

Yoga, change and embodied enlightenment

Though it has been claimed that modern yoga retains little of its origins of religious austerity, I will argue that even if yoga as a physical practice has taken a strong position among the modern fitness trends, there are still important links to the philosophical and religious traditions of India – not least in the minds of many of its practitioners.¹ Reorientations of these traditions to more modern settings have an impact on the practitioners' bodies, and the embodied experience of the practice in turn influences yoga.

I WILL ARGUE THAT THE PRACTICE OF ASHTANGA YOGA represents an embodiment of a religio-spiritual practice, which for the dedicated practitioner is an encompassing disciplining of both body and mind. Though the religio-spiritual interests of many aspiring yogis aren't necessarily purely Hindu in origin, they are spiritual in pointing towards 'higher meanings and authorities'. It is a daily routine, and as the practice and its patterns are inscribed into the practitioners' bodies, they are changed and tend to be more susceptible to the more encompassing philosophical and religious moorings of the practice. Especially the more experienced practitioners tend to be influenced by the philosophy. As a physical and a spiritual practice yoga has become a generator/catalyst of change for some practitioners. Though, there are various reasons for practising yoga, spanning at one end a wish just to get in shape and at the other a de-

sire to reach *moksha* – liberation from the wheel of rebirth – at either end of the scale yoga is perceived to make important changes. For some, the practice is also motivated by life difficulties, including feelings of alienation, and loss. Others are searching for truer, 'more authentic' selves. In this context yoga, and the perception that it is based on the ancient wisdoms of India, seems to offer a way to achieving a more harmonious experience of being in both one's own body and the world. The body, and its external appearance and conduct, can be a more tangible means of gauging one's own (and others') progress. The healthy, fit and youthful body becomes a symbol of the practitioner's dedication to the practice and the disciplined mind. It becomes a symbol of a healthy mind and a moral being, or even of moral superiority. The yoga body as such tells the story of a personal transformation of bodies and minds in an interchange between the ancient philosophies of India, human bodies and the disciplined practice of yoga.

The practice

'Practising yoga for the sake of one's health, a firm body, or enjoyment is not the right approach' (Jois 2002: 26) is a statement made by Shri K. Pattabhi Jois, the founder of modern Ashtanga Vinyasa (or simply Ashtanga) yoga as practised worldwide today. I have done fieldwork among people who travel to Mysore, India, to do yoga. Most of these people go there to practice Ashtanga yoga at the Shri K. Pattabhi Jois Ashtanga Yoga Institute (KPJAYI), established by Pattabhi Jois in 1948. Ashtanga Yoga is often described as a dynamic and physically very demanding yoga practice. There are various views of this tradition or style of yoga. On the one hand, the *asanas* – the postures – and the physicality of the practice are said to be of

¹ This article is an compilation of two separate conference papers, one which was presented at 'Empowerment and the Sacred: An Interdisciplinary Conference' in Leeds, UK, 24–26 June 2011. The other was presented at 'Commun(ica)ting Bodies: The Body and Religion Conference' in Graz, Austria, 15–17 February 2012.

second or lesser importance than 'pure' meditation or philosophical or a *bhakti* – devotional – practice. Ashtanga yoga is seen – stereotypically by practitioners of some other yoga styles – as a rather narcissistic practice for young and healthy people (men), and besides, being too much concerned with the practice of the body will lead the practitioner astray (Jois 2002). On the other hand Ashtanga is seen as a very pure practice, and one reason Pattabhi Jois established it (and developed it along these lines – according to some of my informants), is that learning the *asanas* is the 'easiest' place to start. Ashtanga yoga, as taught by Pattabhi Jois, and later by his daughter and grandson (as well as many Westerners) is based on the Yoga Sutra of Patanjali, which is also the foundation of yoga as one of the six main philosophical schools of traditional Hinduism. Ashtanga means eight limbs, and describes the eight steps on the road to *kaivalya*, or liberation. The steps are:

- 1) *Yama* (*ahimsa*, non-violence; *satya*, truthfulness; *asteya*, not stealing, cheating or being envious; *brahmacharya*, retaining vitality or sexual fluid; *aparigraha*, moderation);
- 2) *Niyama* (*shauca*, internal and external cleanliness, or mental and physical cleanliness; *santosha*, contentment; *tapas*, discipline (of body and sense organs); *svadhyaya*, prayer; *ishvarapranidhana*, surrendering to God);
- 3) *Asana*, (the physical postures);
- 4) *Pranayama* (breath control);
- 5) *Pratyahara* (withdrawal of the senses);
- 6) *Dharana* (fixing the mind on one point);
- 7) *Dhyana* (meditation); and finally
- 8) *Samadhi* (absorption).

