

Creating meaningful space

Yoga practice transforming bodily habits of 'being-in-the-world'

Buenos Aires, the city of tango, good meat, and . . . yoga? As in many modern big cities, yoga¹ has become extremely popular during the last decades. It is everywhere; in gyms, book stores, yoga centers, multinational companies, even churches. We have hatha, swasthya, and ashtanga yoga, hot yoga, naked yoga, yoga for pregnant women, and for Catholics; the list is endless. For Dutch anthropologist Peter van der Veer (2007), modern yoga is a product of global modernization, originated in the dialogue between the Indian national movement and the western political, economic, and cultural influences. Yoga has become an item in the wide catalogue of alternative therapies, seen as a physical exercise promoting bodily and mental health, a way of life, which does not conflict with western science. For van der Veer this 'therapeutic world view' is part of global capitalism. (Van der Veer 2007: 317.)

Introduction

It is tempting to connect yoga's growing popularity with the supposed abandonment of religious traditions in occidental modern cultures and see it as one of the alternatives, marketed to fill the emptiness of non-religious life. Secularism was for long seen as a side product of Enlightenment's scientific world view, even though Eric Sharpe stated that the period between 1960s and 1970s already demonstrated the contrary: religiousness and spirituality were not disappearing from the modern society (Sharpe 1986: 296). But could yoga be seen as a new way of spirituality for those people outside of the strictly religious doctrines? During my own yoga studies in Buenos Aires, I met a bunch of devoted Catholics who com-

bined yoga practice seamlessly with their religious beliefs. Yoga is not, therefore, only a phenomenon of modern non-institutionalized spirituality, but it can also offer something for believers with no spiritual emptiness. What is, then, that 'something'?

The topic of this research arose during my own yoga studies at one Catholic university in Argentina in 2006. I had started practicing yoga some years previously in Finland, which first led me to research yoga practice in the Finnish context. My interest in the power of yoga to silence the mind, also experienced by myself, led me to examine the core reasons why some Finnish yoga practitioners had began their practice as part of my Bachelor's thesis in Finland. I found that for some of these practitioners yoga was a hobby, while for others it was a way of life. I wanted to pursue this topic further in my Master's thesis, which I completed in Argentina between 2008 and 2010. In this research I wanted to concentrate on studying those individuals for whom yoga was a way of life. Most of my ten informants referred to in this paper were part of my Master's research: some were my fellow students, some were my professors, and some were friends of them. All the informants were Argentinean, six of them were females and four were males. All my informants were Catholic yoga practitioners. I was interested in finding out how Catholics interpret yoga practice: what place yoga presents in these individuals' worldview, how spirituality and religiousness intertwine in a search for meaningful life, and how new ways to move and experience the body can change these individuals' ideas of themselves and the world. In this article I focus on presenting the core ideas of my research: the literature of bodily research in the social sciences, the Catholic concept of yoga, and the main results of yoga's transformational powers.

1 In this text I will refer to different yoga traditions that have a bodily focus, highlighting that despite their differences, the essence of the practices is similar.

Bodily perspective in social sciences

Despite yoga's growing popularity, it has received little attention as a subject of anthropological research. According to Benjamin Richard Smith, Australian researcher and practitioner of ashtanga vinyasa yoga, the approach to yoga has been primarily textual and little attention has been drawn on yoga practice itself, even though yoga is fundamentally non-textual and encourages the development of one's own experience (Smith 2007: 29–31). Smith argues that researcher's own body awareness must be part of the investigation process, helping to understand the nuance of the practice for the informants (Smith 2007: 29–31; see also Kohn 2003: 142).

Over the past two decades, the social sciences have shown awakening interest in 'bringing back the body' (Farnell 1999: 341–73). Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (1962) term of phenomenological embodiment has become commonly used in social research abandoning the traditional Cartesian dualism of mind/subject and body/object. Embodiment emphasizes the idea of culturally formed body as a bodily involvement in the real world, 'being-in-the-world', where the body and consciousness are inseparably intertwined as a perceiving subject (Csordas 1999: xiv; Persson 2007: 45). For American anthropologist Thomas J. Csordas (1990: 5) the body is not an object that should be studied in relation to culture, but the subject and the existential grounds for culture itself. According to physician and philosopher Drew Leder, the holistic body techniques could serve as a model to start 'living the body' also in the western society where the relation to it has been merely functional (Leder 1990: 5–6).

Tamara Kohn, Australian social and political sciences researcher who has studied English aikido practitioners, states that '*aikido* practice is a path, a "way" or "do" that reaches far beyond the mat for those who train seriously' (Kohn 2003: 140). In a similar way yoga, at least for some practitioners, is more than a sport. Diego, one of my Catholic informants, categorizes yoga practitioners into three groups: those who take it as a sport, those who engage in it in a therapeutic sense, and finally those for whom yoga is part of their identity. In the latter case, yoga penetrates into every part of life: the body, behavior, life style, and attitude towards life. According to Kohn (2003: 140), this kind of identity transformation is possible when the discipline is taken as a 'total practice'.



