

6 Empowerment and Using the Body in Modern Postural Yoga

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In this chapter, I examine a few of the ways in which the body is used and experienced in Modern Postural Yoga (hereafter MPY).¹ Particularly, I argue that taking bodily experience into account is essential to the study of contemporary yoga, especially when attempting to understand the effects of yoga practice and to explain its increasing popularity. Moreover, a requirement for fully understanding bodily experience is a problematization of the relationships between body techniques and the contexts within which these are performed and interpreted. To that end, I highlight the importance of the practice environment in an individual's experience and understanding of yoga. Finally, in light of this analysis, my suggestion is that MPY very often works to empower the practitioner, even if in a variety of ways and for a diverse range of purposes.

In the first section, I give a brief presentation of some uses of the body in MPY and then proceed to mention a few of the challenges that have to be met if we are to understand what these do and mean to the people using them. The second section analyzes the ways in which yoga may be seen as involving processes of habituation (i.e., how experience is *changed* when practitioners learn new ways of making sense of and using their bodies). The effectiveness of these techniques, however, also depends on intersubjective relations and on a host of context-specific circumstances that need to be considered as well. The relationships between these various aspects are analyzed by acknowledging both the so-called lived body and the importance of the environment. In the third section, I critically discuss the notion of empowerment, which offers one way of summarizing how many practitioners experience and interpret their yoga practice.

It should be stated at the outset that the position adopted here takes a critical stand against the ways in which many explanations of yoga rely on psychologized models of the human being. In my understanding, these models will tend to see the individual (and the psyche) as somehow *apart* from the environment (and the body), whereas ecologically oriented models emphasize the *interdependence* between individual and environment in ways that differ from the former (Ingold 2000). Even though psychologized models may have a strong explanatory power for the yoga practitioner—a fact that, of course, needs to be respected and taken

into account—I consider them limited when attempting a more comprehensive understanding of yoga. For example, I argue that empowerment depends on social situations and shared discursive practices in ways that typically remain unacknowledged from a psychologized viewpoint. Given these limitations, I attempt to further our understanding of experience in MPY through analytically including the practice environment in ways that go beyond individualistic models. However, this should not prevent us from taking a closer look at the role played by individual experience. We do not have to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Indeed, it seems that without taking embodied experience into consideration, one cannot do full justice to the nature and significance of contemporary yoga (Coney 1999). Another issue concerns the assumptions that psychologization often rely on, particularly when the person is assumed to be a “distinct unit” or “isolated self,” in effect offering an ideology of separation (Carrette & King 2005: 57, 80). In such cases, psychologization not only serves pragmatic and purportedly “private” purposes but works to reproduce views that involve highly questionable normative claims. I mention and discuss a few of these assumptions in the final section.

Using the Body in MPY

My research has mainly been conducted with people doing yoga in practice environments inspired by Tirumalai Krishnamacharya (1888–1989). His followers have played a huge role in popularizing yoga in the West, the most famous being Pattabhi Jois (b. 1915), teaching in the style of Ashtanga (Vinyasa) Yoga; B.K.S. Iyengar (b. 1918), who developed what is known as Iyengar Yoga, and T.K.V. Desikachar (b. 1938), teaching in the style of Viniyoga.² Many contemporary MPY teachers have trained in the Iyengar, Ashtanga, or Viniyoga styles before developing their own method or have simply borrowed from them. Krishnamacharya’s influence can be seen, among other things, in the emphasis on and development of postures (*āsana*), particularly by sequencing them and ascribing them specific therapeutic values.³ My research material consists of interviews, participant observation, and publications from these schools, primarily in Sweden but also in India.

Postures (*āsana*), attentive breathing (*prāṇāyāma*), and chant (*svādhyāya*, *japa*) are generally the most important practices and are typically combined in different ways. Most often the novice will begin with learning breathing techniques as an aspect of sequenced postures, but they can also be taught separately. The physical training is usually experienced as arduous and challenging for most beginners. It consists of learning sets of postures (whether sequenced or not) in which the body is stretched, softened, relaxed, and strengthened to different degrees and in various ways. Most important, however, is that the postures are performed with a particular quality of attention and precision. Postural training can thus be seen as a form of meditation in action because the many details that the practitioner has to focus on—such as tempo; aligning the breath with postures; extensions and directions; the order of sequences; names of the

postures; where to fix one’s gaze; precise muscle use; and so on—often keep the practitioner particularly focused and attentive.⁴ Postural training ends with a relaxation practice, in which the practitioner lies on the back, usually taking directions from the teacher how to relax the body completely (see Singleton 2005).