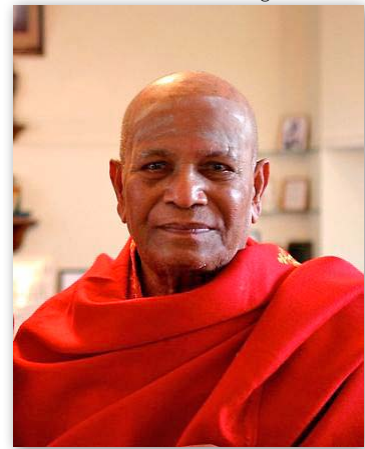
The first four can be thought of as external, while the four last steps are internally oriented. The goal of yoga in modern interpretations of yoga is also often referred to as *samadhi*, which can be defined as connecting with the supreme self, yoking together body and soul/mind, or becoming one with the One/Everything, depending on which interpretation you choose (Desikachar 1995, Jois 2005). At KPJAYI the main focus is on the third limb, that is: teaching the *asanas*, though it is said to be important to practice both the *yamas* and the *niyamas*. The *asanas* are the most easily comprehended though, especially by Westerners, who don't have the necessary background to fully delve into the more complex spiritual and philosophical issues at stake in yoga as a whole. Pattabhi Jois's take was 'Do your practice and everything will come'

(Pattabhi Jois in his preface to Miele 2007). However these things might be, my way in to this field is that physical as the Ashtanga practice may be, many of its practitioners do experience changes that can be termed 'spiritual', and that the healthy and fit body actually may become a signifier of spiritual growth as well as of physical strength.

There has been a strong orientation towards a privatization and individualization of the body and personal life in what Chris Shilling (1993) and others have called 'high modernity', or post-modernity. As the grand narratives of religion and science have lost their ability to explain the workings of the world and life in general, people have turned inwards in their search for meaning and for answers to the great questions of life. The self has become an important project for most people in high modernity. In Shilling's words:

For those who have lost their faith in religious authorities and grand political narratives, and are no longer provided with a clear world view or self-identity by these trans-personal meaning structures, at least the body initially appears to provide a firm foundation on which to reconstruct a reliable sense of self in the modern world. Indeed, the increasingly reflexive ways in which people are relating to their bodies can be seen as one of the defining features of high modernity. Furthermore, it is the exterior territories, or surfaces, of the body that symbolize the self at a time when unprecedented value is placed on the youthful, trim and sensual body. (Shilling 1993: 3)

In this context, and in searching for meaning, yoga, or an adaptation thereof, has become some kind of a trend. Yoga is an introspective and reflexive practice which encourages awareness of body and self, and it is based on the 'ancient truths' of the Hindu civilization. Though this is somewhat controversial



Shri K. Pattabhi Jois.

and debateable,² the philosophy of yoga is seen as authentic, true, and tested, and as such it is – by its practitioners at least – perceived to be a powerful tool in the search for authentic meaning in a seemingly meaningless world. Yoga represents the roots of human knowledge, and is a science/religion (depending on the inclinations of the speaker) geared towards ‘knowing thyself’ – and ultimately dissolving this same self, although that aspect is not always given equal emphasis. Yoga as a physical and introspective practice has a huge impact on the bodies of the practitioners, and linked to the ancient philosophy of Hinduism, can also change the way people think about themselves and the world. The practice extends beyond the physical practice of the *asanas* on the mat; being socialised into the cosmology associated with yoga, and being trained to identify and experience the tenets of yoga, especially the *yamas* and the *niyamas*, both during the practice and in everyday life, the truth of the philosophy can take a stronger hold on the practitioners.

In the following I’ll try to juxtapose my own experience of the practice with conversations I’ve had with other practitioners, my informant’s statements of body, interviews I have done, and social discourses/debates on the importance of the body and conduct inside the yoga community. I will explore the ways in which these people talk about their own practice and their lives in general.