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Yoga and religious context

Modern yoga emphasizes its applicability to everyone, regardless of religion or worldview. For most of my ten informants, all Catholic yoga practitioners, it is difficult or even artificial to draw a difference between their Christian belief and yoga practice even if they are not the same. Catholicism and yoga are intertwined, seamless parts of their life.

Mary Douglas' concept of ritual purity and impurity is easily applicable to yoga where yoga practice itself is seen as purification. In yoga philosophy, impurity refers specifically to ego (reflected in mind and thoughts), which in its ignorance identifies with the material world (Douglas 1996). Mental modifications cause a variety of physical and psychological symptoms from fatigue to a lack of concentration. On the other hand, purity means focusing on the present moment, the 'spirit'. In yoga language, spirit is the true essence of the self, which, particularly in its Catholic interpretation, is connected with the idea of God. 'Living in the present' requires an ability to weed out distracting stimulations of both the mind and the surroundings. The ego is connected to mental fluctuations, which constantly bring forward a variety of illusions and extravagant fantasies.

For my informants, impurity means making mistakes, which is associated with the Catholic concept of sin: recklessly rushing after every desire and stimuli makes one lose control of one's life. Therefore, it is necessary to avoid harmful relationships, issues, habits and attitudes as well as to carry out psycho-physical practices in order to learn how to focus the attention. 'Pure' is associated with charity, integration, human completion, spirituality, self-awareness, inner

change, actions not based on results, and acceptance of the reality (God's will). Increased focus and awareness are non-rational experiences of which informants talk as 'surrender' or 'flow'.

Whatever one's religion, yoga seems to offer an experiential way to live and venerate the wholeness of being human. Yoga can serve as a method to transform the body from being merely a practical tool of one's physical life into encapsulating the entire world and attitudes to body from rational to intuitive and emotional. Corporeal world includes our biology, physicality, intellect, intuition, faith, and emotion, all as inseparable parts of our experience of unity, our identity.



Yoga can be useful also in Catholic prayer, which should not remain purely at a mental level, but as expressed by Laurence Freeman (2006), it should be simple and still worship practiced in silence.

Register of wholeness

Yoga practice is an invitation to experience our own embodiment. Bodily practices generate physical well-being, which also has a psychological effect. All yoga exercises strive for focus and purification: yoga purifies by removing unfavorable postures, habits, breathing techniques, ideas, and attitudes. Yoga is considered to purify a person at all levels: energetically, emotionally, physically and mentally, leading closer to wholeness and spirituality.

According to my informants, yoga does not generate the wholeness, but gives 'a register for it'. The true self is complete, eternal and immutable. Yoga nor any other technique is not able to alter this, but by changing one's own actions, thoughts, attitudes, and concentration, this Self can be lived and experienced. Yoga serves as a tool to calm the mind: once the posture, breathing, and thoughts are under control, the cohesive experience of self becomes possible. The experience of inner silence, described by the informants, is a non-rational experience of self. It is considered to lead towards a deeper contemplative attitude that lasts throughout life. Therefore, yoga can be useful also in Catholic prayer, which should not remain purely at a mental level, but as expressed by Laurence Freeman, English Benedictine monk and Catholic priest, it should be simple and still worship practiced in silence. Only in non-discursive silence we can experience our essential nature, which is in harmony with God, with the created world and with the whole of humanity. (Freeman 2006: 7.)

Kohn's (2003) description of aikido as a total practice fits perfectly with yoga: it is much more than just a hobby for those who take it seriously. Practitioners share diverse levels of understanding. (Kohn 2003: 152.) For the informants yoga provides an important method and experiential way in a critical moment of humanity to offer release from things such as harmful attitudes, habits, and emotional and psychological locks and lead to a deeper spiritual experience. Yoga complements, maybe too institutionalized Catholicism, with bodily practice.

Any holistic body technique² can work as yoga or aikido. For Csordas (1990), setting the body as a basis for observation and *habitus* breaks the dichotomy of subject and object, associated with mind and body. At the

same time this raises questions about other dualisms deriving from the same assumption, such as self and other or cognition and emotion. When the body is not seen as a mere object, but as an integral part of one's identity, also interaction with other people changes: the communication becomes intersubjective, from one self to another self. Csordas argues that this is the beginning of the real communication. (Csordas 1990: 35–40.)