Over time, the practitioner will sometimes be encouraged to practice chanting. For example, in Viniyoga, an integrated sequence might consist of a flow of postures wherein the breath is aligned both with the body’s movement and with the chanting of a mantra. In Iyengar and Ashtanga Yoga, by contrast, chanting is more often limited to reciting dedication mantras at the beginning or ending of a practice session (or both). Quite often, however, devoted practitioners tend to become increasingly interested in learning to chant also other texts or mantras (or both). Examples include the *Gāyatrī* mantra and the *Yogasūtra* text, the latter generally considered highly important to most MPY practitioners (see Mark Singleton’s contribution to this volume), being employed both as a reference for practical and intellectual guidance and being chanted.⁵

When attempting to understand the experiential effects of these practices, I think it is helpful to distinguish between various styles of MPY because similar practices may be interpreted and experienced differently, depending on the context in which they are performed. As I attempt to show, stylistic differences are not only a matter of holding different beliefs but include the way in which a practitioner will *feel* in a particular practice environment. Many practitioners will, for example, emphasize the ways in which a particular practice environment might induce a sense of stillness or calm; a sense of belonging; an energized motivation; or a “spiritual atmosphere.” Sometimes practitioners will prefer a style that is explicitly connected to what is perceived as “traditional Indian yoga,” for example, through the use of Sanskrit names, recitation of mantras, the presence of icons, the use of incense, and the study of yoga texts. By contrast, in other practice environments, these features will be more or less absent. The stylistic differences will be important for whether the practitioner feels at home, for whether he or she has a sense of the atmosphere being right for him or her.

When we enter a Yogashala (a place for yoga classes), we encounter a number of things to which we have to respond (Lingis 1998). We are not simply entering a neutral space but a situation filled with meanings. We will, of course, carry with us ideas about what to expect, what yoga is “about,” why we are there, and so on. However, the moment we enter we will also have to respond in some way to everything we meet. Thus, if we are to encounter, say, a symmetrically arranged row of nightlights that are placed in holders made of glass and shaped like lotus flowers; a smell of sweet incense; the sound of soft, melodious Sanskrit chant from the stereo; a group of smiling, pregnant women sitting on cushions around an antique, wooden table; and, on the wall, a large picture of a Yogi meditating in full lotus—how will all this make us feel? Will we feel comfortable and calm? Perhaps we will feel solemnity? Or curiosity? Or perhaps the situation will evoke memories from past travels in India?

Any reactions will probably be mediated in terms of socioculturally acquired habits. That is to say, nightlights and lotuses will mean something because of past experiences involving similar images, situations, and objects. We will also respond to the environment in terms of felt qualities that provide us with some prereflective sense of ourselves and the atmosphere in which we find ourselves. My point is that both reflective and prereflective responses are crucially important for how a practitioner will understand the nature and effects of yoga practice.

It should, then, be helpful to thematize the various elements that are involved in a person's experience of yoga. First, artefacts and social atmospheres are likely to initiate certain responses. This will include any conversations taking place between people being present—perhaps people from an earlier session exchanging and sharing experiences of their practice. The environment will function as a setting that shapes and contextualizes experiences that will arise in the practice session proper. Thus, prior to actually performing any specific yoga techniques, there are a host of things that provide an interpretive context. Second, “the practice” itself—as it is called by most practitioners—is a highly structured routine consisting of a variety of body techniques. These uses of the body, too, will create certain reactions, both physiological and emotional, which are then contextualized by being related to pre- and post-session contexts, to previous experience, and to any acquired knowledge about yoga. In other words, contextualization will involve adapting to a practice environment that supplies both articulate concepts and vaguely felt meanings that will influence the ways in which a particular individual will interpret the experiences that arise owing to performing certain body techniques. The precise elements that constitute these processes of contextualization will differ between practice environments, even depending on the pedagogical style of a specific teacher. As we have seen, some teachers will encourage what they consider to be a more “spiritual” atmosphere (then adopting culturally relevant artifacts, forms of sociality, and discourses to that intention), which might, say, induce a sense of solemnity, or encourage a behavior that is understood to be “yogic.” Other practice environments will, by contrast, emphasize a more “athletic” style of practice, perhaps by encouraging more sports-like attitudes and by avoiding specific uses of music, chant, and imagery associated with Hinduism or India.

Yoga and Embodied Experience

How are we to understand uses of the body in MPY and the experiences that they may involve? To fully understand embodiment, as Merleau-Ponty (1962) argued, it is necessary to include the “lived body.” This means not only looking at the body from the outside—as an object being talked about in discourse or as behaviorally conducted in social and material spaces—but understanding the body itself as a locus of experience. In the following, I focus on a few of the ways in which the body is experientially involved, thereby pointing out the more common forms of experiencing that seem to be central to the motivations of

many practitioners. This is an attempt to understand why yoga is considered to be a meaningful and rewarding activity by those involved with it. We might say that the challenge lies in understanding why yoga is claimed to work against a depersonalization of the body, involving the practitioner in “modes of refined self-presencing” that make it possible to “(re)negotiate the terms and quality of engagement of the lived bodymind in its encounter with itself in the world” (Zarrilli 2004: 661). In an attempt to shed some light on this, I will distinguish between three overlapping aspects: (1) attending to movement, (2) heightened sensitivity, and (3) emotion.