The practitioners

The first time I met Margareta was over breakfast at Santosha. Since we both were Norwegian, we started talking. This was her first trip to Mysore, and when I asked her how she found the whole experience, she was a bit hesitant. It was clear that it wasn’t all good. The first thing she mentioned was a recent event when she had witnessed someone beating a puppy with a rod because it had entered the ‘wrong’ backyard. Such things deeply affected her she said. Venturing onto the topic of the practice, she first said that there were very few of the people practising in Mysore who lived up to her visions of what a yoga practitioner should be like. Many of the people she had met over the last few weeks were excessively shallow, too sociable and too competitive. To her it seemed that too much em-

phasis was being put on getting new postures and being the best at doing the *asanas*. She on the other hand had trouble being sociable because of all that had happened in the practice. The whole experience of coming to India and practising in the *shala* had been such a personal one, she had simply needed a lot of time on her own to make sense of it all. This was also partly why witnessing the beating of the dog had affected her as it did. ‘There is so much more to the practice than just the physical! There is so much happening in there [in the *shala*].’ The practice and the introspection were leaving her in a vulnerable condition with respect to other experiences. She needed so much time just to digest everything. That was one of the things she meant about people being too sociable: too few were actually taking time to really think the whole yoga and Mysore experience through! When I interjected that a lot of the people I have interviewed actually seem to be rather reflective, at least when it comes to their own practice and reasons for coming here, and have at least been grateful for the opportunity to reflect upon these things through my questions, Margareta countered that that might be one of the problems: they only think of themselves, and not about the deeper implications of the practice. Paradoxically, yoga has become a way not of dissolving the ego, but of building and strengthening it. To her coming here had become not merely an opportunity to learn yoga, but had rather forced her to turn inwards and really reflect upon deeper issues, not only in relation to the practice, but also on, for instance, the poverty and extreme differences that exist in India and the world.

Andrew told me about his introduction to yoga:

I started very slowly. My first teacher was very... I think he was more Iyengar based, very aware of structural alignment and he was very big on – how do you say... functional structure. The asana wasn’t an end in themselves, it was of how you can be comfortable in your everyday life, when you’re sitting, when you’re walking. What it’s going to contribute to a healthier, functioning... and so my first classes were just once a week for two hours, and I would be drained physically, emotionally, mentally and it was really tough, like I needed another week before I could get back in there and do it, because it was very challenging to the ego, you know. There are these tiny women doing *vasisthasana* on the side and they’re just perfectly solid and I’m shaking like a noodle in every pose. So it was a

2 As can be seen in a recent exchange in the aftermath of an *Open Magazine* article (Nanda 2011a, 2011b; Venkataram 2011a, 2011b). See also Alter 2004 and Sjoman 1999.

big change to see that I had neglected myself so much. And then gradually it got more. . . every other day, couple of times a week. And yeah, I didn't push it too much right away. As I got more into it, things like. . . I still drank a little bit at that point, and the more I got into staying in tune, the less I wanted to drink. The less I was going out, and. . . still smoking weed though. . . that's been a constant for a while. . . and yeah, I moved on from my first initial teacher to more vinyasa flow classes, like power yoga style, and that was good, that worked for a couple of years. Working through basics, and opening, building strength. Building my cardio-vascular endurance. And then about two years ago I finally worked my way up to Ashtanga, and again I was like starting over from scratch. Pretty amazing.

Both these stories link the yoga practice to everyday life, and show the perceived connections between body, soul, mind and ways of being in the world. Yoga for these people triggers reflection and introspection and its effects extend outside the physical exercise itself.

Erik's life has changed since I met him for the first time in 2009. 'The yoga takes over more and more', he says. In 2009 he had said that the yoga was mostly a break from work, and a way just to relax and unwind. After working too much back home in Sweden, coming to Mysore for the second time to practice was mainly about rebooting and stressing down, and he didn't necessarily practice that much at home. Today he dreams of opening his own Mysore programme in Stockholm – with his girlfriend, which I think might at least partly be why the yoga takes more of his time. They met in 2009 and being two dedicated practitioners makes it easier to go more deeply into the practice, I assume. Yoga is what his life revolves around these days, and that is what he really wants to do in life. He also wants to travel to Mysore for an extended period of time at some stage, and stay for perhaps six months or even longer. The dedication he has established since 2009 has brought him back to Mysore two more times – making the 2011 trip the fourth – and this time around he was rewarded with being granted authorization to teach the Ashtanga system.

Some of these changes are of course practical. You stop eating late in the evening because you have yoga classes early every morning; you stop going out and drinking for the same reason. You stop eating meat because it makes your body feel heavy, since it takes

much longer to digest, and anyway the philosophy prescribes vegetarianism as a part of *ahimsa*. From being something you fit into your schedule somehow, yoga becomes what the rest of your life revolves around. For some this happens more or less overnight as they delve deeply into the practice right away; for others it happens without themselves even noticing. 'It wasn't something I chose to do, it just happened.' Yoga and the practice become the focal point in life, sometimes to the frustration of friends and family who'll express doubt and anxiety about the time devoted to it, as was the case of Andreas, whose family apprehensively half-asked, half-stated when he went to Mysore: 'You'll end up staying there, won't you?' Other changes can be more personal and 'on a deeper level'. Some people become calmer and more relaxed, more focused. Some become more detached – be it in relation to friends and family, or to their job and career. These things become less important. Addictions are transferred from drugs, alcohol or adrenalin and extreme sports, to the mat and stretching.

