The culture of fin-de-siècle Russia was replete with interest in the occult, spiritualism, and the religions of the Far East, and curiosity about the mystical infused all tiers of society. One prominent figure among those influenced by the spiritual was Konstantin Stanislavsky himself, notably during 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. Reflecting on past artistic work, he began to organize years of his notes on acting and included several notions drawn from Eastern mysticism in general and yoga in particular into his System. Given that important yogic elements were present in the System at its very inception, knowledge of the intersections between his System and yoga is necessary for a full understanding of Stanislavsky’s technique. 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 practices in order to help actors transcend the limitations of the physical senses and tap into higher levels of creative consciousness and, ultimately, inspiration.

What artistic concerns led Stanislavsky to explore yoga, and what social and cultural influences shaped his understanding of it? From exactly what yogic disciplines did he borrow, and how does his notion of yoga differ from other branches? Perhaps most important, what texts influenced Stanislavsky’s thinking about yoga, and, in his published works, does he borrow from them? In this chapter, I propose to answer these questions by demonstrating the extent to which popular trends associated with the Russian Occult Revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries influenced Stanislavsky and, specifically, to show how a collection of books on Hindu philosophy and yoga attributed to one “Yogi Ramacharaka” were instrumental in shaping not only Stanislavsky’s understanding of yoga but, ultimately, the System itself.
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 an assertion made in 1872 by the materialist 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” (2000: 505). 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 2000: 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” (Hoover 1981: 59). 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” (1996: 177). 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.

(qtd in Borovsky 2001: 167)

When she was over 40 and wished to play against her established image of the ingénue, 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” (1997: 226). Although Komissarzhevskaya’s physically animated style of acting was unsuited for the motionless stage compositions that were integral to symbolist productions (Borovsky 2001: 183), 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 religion as much as his Russian counterparts had: “[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” (2004: 453).
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*. 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” (SS I 1988: 354). 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?

(SS I 1988: 361)

Since the actor’s body is itself the obstacle here, Stanislavsky urged that actors 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 actors separate from matter, become incorporeal? We must search for this! It must be developed for ourselves.

(SS I 1988: 356)

In suggesting that actors become “incorporeal,” Stanislavsky distinguishes body from soul and concludes that great performers must surpass those limits 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!” (SS I 1988: 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.

(SS I 1988: 374–5)
In contrast to both Strepetova, who believed her talent was God-given and rejected systematic approaches to her craft (Schuler 2000: 515), and Komissarzhevskaya, who dreamed of founding an acting school in which “theatrical acting will not be taught” (Borovsky 2001: 211), Stanislavsky regarded rehearsal as “laboratory work” (SS 1988: 428) in which to test his theories. His endeavor to bring yoga into his System exhibits a desire to join mysticism and science holistically. Yogic and occult philosophy offered him a holism that Western rationalism alone could not.

The Occult Revival of the Silver Age

A spiritual crisis began to pervade Russia in the late 1800s as a result of

[t]he fading appeal of the official Orthodox Church, the spiritually unsatisfying atheism and positivism of the intelligentsia, the destabilizing impact of the rapid industrialization of the 1890s, political upheaval, cultural disintegration, and the association of rationalism and materialism with the West.

(Rosenthal 1993: 6)

All of those elements “combined to create a climate of personal confusion and religious quest which was receptive to the occult” (Rosenthal 1993: 6). Meanwhile, in the US and Western Europe, similar factors gave rise to the Occult Revival, a movement whose members, as Edmund B. Lingan explains, “combined theatre with an early-modern legend concerning Plato’s involvement in a primordial religion to the end of constructing and disseminating new esoteric religions and spiritual systems” (2010: 367). Lingan goes on to reveal that “numerous self-proclaimed spiritual teachers proposed new theories about the relationship between human beings and the supernatural [...]. Theatre, it seems, was often included in the blend of disciplines upon which the movements of the Occult Revival were based” (2010: 369).

