

PREFACE

It was the first session of a writing seminar on the Enlightenment, and my students were eager to show their enthusiasm for the subject. One student was particularly vocal. As a yoga teacher, he announced, he had been on the path to enlightenment for years. Another student chimed in, reporting details of her daily meditation practice.

Sparing me the task, other students who remembered enough of their high school history classes (and had read the course description) cleared up the misunderstanding. Relieved but somewhat irritated, I wrote off the confusion as an example of how language can, à la Sapir and Whorf, shape our perception of the world. Surely, the same misunderstanding would not have occurred in a German language seminar on *Aufklärung*—although different double entendres might have come up in that course. And did the need to explain the term “Enlightenment” not perhaps also signal, more than its deplorable decline, a welcome shift from a monolithically Western-centric perspective in secondary education?

A few sessions later, class discussion turned to Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy*, and my yoga instructor was triumphant: so it was meditation, my student concluded, that was the key to enlightenment "in that other sense" (of the age of reason) as well? Another example, I thought, of the malignant genius of language. But the series of coincidences was indeed striking. Concerns with the imagery of illumination and with meditation are, after all, not the only overlaps between the semantic fields of Eastern spirituality and Enlightenment rationality. Attention and mental clarity are invoked in both areas, and the "eye of the mind" belongs as much to the metaphorical repertoire of seasoned yogis as to that of Descartes and Locke. What if one took these resonances seriously and considered Enlightenment "in that other sense" to be based on a form of psychophysical practice as well?

That I did not immediately dismiss this thought was in part due to the currency of the concept of "cultural techniques" in recent German media theory, which has shifted the spotlight of theoretical discussion to the practices that precede and consolidate formal systems of communication and action. Certainly, whatever practice my students had integrated into their daily routines had little in common with what Descartes described in terms of meditation. The Cartesian meditations and the paradigm shift they exemplified were certainly part of a very different "culture of attention" than that of Eastern spirituality—but a culture that could perhaps likewise be described by the way it organizes individual and collective attention.¹ Perhaps the specific difference between the cultures of attention that clashed in my seminar was the reason my students, like so many post-Enlightenment subjects, yearned for the different kinds of focus, attentiveness, and discipline promised by the practices of yoga. My teaching that day was not the most focused, but I left class with a thought that injected a fresh dose of thinking into my project. The result is the book that follows.

1. Assmann uses the term "culture of attention" in analogy with the phrase "memory culture" in "Die Aufmerksamkeit Gottes," 69.