The practitioners themselves are well aware of the changes that might occur (at least in their eyes) as a result of the practice and emic explanations abound. Michael tries to get hold of the paradox of the physical practice and the more life-changing experiences:

Yeah, why, I think it's all connected, like the whole three connection of the body, the mind... and then the body. . . as the body gets stronger, the mind gets stronger, as the body gets more clean, the mind gets clean. But [it] goes into your environment as well. So your living environment. . . so if you are living in a space that's also very cluttered, then you clean out that space, I believe this will also have an impact on the mind. And same with the body, if you clean up the body, and you make the body stronger, this will also have an impact on the mind and make the mind more focused and the mind stronger.

In an interview in 'Guruji' by Guy Donahaye and Eddie Stern (2010) – a book dedicated to the memory of Guruji Pattabhi Jois, and containing a collection of interviews with older and often more established and advanced students – the yoga practitioner Graeme Northfield expresses similar sentiments but states them more clearly:

The theory part is learning to really experience the body, to feel the body, to integrate the body,

and to become conscious of what we're doing and of our movement patterns. Then, especially if there are dysfunctional movement patterns that I can correct, this transforms into an emotional benefit, a psychological benefit. Working in the body with consciousness can transform us psychologically, and I believe this is the path to spiritual transformation. The mind is too slippery. (Donahaye & Stern 2010: 216.)

The experiences undergone during the session on the mat combine to structure and confirm or establish the truth of the teachings of yoga for the practitioners. For those coming into the practice without much knowledge of its philosophical and/or religious moorings, the teachings that by and by reach them are interpreted in the light of their experience of the practice, each reinforcing the other. Of course not all yoga practitioners delve deeply into these undercurrents of philosophical and spiritual thoughts and ideas, but I would argue most are touched by them to some degree. This at least is true for the people I met in Mysore (of whom most are rather strongly attached to their practice, it should be noted). And there's a common idea among the practitioners that some influence is inevitable. The more philosophically and spiritually oriented teachings of the practice acquire authority by being linked with, and by providing a commentary on, as well as highlighting, the often very personal experiences gained during the practice. These can be experiences of oneness, insights about the self or the environment, flow, concentration, meditation or similar emotions. Although the *asanas* – the physical practice – is the (at least seemingly) main focus of the Ashtanga approach, those committed to the it are also exposed to the other limbs of the practice, especially the *yamas* and the *niyamas*. In this vein the practice flows (or trickles) from the more or less purely physical practice, into the rest of the practitioner's life, where *ahimsa* and notions of purity for instance deal with such 'simple' things as dietary rules. There is also *santosha*, contentment, which states that you should not strive for anything, but be content with what you have, be it the postures from the *asanas* you are given by the

teacher, or material goods. The precept of maintaining purity of thought, which will lead to a pure mind, as well as that of contentment will, if nothing else, often trigger more in-depth introspection. All this can cater to changes and empowerment through the notion of 'knowing thyself' and a feeling of becoming not just a better (aspiring) yogi, but a better person. This whole complex can be seen in the light of John Dewey's (2005) notions of doing and undergoing, which together constitute a true (and thus potentially altering) experience. Doing the practice, and not only the physical, on-the-mat practice, but also practising the *yamas* and the *niyamas* (after all Pattabhi Jois, the founder of Ashtanga yoga, is famously quoted for stating that it's all '99 percent practice, and 1 percent theory'), and contemplating this practice, might be a life-altering experience.

On a different level, yoga as a 'spirituality of life' (Heelas 2008) is connected to yoga as a social practice, and the practitioners are socialised into an environment governed by a diffuse set of rules of conduct as well as a certain language for talking about yoga, change and life in general. There is yet another level where more 'global' flows and tendencies influence the practice. These levels – or spheres, to avoid hierarchical confusions – are interlinked and influence each other profusely, and should be seen more as analytical aspects than separate spheres. Again in the words of Heelas:

... we are looking at a spirituality 'of' and 'for' being truly human; 'of' because it is experienced

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The *shala* in Mysore.

and understood to emanate from the depths of subjective life, if not life itself; 'for' because of its practicality – its (apparent) ability to make a positive difference to subjective life and the life around us: as well as elsewhere (Heelas 2008: 17).