Attending to Movement

A highly important aspect of contemporary yoga practice is learning to *feel the body move* and to *move the body differently*. MPY in particular enhances a direct involvement with and focused attention toward movement, thus being related to other movement studies such as the Alexander Technique, the Feldenkrais Method, Authentic Movement, or Body-Mind Centering. It is also, perhaps, related to various forms of sport, dance, and martial arts that involve a restructuring of movement. In my view, differences between these various types of activities consist not only in the learning of diverse movement patterns but in the dissimilar contexts within which they are performed, thus implying experiential variations as well. For example, the *purposes* for learning new behavioral routines are crucially important for the ways in which individuals will be affected, especially in their everyday life. Moreover, the fact that MPY involves the training of specific attentional techniques can hardly be overstated when comparing it to other movement studies.

One aspect of attending to movement is learning to intensify the experience of proprioception in general and kinesthesia in particular.⁶ This may be compared to rituals that direct the focus toward the phenomenality of the body itself, thus “targeting the sensorium of the participant,” as Judith Kovach (2002) puts it. In this function of ritual, the “natural attitudes” of the human body—its everyday postures, bearings, gestures and movements—are changed to produce different modalities of awareness, intensifying what is sometimes referred to as “the bodily felt sense” (Levin 2003: 180–1). *These modalities of body-awareness are then different as compared to the everyday*. Indeed, immersing oneself in movement can under certain circumstances, not least through diligent training, take the form of a sustained dynamic flow that is normally not experienced in everyday forms of body performance: “Experienced as an elongated or ongoing present, it is a world in which there are no before or hereafters, no sooner-or-laters, no definitively expected endings or places of arrival” (Sheets-Johnstone 1999a: 490–1). Attending to movement in this way is to immerse oneself in kinetic experiences that are felt to have no goal or purpose beyond themselves, in which “the meaning of the kinetic experience is in the movement itself” (Sheets-Johnstone 1999a: 151). Modes of deeper and sustained flow will typically be achieved only by those who practice regularly

and for a long time. Nevertheless, many practitioners will approximate such experiences in nondramatic ways, and as such they seem to constitute an important motivational factor for continuing to practice yoga.⁷

Maxine Sheets-Johnstone's work (1999a; 1999b; 1998) on kinesthesia and its relation to affectivity is particularly helpful for our purposes. She emphasizes that kinesthesia is, strictly speaking, not an object of consciousness or perception (cf. Gallagher 2002) but more accurately "a felt unfolding dynamic and, in virtue of that dynamic, a felt overall kinetic quality" (1999a: 152). Kinesthesia is fundamentally a nonverbal experience because movement has a distinctive spatiotemporal dynamic coincident with the manner or style in which we are moving and not primarily with the way we reflect on it. Moreover, intensely attending to movement for some people seems to offer more "plural self-identities" by producing heightened forms of multisensory awareness and a less stressed sense of identity (Smith 2002; Ness 1992)—a less rigid sense of oneself and the body, as it were. To learn how to move in ways that are not intended to accomplish something in "the outer world" will have the effect that movement has a less literal or tangible quality, not so much associated with "action" as with affect or mood (Bartenieff 1980: 59). This means that attending to movement may be a "liberating" experience. Whether this is articulated in terms of a "profound selfhood" or an "existentially absolute self" (Kovach 2002) seems to depend primarily on the practice environment and on the individual practitioner's background and interests.

Learning new styles of moving can also bring about transformed affectivities, depending on the particular qualitative, kinetic dynamic involved (Sheets-Johnstone 1999a: 158–9; 1999b). Approaching movement in this way is consistent with *Laban Movement Analysis*, a system devised for observing and analyzing movement that draws on theories originally innovated by Rudolf Laban (see e.g., Hankin 1984) and that offers important ways of understanding the interrelation between body performance and affectivity. That is to say, changing one's way of using the body can have a significant impact on how we feel about ourselves and the environment. In certain cases of depressed patients, for example, physiotherapist Irmgard Bartenieff (1980: 157–8) argues that when body performance is changed, it may have a considerable effect on the person involved:

A person in a deep depression often has a quality of great heaviness resulting from an almost total—a passive—giving into body weight. When the slightest attitude toward the use of that body weight can be activated, a move that may lead out of the depression has been initiated. [...] What is important is its indication of participation rather than passivity and the diminution of heaviness and immobility in the experience of the depressed person (Bartenieff 1980: 56).

This is not, of course, to say that depression or similar conditions are reducible to body performance. Nevertheless, it seems important to acknowledge that 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.⁸ In summary, then, postural practice in MPY may allow the practitioner to change his or her qualitative use of movement: 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.