A major figure of the Occult Revival was the French occultist Edouard Schuré (1841–1929) who claimed “that Plato had been empowered with supersensible perception by a drama that he saw performed as part of his initiation into the mystery religion that was practiced in ancient Eleusis. [...] If properly reconstructed, this ancient and spiritually-efficacious theatre could be revived in the present” (Lingan 2010: 368). Following the Revolution of 1905, Schuré’s works (along with those of other prominent European occultists) were published in Russian and “appealed to Russian seekers of a higher harmony that could transcend the social fragmentation, class conflict and cultural chaos of their time” (Rosenthal 1993: 10). By the end of the nineteenth century, apprehension about such social 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 Soloviev, the composer Scriabin, and the poets Maksimilian Voloshin and Andrei Bely all “read their way through the classics of the East – the Mahabharata, the Rig Veda and the Upanishads. At the
same time, the books of Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda and Yogi Ramacharaka [sic] began to be published” (2000: 136).

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 Krayini” (1869–1945), were instrumental in popularizing alternative spirituality (Maslenikov 1942: 172; 1952: 128–9). In 1901, the Merezhkovskys, along with writers Dmitry Filosofof (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 (Maslenikov 1942: 172–4).

Interest in the occult also flourished as a partial result of the 1905 Revolution, which had 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 (Rosenthal 1997: 23). After 1909, and following Russia’s war with Japan, interest in countries of the Far East escalated as well, and numerous occultists developed ideologies that placed great emphasis on the religions of the East. For example, during that 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 (Rosenthal 1997: 21). 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.

Occultism intrigued certain artists in Stanislavsky’s social and professional circles. As early as 1899, Maxim Gorky (1868–1936) became aware of Theosophy, a new religious movement (NRM) based primarily on the philosophies of Brahmanism and Buddhism (Agursky 1997: 267). 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 (Washington 1993: 32–3). 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, with the founding of the Russian Theosophical Society in 1908, captured the Russian imagination. Although Gorky was initially critical of Blavatsky, by 1912 he had called for the Russian publication of her entire body of writing (Agursky 1997: 267).

Another prominent artist of the times who was deeply devoted to Eastern mysticism was the painter and poet Nikolai Konstantinovich Roerich (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 (Decter 1989: 79). 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 (McCannon 2000: 278, 292). 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 he had access to a variety of sources, both classic and contemporary, from which to glean information on yoga and Eastern spirituality.

Sources, the First Studio, and the spiritual underpinnings of the System

By 1913, Russia had 35 functioning occult organizations, and the country saw upward of 30 esoteric journals published between 1881 and 1918 (McCannon 2000: 295n). The Moscow Art Theatre itself 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 an Indian Yogi, to whom Stanislavsky refers only as “Suravardi,” to speak on Hinduism to the members of the company. The production, however, was canceled (Carnicke 2009: 175, 233n).

According to A.L. Fovitzky, Stanislavsky drew on yogic practices to enhance his own 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.

(1923: 42)

Fovitzky further notes that Stanislavsky’s students and colleagues appreciated his exercises inasmuch as “there is an Oriental element in the Russian soul” (1923: 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 holism, 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 actors were not rabbits for experimentation” (SS I 1988: 376). Still, despite such resistance, Stanislavsky continued to include yogic techniques throughout the following years. In 1908, he held sequestered rehearsals of Turgenev’s A Month in the Country, in which he focused on how to convey the inner life of the characters through the “invisible radiation of creative will and feeling” (SS I 1988: 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” (Melik-Zakharov and Bogatyrev 1963: 51). 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.