Approached from this angle, the physicality of the practice is crucial. Through the practice (at least part of) the philosophy of yoga is experienced physically to be true and yoga itself is embodied. That 'the truth of yoga can't be understood (intellectually); it has to be felt and experienced (physically)', is a common theme among the practitioners. The body is felt to alter, and the mind is also experienced as having been changed. These experiences themselves are seen as proof of everything that yoga promises, a stronger, more flexible body, a calmer mind, better concentration and so forth. That these changes can be claimed to be felt just because they are announced or expected doesn't alter the fact that they are experienced. In either way the experience of change proves that yoga works, which further strengthens the belief in yoga and thus alters the life-world of the practitioner. As Tim Ingold asserts, settings of practical activity also work to create dispositions. He writes that

... cultural knowledge, rather than being imported into settings of practical activity, is constituted within these settings through the development of specific dispositions and sensibilities that lead people to orient themselves in relation to their environment and to attend to its features in the particular ways that they do (Ingold 2000: 154).

So ideas, experience and body practice are linked, as is also suggested by Michael Jackson in his 1983 article 'Knowledge of the Body'. He writes:

... the habitual or 'set' relations between ideas, experience and body practices may be broken. Thus altered patterns of body use may induce new experiences and provoke new ideas, as when a regulation and steadying of the breath induces tranquillity of mind, or a balanced pose bodies forth a sense of equanimity. (Jackson 1983: 334.)

The social discourse eclipsing the practice is as such an important factor. The language surrounding the physical exercise is a language much concerned with

introspection, change and empowerment. Through being socialised into the yoga family one is trained to recognise and acknowledge the physical changes that the practice brings, and also to frame these changes in philosophical or religious language and understanding. The message is: through dedicated practice you get to know your true and authentic self. The practice will (re-)connect you to some original power source, be it God, the Universe, Everything (or to state it in a way more true to its Hindu origin; to Nothingness). You will realise that you are one with the universal soul. Practising opens up the body. These are well-rehearsed ways of framing the practice that happens on the mat, and the practitioner will, simultaneously with learning the Ashtanga sequence, be socialised into the language of the tribe, and learn how to recognise in her or his own body the pros and cons of yoga. Part of this language and social knowledge is also yoga's ability to heal the body and soul, and its power to redeem, save and change. The philosophy and practice of yoga '... become a determination or explanation of that world [the world we perceive]' (Merleau-Ponty 2002: ix). The personal experience of and commitment to the yoga practice acts as a turning point in many a life story. As Paul Heelas says, practice becomes crucial, as just being a spiritual being is of little value if this is not experienced:

Practices: to experience spirituality and to put spirituality into practice. Practices: not taken to 'construct' the 'truth' of what we are through 'laid-down' performance (as the likes of Foucault would have it), but experienced as *revealing* the truths of life to *create* life-with-a-difference (as the Romantics would have it). (Heelas 2008: 33, italics in the original.)

Practice reveals the truth – the truth of being is experienced in the practice. As seen in statements such as: 'it just changed', 'it wasn't a conscious choice', etc. Through the experiences of the practice the truth of life is revealed and thus the practice entails changes. Life becomes different and the body becomes changed.

Heelas (2008) locates spirituality in the deepest parts of life and coins the term 'spiritualities of life'. This spirituality is rooted in personal experiences and introspection and in the notion of a 'god within'. Yoga can easily be fitted into this category. Yoga teachers and books encourage one to be present in the practice, learning from the experience thereof, and not least also carrying that experience and the wider as-

pects of the practice into life off the mat. Changes are mostly traced back to the practice and what is learned of the body and the self on the mat. While 'dramatic' events might create a need for change, change comes from experience. Yoga is either a source of change-inducing experiences or is undergone in order to ease the impacts of traumatic episodes; as such alleviating changes and converting negative upheavals into positive change.

There is great faith in yoga's ability to change the body and empower the mind. These powers which people talk about, as well as the yoga texts, argue for yoga's ability to change and heal both body and soul; these beliefs are reinforced and re-established. Some argue that yoga is purely a science of the body and thus that the ability not only to change the physical body, but also its effect on the mind can be scientifically proved. There have also been studies in the West that will testify to some degree to these effects of regular yoga practice. Others are more likely to attribute yoga's capacity for healing and change to more spiritual sources. As the body and mind of the individual self is brought into harmony with the universal Self, healing will ensue.