Finally, it must also be mentioned, yoga training will generally boost the individual's health, for example by increasing the ability to pursue daily activities without feeling fatigued and with reduced risk for disease or pain. Beneficial effects due to yoga are often claimed to range from increased relaxation to enhanced muscular strength, from cardiorespiratory fitness to changed body composition, all of which will typically have considerable consequences for anxiety levels, stress resistance, and so on. Though I do not deal with this aspect here—and there are literally hundreds of research projects being conducted in this area—it is certainly important to how yoga practice is perceived and explained by most practitioners. Indeed, it is probably the most frequently voiced reason for attending yoga classes in the first place, and for many people fitness and health are what yoga is all about.

Though transformed body performance and heightened attention to movement will occur in highly individual combinations and with a great variety of results, not least depending on the practitioner's level of commitment and motivation, it is nevertheless very common that even novice practitioners will experience these changes as being highly positive. Moreover, the transformations might even be interpreted as being of a "spiritual" character. To give an example, one of the very common ways that practitioners have of describing the effects of a yoga session, especially in the relaxation phase at the end, is to talk about being immersed in "a whole different world." The experience of attending to movement will thus be understood as highly significant, compared to what one is used to, and the step toward talking about this as being of a "spiritual" nature—not least because interpreted as a more "authentic" way of being—is not a big one to take. Though this is, of course, only one way in which talk about spirituality might occur in specific MPY practice environments, it is nevertheless an important one.

Heightened Sensitivity

The results of yoga practice are often claimed to involve a "heightened sensitivity" of the body and a "heightened richness" of sensory experience. For example, many long-time practitioners will feel that they have become more sensitive to their surroundings and to their own bodies. To make sense of these claims, I draw on the work of Drew Leder (1990). Leder explains that there is a general from-to structure and a figure-ground configuration that characterizes all forms of experience. In other words, various elements of experience will be

relatively tacit in different ways and to different degrees; as when something is only marginally present to us in experience, or when we have an awareness of something in a more obscure or vague fashion. This is so because when we direct our attention somewhere, we simultaneously direct it away from something else. And attentional skills are essentially habit-dependent. Moreover, says Leder, most everyday actions will be directed away from the body in that one “acts from the here-and-now body to spatially or temporally noncoincident objects” (Leder 1990: 18). This means that one’s body is normally rendered subsidiary, not only as a physical means to an end but within the structure of attention as well. Most of the time, then, entire corporeal regions and powers are “absenced” by being part of the from-structure of experience, being directed toward some or other object in the outer world, which effectively relegates the body to the status of neutral background. In addition, relatively unused sensory capacities will have the effect that perceptual detail may recede from apprehension altogether, not being “actualized” or “differentiated” as it were. In other words, we under-exploit the potential for sensory experience to the extent that we narrow our perceptual skills to a relatively restricted range. This might happen owing to habitual (culturally conditioned) over-reliance on vision and thought and owing to inattentiveness to kinesthesia, smell, taste, and sound (Classen 1997). The overall result is that everyday uses of the body will tend to involve a form of “surface awareness” in which one is typically more dimly aware of certain sights, sounds, movements, and so on.

Arguably, experience will take on something of a continuous character owing to habit and, as such, will involve more or less persistent qualities being afforded to the world, to other people, and to oneself. Thus, for example, when the body is habitually used as a neutral background to goal-oriented thoughts and actions, the body is not experienced as “alive” in itself. This may even produce an excessive disconnection of ourselves (i.e., our bodies) from the environment in which one might feel alienated and emotionally disconnected from “the world.” And, as Matthew Ratcliffe argues, “if one’s sense of the world is tainted by a ‘feeling of unreality,’ this will affect how all objects of perception appear. They are distant, removed, not quite ‘there’” (Ratcliffe 2005: 45; cf. Mazis 1993). In these hyper-detached forms of experience, we might say, perceptual and imaginative skills are habitually set on producing an affectively neutral and nondynamic experience of ourselves and the world.

However, habits can be changed. If we can learn how to utilize bodily capacities and powers differently, this may result in a form of heightened sensitivity in which additional sensory detail is differentiated. Moreover, as Phillip Zarrilli shows (2004), experiential skills can be acquired that involve a heightened awareness of the body (e.g., movement, breathing, and the like) even when our attention is directed toward something other than the body itself. Significantly, Zarrilli claims that this “allows for a shift in one’s experience of the body and mind aspects from their gross separation, marked by the body’s constant disappearance, to a much more subtle, dialectical engagement of body-in-mind and mind-in-body” (Zarrilli 2004: 661). Seen from another perspective, richness

of sensory detail and a heightened sense of bodily involvement may also work to disrupt the experience of the environment (“the world”) as consisting of static objects and discrete events. When compared to situations in which we relate to things and events in a relatively detached way, certain experiential skills may enable us to experience our surroundings and our bodies in a more dynamic, animated, and relational mode.

