveraged the situation so that: what were they going to do, say, "Oh no we're not going to approve your PhD proposal, even though you already have the grant"? So I had the Fulbright fellowship and got to go back to Madurai to live in my teacher's house, to become a Fellow of the Department of Sanskrit, at the University where he was the Chair of the department.

**DG:** How did that introduce you to the study of yoga, though?

**DB:** Well, the study of yoga is the study of India, as far as I can tell.

**DG:** It's what most of [your books](#) are about.

**DB:** Well, most of my books are about the intersections of the medieval traditions of the rise of esoteric yoga, the Tantric traditions, especially the goddess traditions: those particular, peculiar formulations that involve the Brahmins in South India and other ways in which it anthropologically took hold. What living in Sundaramoorthy's house did, and spending all those years in India did is, it gave me immersion in language and culture. I got, essentially, the training of an anthropologist, both in a kind of formal fieldwork sense but also the company of a gifted comparative linguist and philologist. So I got a classical education and a fieldwork education at the same time. When you spend that much time in India, you see that correlation between sources and texts and history and living traditions. And I was particularly interested in the kind of historical tradition that you couldn't understand without a living tradition. There's no penetrating Tantric lore, and text, and prescription, and liturgy, and philosophy and what they call "yoga", without meeting someone who can tell you what the books are saying and finding out what it looks like. You don't study Tantric liturgies of complex yogic rituals without learning it from someone who can do those rituals. It's impossible. That was always my ace in the hole, was that: the book says this, but I know what that looks like, I've seen that performed in more than one place, by more than one person, in more than one way.

**DG:** But when you said performed, we're not just talking about the exercise aspect of yoga. . . ?

**DB:** No, no, no you mean what we call yoga today in the West?

**DG:** There's much more to it than that.

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**DB:** Oh no, no, no. I don't even refer. . . . Let's talk about that for a second. What we call yoga today in the West is now a meme, it has a life of its own, it's a phenomena of gyms and yoga studios, and morning TV exercise shows. That is a whole separate history from the history that I would have considered yoga until 20 years ago. Those characters that brought/ invented/ co-opted the word yoga to mean postures and exercise and the somatic engagement that happens on mats or in asana in posture, that's, in fact, not really my subject at all. I don't really know much about that. I didn't really follow that transmission of that material to the West. I had to learn that much, much later in my career. Who were these guys? What's the history of what we call yoga today, like yoga asana? There are people who write about that, who've taken that up as their academic subject. That's just something that happened while I was there. Characters like [Krishnamacharya](#) and [Pattabhi Jois](#) and [B.K.S. Iyengar](#) who's a famous name in all of that. (20:00) Those guys were largely still in Pune or in Madras when I was studying in India, then they kind of brought their stuff to the West.

**DG:** And then you get people like John Friend. . .

**DB:** [John Friend](#) and [Rodney Yee](#) and [Francois Raoult](#) – these were all people who studied with Iyengar in Pune. They're in Pune doing Hatha Yoga with Iyengar when I was in Madurai studying Tantra and learning Sanskrit and speaking Tamil. We had nothing to do. . . .That world had nothing to do with my world.

**DG:** So, in your world, what is yoga?

**DB:** Yoga was the practical esoteric methodology of applied religion. I mean, if yoga meant engagement it meant application, it meant method. And, in that sense, it meant the study of how to take ideas, values, insights, claims, and apply them somatically, cognitively emotionally: how to put them into action, or into your life. That would apply to ritual, to study, to mythology, to esoteric practices. That's what yoga was. Yoga was the application of this visionary, philosophical religiously encoded symbolic world into practice. And the practice would be somatic and cognitive and ethical and practical, in terms of living your life. And most of that was learned textually, contemplatively and ritually.

**DG:** And there is, you mentioned earlier, pluralism. What you're describing to me were different ways of living. There is a pluralistic component there.