Yoga is a practice of awareness, and the body is the vehicle for this awareness. Jennifer, an American yoga student and former dancer in her twenties, uses improvement in the practice as a sign that she is becoming stronger, not only physically, but also that she is able to change:

So I think, not only that in the daily way, but also just in poses, like for the first time ever today I really balanced myself for fifteen whole breaths [doing a head stand], and it's like. . . . I just think it's so important to have these clear and constant markers of the ability to change and grow and develop, cause it's easy to be complacent and not believe in how much, if we stay with something and we want it, we do that. And to me like, that's why Ashtanga is beneficial for me, and the self-trust instead of deferring to people outside of me.

To Jennifer, the body becomes not only tool for change, but changes in the body – both in its functionality and in its appearance – also come to signify deeper changes. The body is a tool that makes it possible to gauge what is happening in the practice. As Jennifer says, her capabilities in the practice become a 'clear and constant marker of my ability to change, grow and develop'. Instead of deferring to people out-

side herself, she turns inwards – into the body. She observes changes and how she comes to master the practice, and she builds self-trust. She elucidates:

Biggest benefit [of yoga]?: I think health. I think not meaning how my organs work or heart condition. More emotional health with relationship to my body and that. . . there's been a reconnection, I think, between mind and body, identity of the self, whether it's pain or sadness or whatever and the body, and a much greater respect and appreciation of the workings of the body. And I think a lot of that was like the dance creating separation, and the yoga just making me the relevant party in the experience. I think it has really invited internal communication, [a] sort of feedback systems, that I had, if they existed before, I had sort of like cut them off. And that's me as like everything in life. Like so crucial to living a happy, functional life. I think Ashtanga makes me physically stronger, and that helps me to be like 'oh, look I can a strong person, and maybe live that way more so.'

So the biggest benefit for Jennifer has been the reconnection she has experienced to her own body. Whereas dance, which used to be her main physical practice, created a separation, or a distance from herself, yoga has turned her inwards. Dancing, she says, is targeted at an audience, and even if dancing itself can be a great physical practice and experience, it ultimately is a practice which is turned outwards. The choreographer told her what to do, and she performed for an audience. It cut her off from herself, as for instance, in the principle that even if there is pain and minor injuries 'the show must go on'. There were a lot of former dancers in the *shala*, and many of them had tales of injuries, and more or less chronic pain when performing. Messages from the body are disregarded. Through yoga Jennifer has gotten back in touch with the feedback system of her body. She has gained greater respect for and appreciation for the 'workings of the body', as she puts it. This reattachment extends beyond aches and pains to her emotions.

Arja, a Finnish student in her early thirties, on her second trip to Mysore, links the physical practice more explicitly to spirituality. When I asked her about her last three months in Mysore, she chuckles a little and thinks for a while before answering:

[In a] spiritual, emotional and physical way, I've been like cleaning, cleansing, purifying a lot. And that has been very surprising. . . in [a] positive way actually. Like everything has been really positive. And then what I kind of received from the teachers, from Sharath and Saraswati. . . Yeah, some *asanas*. I wasn't expecting that I. . . they give me, like so many new *asanas*. That wasn't really important, but because they did that I kind of felt also good. That ok, I can do this actually. That, you know, it's ok. But then what I have received which is more important is. . . Putting in words is so. . . Like I felt I'm more part of the tradition and I understand more. And kind of the spiritual sides of yoga. Because I've had this time to be here, and just [thinking]. . . yeah, maybe like the spiritual side of the practice has come a little bit more seen to me, to myself. And I felt it more. And kind of the example that Sharath and Saraswati – how they are, how they teach. . . And think I've learned a lot of how they have been kind of treating people there, and how they are. . . Like in January there where like 200–250 people here – so many people – and still they remember, you know, what you do and the people. And like how they are. Their example, what yoga does and even like Saraswati, she is almost 70, and she is like ageless.

Having been mostly into the physical aspect of the practice, she has, to her own surprise, started connecting to the practice and the tradition in a deeper way. Her practice has begun to take on a more spiritual aspect. When asked to explain this, she continues:

Yeah, I am connected to something larger and bigger through the practice. And maybe it's also like through the practice, when you are really concentrating. . . When you have been like cleaning yourself, like your body and with the breathing and focusing [on] what you are doing. And that's why they have all these *bandhas* and *dristis* and the *vinayasa*. That those are tools for you to kind of get rid of the things and shit. And then when you keep on doing that it's like there's less everything. What I felt sometimes when practising, it's the kind of emptiness. That there's nothing. You know? But nothingness is the everything. I'm being kind of connected to everything.