Experiential skills that involve a higher degree of perceptual differentiation also seem to overlap with how we feel, think, and imagine. Indeed, the yoga practitioner learns to attend to movement, breath, and sound in ways that depend not only on body usage and heightened forms of awareness but, for example, on learning a specific language of the body (such as distinguishing between different kinds of pain or different body parts) and the acquiring of a historical sense of bodily movements (Leigh Foster 1997), both of which entail the implementation of specific imaginative-discursive registers.

Zarrilli especially emphasizes “attentiveness to the breath” (2004: 661) as a technique for moving away from detached modes of experience and toward more relational modes. Similarly, Sundar Sarukkai views breathing primarily in terms of an engagement with the “inner body” that makes possible the “experience of the dimensionality that ‘fills’ our body” (Sarukkai 2002: 471). James Morley also argues that experience of breath control “is the concrete experience of the body as a *relation* between inside and outside” (Morley 2001: 76; emphasis in original). According to these authors, the cultivation of attentive breathing make possible modes of experiencing in which “inner” and “outer” are not as dualistically opposed. However, attentive breathing, too, will depend on the adoption of various nomenclatures and forms of imagination within a particular practice environment. This means that any “dimensionality” or “relation” will be experienced somewhat differently, depending on the precise nature of the breathing technique and on the purpose for which it is used. Differences may consist in whether attentive breathing is accomplished simultaneously with movement and in a variety of elements, places, or moments of breathing that can be accentuated differently. Also relevant are the precise ways in which particular breathing techniques are related to dealing with emotions and thoughts and how or to what extent they are utilized in everyday situations. Breathing techniques may also include the making of sound (such as *ujjāyī prāṇāyāma*). In fact, the use of sound and chant has often been claimed a central place within the history of yoga (Beck 1993) and has sometimes been explicitly connected to attentive breathing (Carpenter 2003).

Postural training and attentive breathing may also enhance the practitioner’s sensitivity toward the body by improving awareness of particular bodily states and feelings. Richard Shusterman proposes that certain somatic practices can, besides making “the quality of our experience more satisfyingly rich,” work to “improve the acuity, health, and control of our senses by cultivating heightened attention to and mastery of their somatic functioning, while also freeing us from bodily habits and defects that impair sensory performance” (Shusterman 1999: 305). As such, certain body techniques may “reveal and improve somatic

malfunctionings that normally go undetected even though they impair our well-being and performance,” thus providing for a “psychosomatic management of pain” (1999: 302–3). Shusterman gives us two examples of how this may work:

We rarely notice our breathing, but its rhythm and depth provide rapid, reliable evidence of our emotional state. Consciousness of breathing can therefore make us aware that we are angry, tense, or anxious when we might otherwise remain unaware of these feelings and thus vulnerable to their misdirection. Similarly, a chronic muscular contraction that not only constrains movement but results in tension and pain may nonetheless go unnoticed because it has become habitual. As unnoticed, this chronic contraction cannot be relieved, nor can its resultant disability and discomfort. Yet, once such somatic functioning is brought to clear attention, there is a chance to modify it and avoid its unhealthy consequences, which include not only pain but a dulling of the senses, a diminution of aesthetic sensitivity and pleasure (Shusterman 1999: 302–3).

Emotion

MPY will also involve a spectrum of emotionalities, even if this fact is typically ignored in many accounts of yoga. Indeed, emotion is generally mentioned only in passing, often with a pejorative undertone (e.g., as “passions” to be overcome). However, I argue that emotionality is involved in a variety of ways, for example, through identification and belonging; through the sharing of experiences between practitioners, what we might view as the production of “emotional histories”; through the use of artifacts (e.g., particular lighting, icons of Hindu deities, incense, music, and so on, which invite for certain emotional responses); or through specific affective-imaginative engagements in yoga practice. In the following paragraphs, I give a few examples.

Ben Malbon (1999: 72–4) argues that group activities will typically involve a “collective sensibility” or “being-togetherness” that can, temporarily at least and given the right circumstances, unload the burden of individuality. Thus, by moving among and being in proximity to others and identifying with others in a group and with a collective focus (such as a particular music, yoga practice, and so on), one can slip between consciousness of self and consciousness of being part of something larger, between anonymizing and individualizing. Moreover, sensations of belonging can be prolonged, as when one identifies with certain sites, times, memories, paraphernalia or others not physically present. These are forms of emotional involvement that seem to be quite common in many MPY environments.