Stanislavsky established the First Studio of the Moscow Art Theatre in 1912 to develop the System by conducting practical experiments in the context of rehearsal. He appointed Leopold Antonovich Sulerzhitsky – “Suler” to his friends – (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” (SS I: 437). Besides being familiar with Eastern religions, Suler was a pacifist and a “fervent Tolstoyan” (SS I 1988: 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 Suler and, in turn, Stanislavsky along with the members of the First Studio. In his account of the journey from Russia to Canada, which Stanislavsky had read before hiring him (Carnicke 2009: 172), 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.

(1982: 97)

“[O]ne 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” (97).

Under Suler’s leadership the actors of the First Studio drew from yoga in their acting exercises. For example, Studio member Vera Soloviova recounts that they worked on perfecting concentration and sending “rays” of prana to each other (Gray 1964: 211).

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. That a number of the yogic exercises used in the First Studio (particularly the exercises in radiating prana) come from books in a series attributed to “Yogi Ramacharaka” is not down to chance, but rather relates to a vacation to France that Stanislavsky took with his family in July 1911, well before the Studio was founded.
His son Igor’s tutor, Nikolai Vasilievich Demidov (1884–1953), was a medical student who would eventually abandon that pursuit to join the First Studio as an actor and yoga teacher (Carnicke 2009: 170, 232n). The young man presented to Stanislavsky two of Ramacharaka’s books, *Hatha Yoga* and *Raja Yoga*, asking, “Why invent exercises yourself, and why look for words to name that which has already been named?” (qtd in Carnicke 2009: 170).

Although Stanislavsky’s most detailed study of yoga occurred in the first quarter of the twentieth century, he apparently continued to find it useful, devoting chapter ten on communication (*obshchenie*) of *An Actor’s Work on Himself, Part I* to exercises identical to those Ramacharaka offers. In that chapter, 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” (SS II 1989: 338, italics his). In the corresponding chapter of the 1935 typescript that he sent to Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood as she prepared her own translation (*An Actor Prepares*), 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.

(Stanislavskii 1935: 9; Stanislavski 1936: 187)

Here, he indirectly references *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 [sic]” that “radiates strength and energy to all parts of the body” (1904: 151, 158). In addition, Stanislavsky references *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” (1904: 161). 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” (Stanislavski 1936: 187); in so doing, she obfuscates Stanislavsky’s belief about the use of such energy to establish unspoken external communication with one’s partner and the audience. In the subsequent 1938 Russian version, published in the Soviet Union, the term disappears completely.

In the West, not only such abridgment but also the absence of scholarly notes has obscured yoga’s presence in Stanislavsky’s acting manuals. For example, Hapgood’s translation of Stanislavsky’s second acting manual, which she entitles *Building a Character*, 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” (Stanislavski 1949: 47). Likewise, Jean Benedetti correctly uses the word “energy” in his own translation of that volume (Stanislavski 2008: 365). 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 the terms “muscular energy” and “energy” (SS III 1955: 459).5 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” (459).

The fourth volume of the Collected Works, An Actor’s Work on a Role, provides substantial annotation in support of Stanislavsky’s use of yoga and even identifies Ramacharaka as one of his sources (SS IV 1957: 495–7).6 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” (SS IV 1957: 495, 71n). Thus, the lens of Soviet ideology inaccurately portrays Stanislavsky as favoring the scientific over the spiritual, and creates the illusion that, after exploring yoga, he dismissed it as “idealistic.” But the fact that he explicitly invokes prana in his typescript to Hapgood 23 years following his experiments in the First Studio provides evidence that Stanislavsky continued to regard yoga 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

The Occult Revival seized not only the Russian imagination, but 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 NRMs. 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” (1993: 25), then one person who satiated that appetite was the “lawyer-turned-metaphysician” William Walker Atkinson (1862–1932) (Melton et al. 1990: 502).

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. Also, under the pen name “Yogi Ramacharaka,”7 he wrote a collection of books on Hinduism and yoga, which gained him international reputation and which all remain in print today.