So Arja too is saying something about the progress – so to speak – of her practice. She is moving beyond the mere physical practice, and getting in touch with a deeper understanding of the yoga practice through this experience.

Embodied enlightenment?

'Enlightenment' in yoga philosophy usually denotes *samadhi* or the ultimate connection with everything, but has also been read to mean a yoking of the mind and the body. *Samadhi* is also interpreted as the end of all dualities. According to Desikachar (1995) identity disappears in *samadhi* and we merge and become one with the object that is being focused on (for instance in meditation). Enlightenment in Ashtanga yoga these days is also embodied, I would argue. The practitioner is enlightened as to his or her own physicality and body. Enlightenment has become embodied and is situated within the flesh, and this actually entails a yoking of mind and body, as the mind comes to be understood as embodied, or the body 'enminded' (Ingold 2000) if you will. There is a realisation of being a body in the world.

The students are initially realising their bodies. They are both realising that they have bodies, and they are realising themselves *as* bodies, that is; that they *are* bodies. As Jennifer says, there is a reconnection between the body and the mind. They are further realising the potential their bodies and they as bodies have. The yoga practice comes to have *meaning* for the students. As Merleau-Ponty writes:

The sensible configuration of an object or a gesture, which the criticism of the constancy hypothesis brings before our eyes, is not grasped in some inexpressible coincidence, it "is understood" through a sort of act of appropriation which we all experience when we say that we have "found" the rabbit in the foliage of a puzzle, or that we have "caught" a slight gesture. Once the prejudice of sensation has been banished, a face, a signature, a form of behavior cease to be mere "visual data" whose psychological meaning is to be sought in our inner experience, and the mental life of others becomes an immediate object, a whole charged with immanent meaning. (Merleau-Ponty 2007: 144.)

Socialised into the reality of the yoga philosophy and through the physical practice it ceases to be 'mere

visual data'. As the practitioners get to know the philosophy surrounding the physical practice, they also relate their experience of this practice to the philosophy and learn to recognise the bodily changes that are parallel to the philosophical ideals. Or rather they are enabled to relate their experience to the philosophy and make sense of their physical changes and reactions in relation to the philosophy, as well as look for and feel their bodies against this background. Physical experience lends credibility to the philosophical ideas, and through the philosophy the students are helped both to legitimise their practice and make sense of what happens on the yoga mat. The physical changes that happen to one's own body might be a motivation for practising, but also *prove* the strength of the practice, and thus the philosophy that prescribes it. Through the yoga practice the body gets into shape, and thus the fit body becomes proof of the truth of yoga's power to change each person for the better. Although yoga shouldn't be a project just of the body or just of collecting new *asanas*, the strong, youthful and fit body, can become a signifier of dedicated practice, and a dedication to the (soteriological) ideal of the yoga philosophy.

Yoga as an encompassing philosophy fits the self-projects of 'bettering bodies' into a larger, meaningful whole. Health and fitness aren't sought for their own sakes within this context, at least not theoretically, but as part of an enlightenment and salvation (of self) project. In yoga the focus on the development or realisation of self, which has gained so much importance in high modernity, can be fitted into a context of higher religious or spiritual meaning. The project is no longer a project of self-aggrandisement, but rather can be termed as a project of religio-spiritual asceticism and moral cleansing. Looking good is just an unfortunate by-product of spiritual discipline. Juggling self-projects and a religious/spiritual practice is of course not easy and clear-cut, and there are constant negotiations within the yoga community about what is the correct way of practising.

Klas Nevrin (2008) argues that Modern Postural Yoga (MPY) can be a source of change and empowerment since

. . .there are complex links between movement and affectivity that can be influenced by sustained involvement with MPY practices – though certainly in various ways and to different degrees.* In summary, then, postural practice in MPY may allow the practitioners to change his or her qualitative use of move-



Mastering the body and physical empowerment.

ment: weight distribution, effort, temporality, the coordinated use of parts, and so on. This also includes a heightened attention to feeling movement itself, which will typically alter the practitioner's sense of self and body and invite for a variety of reflections regarding the nature and significance of this change. (Nevrin 2008: 124–5, *footnote omitted.)