Take, for example, the use of music and sound. Arguably, music will instill certain responses, as a bodily sense of participation, a patterning of lived time and space (Etlin 1998). Through the use of sound people are “moved,” they become emotionally and imaginatively engaged. Indeed, as Malbon recognizes, music often plays a central role in the constitution of a community, allowing people to

situate themselves historically, culturally, politically, and stylistically. As such, it can transform or create social spaces, providing both aural backdrops and foci for many aspects of social interaction, not least by articulating identities and developing a sense of belonging. Music can also intensify shared experiences by evoking similar emotional and physical responses among a group of people (Malbon 1999: 77–80). Indeed, within many MPY practice environments, music is a highly important resource for identification, extending far beyond the actual yoga practice. Examples range from yoga teacher Shiva Rea’s use of “trance dance” and music, to the popularity enjoyed by the so-called “chant masters” Krishna Das, Jai Uttal, and Deva Premal, among many MPY practitioners. The chanting of mantras and texts may also serve simultaneous purposes of identification, contemplation, and demonstration of expertise (see Nevrin forthcoming).

Yoga practices may also be accompanied by a particular emotional and imaginative poise, performatively enacted and felt by the person involved (Crouch 2003). This means that yoga practitioners not only learn new ways of moving and sensing with the body but they will be emotionally involved in and through the particular action. One source for emotion is the bodily techniques themselves, as certain bodily performances, such as kneeling, slow breathing, and so on, will involve affective associations (Holloway 2003), *qua* “emotionally marked actions” (Leavitt 1996). Affective associations depend, of course, on cultural stereotyping but also to a certain degree on kinetic qualities involved in the action itself because our “bodily feelings of movement have a certain dynamic. We feel, for example, the swiftness or slowness of our movement, its constrictedness or openness, its tensional tightness or looseness, and more” (Sheets-Johnstone 1998: 272). As such, bodily actions entail structures of experience that invite for affective and imaginative elaboration in certain directions, even if never mandating these elaborations as invariants.⁹

An example is that sun salutations are sometimes performed in a devotional style, directed toward an imagined other, such as “the sun” or “God.”¹⁰ These styles of performance will draw on the prostration-like form of the sun salutation, directing the emotionally marked character toward something or someone beyond the individual, perhaps as a form of dedication. This can be compared to when sun salutations are performed in practice environments where the emphasis lies on, say, correct physical execution, and when the quality of attention is oriented more directly toward experiencing the body itself. Simply put, the affective-imaginative engagement will be quite different between these various styles of performing, though the body techniques themselves are roughly similar. This difference is not peripheral to the practice but rather quite fundamental. In fact, many practitioners have repeatedly informed me how they actively seek out a particular practice environment that “fits them,” where the style of performance and the atmosphere were experienced as conducive to their own personality, taste, and aspirations. Quite often, people will indeed comment on such things as the atmosphere of a school or the style of a practice. Moreover, differences in emotional and imaginative involvement

will have considerable consequences for how a practitioner might change his or her attitudes toward various issues in everyday life.

Empowerment: A Critical Analysis

MPY practices of attending to and with the body can be said to *existentially* empower the practitioner by making him or her feel more “whole,” “alive,” and so on. This empowering effect is achieved through the learning of a variety of skills and techniques and by taking part in an emotionally invigorating social space. MPY practice environments also offer ways of increasing self-confidence by *socially* empowering the individual, which serves to establish attitudes and choices vis-à-vis some issue that is of concern to the individual. For example, life style changes are typically initiated by the ways in which a particular practice environment may offer emotional support and encourage specific forms of behavior understood to be “yogic” (as opposed to, say, “egoistic,” “weak,” “addicted,” or “unhealthy”). In the following, I discuss these two forms of empowerment in more detail, showing both how they are intimately related to each other and how they involve problematic issues.

Existential Empowerment

The attentional skills and the nonordinary uses of the body that one acquires through yoga practice can be said to counteract detached and inflexible modes of experiencing. However, it is often taken for granted that these skills are also fully transposable to other situations, thus ignoring the fact that they are rather purpose-specific and therefore limited. Though many practitioners may recognize this, they rarely discuss it openly, and some yoga discourses do in fact insinuate that mastering yoga means having achieved authentic access to “reality” or “the realization of one’s true nature” (Jois 2002: 5), regardless of specific situational circumstances. However, such an assumption may give rise to arrogance when denying the infinitely many ways in which one might attend differently to the world. It also suggests that the individual (whether as “worldly” or “pure” consciousness) is (or can be) a more or less independent entity, disconnected from the environment. The question then arises whether this assumption is not evidence of a utopian dream. Indeed, many yoga discourses do seem to support a concept of self-realization that emphasizes “the complete freedom of the mind” (Strauss 1997: 36), thus propagating a highly individualistic view of the human being that, in my opinion, disregards the many ways in which we are dependent on one another and on the environment. Indeed, such a view will also tend to dichotomize “inward freedom” over and against “outward conformity” (Gendlin 1987).