Atkinson’s Ramacharaka series covers a wide range of popular occult topics including life after death, clairvoyance, psychic healing, Christian mysticism, and general introductions to yogic philosophy, plus translations of and commentaries on the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads. Claiming that his own system of yoga is “Eclectic [sic] in nature and derivation,” Atkinson-as-Ramacharaka does not favor
one specific branch of yoga over another (1909: 115). 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.” 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” (Wegner 1976: 89). As Helena Roerich observes, it is the Ramacharaka books themselves that offer such second-hand 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” (Roerich II 1967: 400). Since Stanislavsky neither spoke nor read English, he relied on Russian translations of Hatha Yoga; or, The Yogi Philosophy of Physical Well-being, and Raja Yoga or Mental Development.

Though often distinguished as separate practices, Hatha yoga and Raja yoga are mutually dependent, as is emphasized in the fifteenth-century manual known as the Hatha Yoga Pradipika: “Raja Yoga will not be complete without Hatha, nor Hatha without Raja Yoga. Therefore practice the pair to perfection” (Svatmarana 2002: 51). In Hatha yoga, consistent practice of postures (asanas) and regulated breathing (pranayama) ensures bodily health, strength, and flexibility, enabling one “to balance the flow of solar and lunar energy in the human system” (Iyengar 1979: 519). Perhaps most importantly, practicing Hatha yoga prepares one for the stillness required to meditate, and only through mastering meditation can the aspirant succeed in Raja yoga. Thus, Hatha is an essential part of Raja yoga, which mandates that the aspirant sequentially master eight stages, or “limbs,” many of which bear a distinct resemblance to acting exercises. 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), followed by the ultimate goal of Raja yoga: the state of samadhi, in which the aspirant achieves “union with the Supreme Universal Spirit, by becoming the ruler of one’s own mind by defeating its enemies” (Iyengar 1979: 528).

Just as the yogi’s mind encounters numerous enemies, so does the actor’s creative spirit. For Stanislavsky, “Forcing is [the actor’s] most dangerous enemy.” He warns, “it is dangerous to force any aspect of our subtle, capricious, complex creative nature. It takes pitiless revenge on what we see in contemporary acting” (2008: xxviii). Here, Stanislavsky emphasizes that “forcing” something to respond can yield only one result: physical, mental, or emotional tension and resistance and, hence, unnatural behavior on stage. He goes on to insist that an actor’s “creative process should not run counter to nature and her laws” (2008: xxviii). Ramacharaka offers a solution to the problem since “the Yogi does not have to get back [to nature] for he is already there, for he has always clung close to nature and her ways” (1906: 9, italics his). 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 is *Hatha Yoga; or, The Yogi Philosophy of Physical Well-Being*, which is concerned with the third and fourth limbs of Raja 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 direct its movement through mastery of rhythmic breath control. In *Hatha Yoga*, however, Ramacharaka neither uses the term asana, nor includes 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 cultivate relaxation, which are accompanied by a series of authentic breathing exercises for controlling prana (1904: 195–204; 101–26; 159–68). 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 [...] (qtd in Carnicke 2009: 178)

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

[M]an 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.

(1904: 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.

(1904: 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.

His awareness of the correlation between breathing and concentration dates to as early as a lecture delivered between 1918 and 1922 to the students of the Bolshoi Opera Studio:

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 rhythmical. 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.

(Stanislavskii 1947: 62)

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” (1947: 62–3). 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’” (1904: 103). Stanislavsky even stresses breathing through the nostrils as opposed to the mouth – a point to which Ramacharaka devotes a chapter of *Hatha Yoga* (1904: 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. Ramacharaka’s *Raja Yoga or Mental Development* addresses dharana and dhyana. The aspirant 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* Ramacharaka focuses on the subconscious as he offers 12 lessons on how to sustain concentration and to tap into higher consciousness through meditation.