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**DB:** Well, because yoga means application, there were Buddhist yogas and Hindu yogas and Jain yogas and Sikh yogas – everybody's using the word. And they're all, in effect, using the word to mean: "This is what we do and this is how we do it." And the "it" on the other end of that, is: what we think; what we believe; what we conjure to be possible in bodies; and what are our cognitive, spiritual and intellectual goals; how do we organise our lives? What's the practical implications of . . . . If we have these stories and rituals and practices, how does that change our everyday lives? How do we live? How we go about our ordinary lives, our moral lives, our intellectual lives? That was what. . . . So yoga applied in every religion in India, it was just the word people used for method, application, how we do what we do, how we engage, how we connect.

**DG:** And you've spent a significant amount of time, now, doing public engagement with people who may not know the scholarly issues you and I have been discussing.

**DB:** Oh no, none of it! The vast majority of people, who are sort-of my weekend job, are people who got introduced to yoga simply as asana. Now that's changing too, because over the last fifteen years of that, I would say. . . . Twenty years ago, yoga was nowhere near the sort of simple, mainstream place it factors into our contemporary society. I mean I call it "Aisle 11a" now. When you go to the Wegmans grocery store in Rochester, yoga is in Aisle 11a. It's like "outdoor goods", "Seasonal", "yoga". So, how much more mainstream can you get? It's not even in the gym, it's in the grocery store! So, most of the people I meet who do yoga came in through that way. They came in through a yoga studio or a gym, practicing asana. What happened fifteen or twenty years ago is that that same nascent crew, which was far from the mainstream, was still interested in things Indian. They were still interested in that old sense of all the meanings of the word yoga. Now, they had no clue of what that was about, and that's how I got involved. They were just curious. "We do yoga. What's that?" Well, Niagara Falls! That's just going to come tumbling over in volumes of history and curiosities expressed in texts and sources and ideas. And somehow there's still some small segment of that population that still asks me that question. And their rooms are full- such as it is- with people for whom yoga is just their asana practice.

**(25:00)** And that asana practice creates this surrogate community that often substitutes – in our fragmented, secularised, less religious, less institutional world – for the kinds of communities that even my parent's generation associated with the church, or the rotary club, or the Boy Scouts, or the Book of the Month club. People go to yoga studios and they have. . . . And since we don't have those other kinds of institutional, pre-created structures for us – you know, you went to the church or your

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father was a Mason or something – you go there, now. And so, yoga studios and these sorts of environments are not only places where they get their asana practice – which they're still principally interested in – it's where they meet their friends, where they meet like-minded people. And then they all say, "Well, what's yoga?" And then some bright light says, "Well, we could have an event, we could ask somebody who knows about that."

**DG:** Professor Brooks we're basically out of time, but if you could say briefly – you've mentioned your public work but what is your new scholarly project, if you have one?

**DB:** Oh yes. So I parley the two together because I've always thought that the vanity and self-perpetuation of scholarship, at a certain level, is just more and more of itself. It really does very little good for the world, in a certain way. And I came from an environment where we wanted to do something in the world, we wanted to build schools, we wanted to help people, we wanted to give people in India a chance to study their culture, or to have a good life, or to get an education: very simple kinds of things. So I took this out of the university environment of learning and parleyed that into opportunities to take people to India and then two pieces happened. The first is, they get a great experience and we do things like build schools and send children to school, and take care of folks. That's the simple way of putting it. But also, that means that I get to spend a great deal of time on the ground in India. So, my new projects have to do with an extension of the goddess traditions that I was working on in the '80s. And now I'm focussed on the furtherance of that mythology as it takes place in pilgrimage in South India. So there are these whole seasons of tens of thousands of people on the road – especially in Tamil Nadu – who are going to Shiva temples and Ganesha temples and Muruga temples and then to this character named Ayyappa. And I'm following all of those pilgrim paths and tracing history, language, sources, philosophy and literature into the anthropology of the practices of pilgrimage.

**DG:** Professor Brooks thank you for your time. And pleasant voyages.

**DB:** Thanks a lot.



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