Acquired skills may of course be transposable to some degree and extent. For example, skills of concentration learned in one context may be useful in other situations, and having some acquaintance with the experience of movement flow may prove valuable as well. Having achieved a certain level of health and fitness

will surely have repercussions in many situations in everyday life. And to the extent that yoga makes it possible to achieve relatively relaxed and matured forms of body performance, this will most certainly have ramifications for daily life.

However, as I have argued throughout this chapter, we need also to take into account the importance of social, discursive, and material environments. This means that experiential freedom and authenticity, say, cannot depend solely on the individual’s skills and abilities but always already involves constantly changing circumstances. For example, in some situations, detached modes of experience may arise because of circumstances that to some extent lie beyond the individual’s intentional powers, including the following: how we are expected to emotionally relate to one another in a given social situation (e.g., many social contexts establish the priority of ideational knowledge over and against emotional, or hierarchically value the visual over the tactile-kinesthetic); the emphasis on individualistic self-narratives within many forms of media and education; regulation and commodification of the body in modern consumer-oriented settings, including “emotional control” and “experiential consuming”; stressful living-conditions, not least an achievement-related production of anxiety and stress; the influence of technologies and architectures on social interactions and on individual experience of space and time (e.g., increased social isolation and “disembodied” life styles); and many other things.¹¹ So long as we are involved in social interactions with other human beings, circumstances such as these are bound to influence us to some degree, not least by restricting our ways of feeling, thinking, and acting.

There is thus a limit to how yoga can change a person, because he or she is highly dependent on environmental circumstances, including the presence of fulfilling relationships and beneficial living conditions. The neglect to address this limit often results in a rhetoric claim that yoga has a dimension of truth and authenticity supposedly lacking in other activities. This rhetoric is closely tied to the notion of “spiritual insight,” which is often used to claim status and legitimize authority. Another purpose is to establish motivational incentives. Thus, when something (e.g., a behavior or an experience) is termed “spiritual,” it often means that the person in question wants to claim its importance to his or her own life and in relation to others’ lives. Though these purposes may seem innocent enough, “spirituality talk” typically establishes and reinforces a status struggle in which yoga is claimed to be a more correct way of accessing reality. This of course underestimates the many alternative ways in which a person can transform habits of experience (e.g., through artistic or communicative skills). Besides relying on problematic ontologies (Ingold 2000), the overemphasis on sensory experience within an individualistic and psychologized interpretive framework downplays the need for communication and dialogue. Moreover, if experiential freedom is dependent on social situations, one would also have to take into account such things as power structures and living conditions. Though there are exceptions, recognition of the social, not only ethically but ontologically (Anton 2001), is conspicuously missing in many yoga discourses.

A final issue concerns the fact that reflection and thought are often seen as being opposed to yogic practice. However, this seems counterproductive to some of the professed aims of yoga, such as enhancing experiential freedom and authenticity. The emphasis on “practice” approaches yoga as a form of *de*-habituation and *de*-identification, and polarizes the alleged authority of “personal experience” over and against “language” or “theory,” as if the latter were somehow outside the field of experience (and despite the fact that they are, in my view, heavily involved in yoga practice). This polarization makes it very difficult to critically assess the ways in which particular discourses might involve naïve attitudes toward society’s influence on the individual. It also acts as a defense for a lack of training one’s ability to reflect, which in turn might result in inflexible action. Indeed, it may well be argued that freedom is dependent also on our capacity to break out of and carry forward the language we inherit and find ourselves already using, which requires that one learns how to think more creatively with words (Levin 1997). There are many examples of innovation within yoga, for example, the conception of new vocabularies of the body and of emotions. Yet, these instances of reflection typically remain unacknowledged. Finally, developing self-reflexivity, as in exposing prejudgments, is of course a highly important point of departure for communicating with others and for making possible mutual understanding and respect. When neglected, this means one runs the risk of adopting chauvinistic or naïve attitudes toward others. A depreciation of reflection and thought may thus serve to cement, and even veil, highly questionable and disconcerting stereotypes (such as racism, sexism, beatism, and healthism). In summary, then, psychologized and individualistic models, accompanied by a rhetoric of truth, make difficult the recognition that yoga is also a social practice. In the following section, I attempt to show how MPY creates social spaces in which people engage with one another in various ways.

Social Empowerment

MPY practice environments also provide for trust and solidarity, as a form of social empowerment. Through various social interactions, the practitioner might be encouraged to “be oneself,” to avoid drugs and other bad habits, such as unhealthy diets or relationships, even to resist consumerist attitudes. Moreover, to relax into an emotionally supportive atmosphere may enable the person to more openly express emotion and to feel “at home” with others.

A common example is the overcoming of resistance, pain, and fear when pursuing challenging postures. This works to empower the practitioner, by enhancing his or her willpower and self-confidence. He or she thus gets acquainted with the feeling of overcoming difficulties, which may of course affect daily life as well. However, all this happens not least because of social support and teacher guidance. Many practitioners will indeed attest to the importance of having been in a practice environment that inspired and challenged them in various ways.