Stanislavsky includes detailed yogic exercises for developing concentration in chapter five of *An Actor’s Work on Himself, Part I*, entitled “Stage Concentration” (vesenicheskoe vnimanie). Not coincidentally, Ramacharaka devotes the fifth lesson of *Raja Yoga* to “Cultivation of Attention,” and his influence on Stanislavsky here 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 (SS II 1989: 155–8; Ramacharaka 1906: 114–18). Stanislavsky, however, adapts the exercises to the stage, incorporating them into his famous exercises in “Circles of Attention” (krugi vnimaniia), which are designed to cultivate the “public solitude” (publichnoe odinochestvo) necessary to both concentration and the eradication of an actor’s self-consciousness (SS II 1989: 158–63). 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?!’” (SS II 1989: 152). 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” (1906: 111–12).

Ramacharaka and Stanislavsky highlight the same key ideas regarding the cultivation of attention, yet Stanislavsky fashions them more specifically to his purpose. Ramacharaka observes, 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.

(1906: 100)

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” (SS II 1989: 167). 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.

(SS II 1989: 170–1)

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” (SS II 1989: 171). 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)” (2009: 227). 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 a 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. In one of these manuscripts, Stanislavsky includes a detailed discussion of the superconscious, in which he frequently paraphrases the Raja Yoga (SS IV 1957: 155–60; SS IV 1991: 140–5). For example, in his discussion of the actor’s unconscious creative process, Stanislavsky quotes from two of Ramacharaka’s own Western sources: “Professor Elmer Gates says: ‘At least ninety percent of our mental life is subconscious,’” and “[Henry] Maudsley claims, that ‘consciousness does not possess even one-tenth of the functions usually attributed to it’” (SS IV 1991: 140; Ramacharaka 1906: 149, 174, 176). 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 (Stanislavski 1961a: 81–4), and she retained his references to Gates and Maudsley in the typescript. 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” (Stanislavski 1961b: 274).

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 the poet 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” (Vinogradskiaia 1987: 72). 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” (1906: 226).

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” (1906: 230; his emphasis). 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’” (SS IV 1991: 143). In addition, 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” (SS IV 1991: 140).
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, the highest state of consciousness being 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 clear spiritual, and even theological resonance, Stanislavsky illustrates that principle with his concept of “I am” (*La esm’*), a state in which the actor is completely immersed in the circumstances of the play and is at one with the role, 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” (SS IV 1991: 441). Thus, Stanislavsky’s “I am” is a unified state of actor and role that echoes the yogic *samadhi*. 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” (SS II 1989: 439).

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’” (1906: 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.

(SS IV 1991: 142)

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. To heighten understanding of Stanislavsky’s spirituality, itself ever subject to change and development, breathes new life into Stanislavsky’s teachings in the twenty-first century.

Notes
1 An earlier version of this chapter appeared as White (2006).
2 Here, “occult” refers to ideologies or new religious movements (NRMs) founded in the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries by charismatic leaders who claimed to possess secret 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 systems).
3 Hoover refers to Strepetova’s Katerina in Alexander Ostrovsky’s The Storm.
4 Translations from Russian sources are mine unless otherwise noted.
5 The note is omitted from the SS III volume republished in 1990.
6 See especially notes 71, 77, 78, 79.
7 For purposes of clarity, I use the name “Ramacharaka” when citing the books attributed to him.
8 Roerich was aware of Ramacharaka’s true identity (Roerich II 1967: 21).
9 Point “d” does not appear in Carnicke 2009.
10 Rose Whyman notes that Stanislavsky’s notion of the superconscious, unconscious, and subconscious mirror German philosopher Edouard von Hartmann’s “three layers of the unconscious”: “the absolute,” “the physiological,” and the “relative or psychological” respectively. “Here is the source of Stanislavsky’s tri-partite idea,” she contends, “although perhaps it is indirect. […] The same idea exists in von Hartmann and clearly the writers of Ramacharaka’s books mixed yogic traditions with more contemporary ideas” (2008: 89).

Bibliography


