Reflections on a Special Relationship with Mircea Eliade

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Abstract

The author summarizes a relationship he had with Mircea Eliade in the 1970s and 1980s.

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Perhaps one of the most personally rewarding experiences for me was the relationship I had with Mircea Eliade. I worked as his research assistant for over five years after receiving my Ph.D. In college, I had read his book on Yoga which was influential in my goal to better understand the nature of meditation experience.

I had practiced a yoga meditation in college and graduate school and had developed the ability to “raise” the kundalini. None of my fellow students or professors had any experience personally in dealing with advanced meditative states of consciousness so I sought to meet with Dr. Eliade to discuss his book and share impressions I had with meditation.

I remember writing him a letter requesting a meeting with him. To my delight, I received a letter of response several days later stating he would be happy to meet with me. I remember entering a small room filled with the pleasant scent of pipe tobacco with books and papers filling most of the office space. I sat down and described my experiences and Mircea listened with great interest. When I was done, he confessed to me that he was surprised that a person from the West could experience what I had described (going into samadhi via yoga practice). As a colleague of Jung’s, he had embraced the belief held by many scholars at the time that the spiritual practices associated with yoga practice was reserved for people who lived in the East and that the West had a different spiritual tradition that embraced Western religious traditions. By comparison, he, himself, had spent time in India practicing yoga and had an experience there that impacted on his own sense of “ego” many years ago.

As time went on, I learned more about the man whose work on Yoga was the first major scholarly contribution to the subject matter in the West. I remarked to him that based upon my experience and studies of the religious literature, psychologists had provided a less than scholarly effort to elucidate the phenomenology of meditation, generally due to a lacking knowledge of methods (inclusive of hermeneutics and knowledge of languages) used in the history of religious tradition to explore this phenomena. He listened attentively and discussed the work involved in providing accurate, detailed information on the subject of yoga. He remarked that it took him some eight years to write the book on yoga and had an experience there that impacted on his own sense of “ego” many years ago.

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Address: Mike Maliszewski received his Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Chicago. He went on to develop the world’s largest behavioral medicine program in Chicago which offered an accelerated model of treatment in terms of approach and outcome, a format that was later adapted for procedural use by the AMA and APA some 15 years later. He is currently affiliated with Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School. Received June 30, 2011. Revised June 30, 2011. Accepted Sept 3, 2011.
psychologists spending a year or so writing a very general book on the same subject. I remind the reader that there was a book published that essentially consisted of his list of publications which included dozens of books and hundreds of papers. His writings included novels and other literary works in addition to the scholarly pieces for which he is best known.

Aside from the rigor of his scholarship, I was deeply impressed by Mircea’s lack of egotism which often dominated other scholars in academia of far less renown. Here was an international icon in the leagues of Freud, Jung and (Joseph) Campbell who exhibited warmth, had a thirst for intellectual inquiry, shared his knowledge with others on an equal status, and generously gave of his time, despite international requests for his attention and expertise.

I was involved in two research projects at the time dealing with spiritual aspects of martial arts and human sexual experience. Mircea met with me regularly to discuss my work, suggesting resources and individuals to consult as my work progressed. He offered to let his name be associated with contacting a thousand scholars internationally to provide input to the sexuality project. Over 80% responded. He was also the first person with whom I discussed my meeting with the Dalai Lama in Bodh Gaya, India and other tantric practitioners where I was investigating sexual practices within Hindu tantrism and Buddhist Vajrayana. As to the martial arts work, he reviewed my manuscript just prior to having it formally submitted to a publisher, commenting that it was “so erudite!”, and offered to write a preface to the book for me. His complement still amazes me as I had never expected it, although it had taken 10 years to put the work together. Regrettably, he died just prior to publication acceptance and his partially completed preface was published in a professional journal instead, with a more academic version of the work. His death was deeply felt by me. To this day, I have seldom seen anyone in academia who possessed the intellectual rigor or personal generosity he displayed with me.