According to Asha Persson who has studied Satyananda Yoga, focusing the attention inwards does not lead to a separation of the body and self as Leder's dys-appearance model suggests, but gives to the practitioner a sensation of their ontological unity (Persson 2007: 47). Each person interprets and gives meaning to this experience of wholeness according to his/her worldview. Such integral perception of self can lead to new kind of social interaction and commitment to life when the society is seen as a net of complete selves. For Kohn it is the otherness of the new and culturally different body techniques that start changing the perception of self, culture, society, and class whether this otherness is consciously understood or not (Kohn 2001: 163).

2 In addition to aikido and yoga there are other holistic body techniques, such as Somatic Movement, Body-Mind Centering (BMC), Feldenkrais Method, Alexander Technique, and Authentic Movement (Jussilainen 2007: 58–67).

María Carozzi, Argentinean anthropologist researching modern religious movements, suggests that non-typical ways of movement, proximity, and use of space produce experiences of discontinuity of self, which under systematic interpretation can lead to new models of personal identity (Carozzi 2002). Yoga's otherness – that is, in the western sense its non-rational and non-functional bodily experience in which the differences between subject and object, mind and body, self and world as well as self and others lose their habitual dualistic meaning – can cause discontinuity in the sense of self. Under yogic interpretations, however, these interruptions are seen as stopping the mind's movements, ego, and thus as an experience of the real self.

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Anthropologist Asha Persson (2007) examines Satyananda Yoga's social dimension through phenomenological concepts of place and space. Spatiality connects yoga practitioners' ideas of desired phenomenological state, described with such words as solidity, steadiness, stillness, presence, grounding, balance, centeredness, movement, flow, release, openness, expansion, and spaciousness. Even though many are paradoxes, in yogic thinking they are not considered as opposites, but seamless parts of the same total. That is why in yoga practice embracing one 'paradox' can help to achieve its 'opposite'. The balance between opposites is one of yoga's principal aspirations. The placeless experience of the space does not seem to be frightening for yoga practitioners as Edward Casey has argued (Casey 1993: ix). Persson describes yoga's bodily experience as 'intimate immensity' in which grounding is a prerequisite for placelessness and meditative experience, as well as for true human interaction. One's body is a place wherefrom one can start to experiment the universal space as well as other selves. (Persson 2007: 44–6, 54.)

Persson's observations of yoga coincide with my experiences as a yoga practitioner as well as my informants' descriptions of their practice. Yoga emphasizes the body, but at the same time aims to go beyond this. For Diego, one of my informants, it is dangerous to reduce yoga only to a physical level, as it 'transcends the physical'. Grounding prepares for non-physical experience, often called flowing. Liliana, another informant, describes the paradoxical meditative state where internal and external, self and the world blend: by disconnecting from the external

world, the connection with the inner, true, world becomes possible. Yoga body is a micro cosmos, reflecting the entire universe.

One thing becomes clear from the interviews: yoga seems to strengthen the meaning of the informants' life. A certain kind of symbolic language is found to complement the rational way of thinking. Informants often refer to this symbolic view as 'an increase in sensitivity'. Yoga is the bodily technique that makes a ritual devotion possible, but the devotedness depends on one's beliefs. For Clifford Geertz only symbols can enable the merger of everyday life and beliefs (Geertz 2005: 115), and the *asanas* – yoga postures – are full of meaning, hierophants, conscious or unconscious, for the practitioner. Movements themselves as rational and non-functional bodily experiences, names of the postures and theories of their impacts on all levels of human life, inner concentration and silence, throwing oneself into the moment ('flow'), and desire to live one's own spirituality, all meet in 'successful' yoga practice. According to Geertz (2005), living the religious meanings through the ritual can change a person and his/her interpretation of everyday life. Life is seen as a part of a larger reality, which modifies and supplements the first. (Geertz 2005: 115).

Even if yoga's philosophical background is completely unknown for the practitioner, the holistic body-world relation transmits through the practice. The body technique's ritual movements are never empty of meaning. According to Pierre Bourdieu



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(1977), the ritual's typical movements and postures integrate the body space into cosmic space (Bourdieu 1977: 91). Both yoga and religious worldview help to find a concrete place from which to view the world: the faith through beliefs and values, and yoga through holistic bodily experience of oneself in relation to others and the world. The repetitive experience of one's ontological unity through a frequent yoga practice can change one's identity; the body becomes a manifestation and a symbol of the union between internal and external worlds.

We all have a body, but the bodily being-in-the-world and its meanings vary from individual and culture to another (Persson 2007: 44–54). The spread of holistic body techniques should not be ignored. The popularity of these disciplines is not only a sign of the spread of cultural elements in the increasingly globalized world, but also shows a need to live a different, more holistic, bodily experience. Divergent body schema, technique's 'otherness', may modify an individual's experience of the self. The changed identity also reflects on the social interactions and the body-world relationship, deepening the commitment to life. Research on the diverge ways of movement and use of space as well bodily meanings is a multidisciplinary challenge that can expand the understanding of the human being as an active meaning maker. ■



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