How the whole body is oriented in space will influence our perception of our environment. Sound, scent, feeling, and sight, as well as the experience of how the body is located in space, all have impact on our being in the world, though the last one might be the least conscious. The body's location includes balance, any physical unease, orientations of up and down, right and left – all these aspects go to informing us of our surroundings. The body is the basis for all experience, and proprioception – that is, the unconscious perception of movement and spatial orientation arising from stimuli within the body itself – is an important part of this. I quote Judith Kovach:

Our awareness of the unified mass of this lived body is neither perceptual nor relational but

substantial and discrete; it is a sense neither of surfaces nor of structures but of a fundamental physicality, given neither through the rational mind nor through sight, hearing, taste, touch, or smell but through the body's response to everyday forces such as gravity and inertia that the bodily mass resists. Our sense of objecthood, substantiality, and wholeness – indeed, our sense of our own material selfhood – is neither conceptual nor perceptual but proprioceptual, constituting the mere awareness of our unitary bodily physicality. (Kovach 2002: 948.)

By doing *asana*, bodily orientation is manipulated, and gravity challenged. Thus the exploration of and experimentation with the body and our senses' proprioceptual basis might lead to more conscious way of being bodies in the world. This might happen even though the fundamentality of this proprioception might not be conscious. Yoga is usually taught in terms of being attentive of the body and what happens during the course of the practice. This will also heighten the awareness of the body in space and time. Such introspection is important.

The yoga practice is, as I have shown, said to reconnect the students with their own bodies, or to create a reconnection between body and mind. They become aware of their bodies, and they rediscover their bodies and their physicality. They re-inhabit their bodies. During the *asana* practice the body is used and enacted (Mol 2002) in new and different ways. It is twisted, turned upside down, bent, and lifted. The student gains new perspectives on his or her body, the body is experienced differently, a new feeling of strain is experienced and thus new insight and knowledge of own body might be gained. Shilling (1993) claims that

. . .the greater the knowledge we gain about our bodies and how to control them the more is our certainty undermined about what the body is and how it should be controlled. In the conditions of high modernity, our notion of the body is regularly re-examined and reformed in light of new and incoming information that is gained about the body and its changing limits and boundaries. Knowledge about the body rejoins its subject matter, having the effect, in principle, of altering the body. . . (Shilling 1993: 183.)

Though, Shilling writes about what he claims is a growing sense of a lack of control in high modernity

– and the re-examination and incoming information he writes about are largely due to technological advances – this insight can shed some light on yoga practice as well. Yoga can be a way to seek control in these uncontrollable times. Additionally, according to my interpretations, yoga can be seen as a re-examination of the body and its significance. During yoga practice there is a lot of incoming information about the body. Practising yoga, in all aspects of the practice, unfolds new knowledge about the body, and thus alters the body as the knowledge and new meaning is somatised, or 'rejoins its subject matter' (Shilling 1993).

Becoming more conscious and sensitive to the fundamentals and materiality of our own bodies creates a potential for an altered way of enacting the body. Changing our habitual behavioural patterns, and being attentive to our bodies may give rise to new experiences (Jackson 1983). New physical input, and new experiences are embodied; thus the body changes. Being aware of these changes, reflecting upon them, and also by gaining a double perspective (Bateson 2000, Bohm 1995) of being in and outside the practice, knowledge of and insight as to the workings of the body is gained. Through the movement between doing and undergoing (Dewey 1958), real experience of the body is gained, and knowledge of one's own body is unfolded (Bohm 1995). These changes in perspective happen on the mat as the student does and undergoes the practice, or as they shift between concentration/flow and reflection/conscious practice. The double view is also represented in the movement between the practice on the mat, and reflection afterwards. Much reflection, and 'sense-making' is done, for instance, in conversation with other students. Through reflection, the physical experience of the practice is made significant, and this significance is made relevant and somatised when taken back to the *asana* practice on the mat. This is thus a process of soma-significance (Bohm 1995).

From being inscribed into the body through the practice, the awareness promoted by teachers can bring this more tacit insight to the fore. The philosophy, as written and debated in the yoga community, is a context in which the body is made sense of, as well as the other way around; when the body feels the way it does and the practitioners have the physical experience of their bodies that they do, the philosophy of yoga is 'proven' to be true. The philosophy, the social discourse on yoga, and the experience of the practice, feed into and strengthen each other, and together make up the reality of yoga in the 'modern

Western context'. As they move more deeply into the practice, they move beyond the merely physical practice of *asana*, and are pulled into and are immersed in a deeper discourse of how and why. Especially in Mysore, it's hard to stay clear of the more moral and philosophical aspects of the practice. Everywhere the students are spattered by droplets of philosophical knowledge and are encouraged to search within their own experience of the practice and life in general for parallels to and evidence for it. Older students and teachers 'help' and socialise (younger) students into recognising the 'correct' experience of the practice. If you don't understand: 'Just do your practice, and everything will come!' Answers and insights are promised at a later stage, and as the practice is rooted in the yoga philosophy the students are encouraged to look into it. ■



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