As Randall Collins (2004) has argued, when individuals gather together and participate in a collective action—what he calls interaction rituals—this may produce a powerful emotional stimulus. This is because we are prereflectively sensitive to each other’s bodily presence; we affect and respond to others’ bodily expressions, entering into shared rhythms, being caught by each other’s movements and emotions. Collins’s point is that the more participants focus on a common activity and the more they attune to each other, to what everyone else is doing and feeling, the more intense the experience. This is a form of emotional energy, which will typically take the form of exhilaration, confidence, trust, enthusiasm, and a strengthened sense of initiative. Individuals who are full of emotional energy feel “good” and “valuable.” These empowering experiences can then also be evoked in situations when one is “alone.”

I argue that this form of emotionality is an important aspect of social empowerment, particularly in those MPY practice environments in which collectivity is accentuated. Indeed, in Malbon’s analysis, empowerment—or playful vitality, as he calls it—is largely emotional in constitution and arises partly through the flux between self and collectivity and through the prioritizing of the affectual, of proximity and tactility, and of the “here and now.” As such, it is “partly a celebration of the energy and euphoria that can be generated through being together, playing together and experiencing ‘others’ together. Yet vitality is also partly an escape attempt, a temporary relief from other facets and identifications” of an individual’s own life: from work, from the past or the future, from worries, and so on. In situations wherein playful vitality is cultivated, it is primarily a construction in which “the everyday is disrupted, the mundane is forgotten and the ecstatic becomes possible” (Malbon 1999: 164). For my part, I would not want to view this in terms of an “escape,” as that seems to value the everyday and the mundane as somehow being more true or real. Nevertheless, Collin’s and Malbon’s analyses of interaction rituals and playful vitality are pertinent to an understanding of the social aspects of MPY practice environments. Indeed, social empowerment seems both necessary and desirable, perhaps even an unavoidable aspect of situations in which people get together and do something.

Moreover, social empowerment in MPY is probably to some extent related to sociopolitical changes in late modernity. For example, lack of power in areas where one is dependent on security and trust will likely produce reactions such as shame and feelings of defeat, failure, insufficiency, alienation, and abandonment. These are symptoms of threatened or insecure social ties and the effects of lack of control, increasingly common in many modern settings. Therefore, as Michel Maffesoli (1996) argues, the establishment of “emotional communities” is essential for the vitalization of social interactions and for satisfying a need for emotional intimacy and nearness. Mellor and Shilling (1997) similarly claim that contemporary forms of social bonding are often based on emotional, bodily, and sensual interactions that differ from older, traditional forms. Indeed, I would argue that MPY can be seen as offering discourses and practices that open up new spaces in which alternative ideologies and practices

of the body can be explored, simultaneously offering opportunities for social empowerment and the formation of alternative social interactions (Turner 1994; Burkitt 1999: 145)—a resistance against conventional forms of sociality, as it were. Paradoxically, however, many MPY practitioners are playing on both sides: on the one hand constructing social alternatives, yet on the other hand reinforcing an ideology of separation, at least to the extent that the importance of the social is underrated.

Also relevant is the fact that social situations consist of micro-political dimensions such as struggles for authority and symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1977); that is, the accumulation of status or recognition that constrain or make possible a person's actions within a specific social context. An important variant is physical capital, a notion coined by Chris Shilling (1993) to analyze the increasing commodification of the body and the important links between identities and the social values accorded to bodies. However, these facets of the social are typically unrecognized in many yoga communities. For example, in MPY, accumulation of symbolic and physical capital often involves the use of the designations "spiritual" and "healthy." More overtly political uses might include the construction of emotional identities that provide for confrontational attitudes (McKean 1996), mobilized against competing schools by proclaiming a lineage-holder's higher degree of "spiritual authenticity," or by declaring a teacher's legitimacy in terms of his or her adherence to a "spiritual tradition." The epithet "spiritual" also tends to conflate the difference between, on the one hand, the sense of self-ease that can arise due to certain bodily practices and, on the other hand, the self-confidence that arises due to accumulation of symbolic capital.

Collins (2004) shows that individuals will typically acquire or lose emotional energy in interactions that are characterized by power and status. For example, the feeling of belonging to a group will significantly increase a person's emotional energy. Moreover, the "sociometric star" will tend to receive the most emotional energy and affection, whereas the outsider or novice receives much less (Freund 1990). In other words, a teacher or advanced practitioner—stated bluntly, those who belong to the elite of the in-group—will feel confident, strong, and successful not only because he or she has acquired "yogic skills" but owing to being at the center of attention and having acquired symbolic capital. This will even have repercussions on the ability to be attentively involved because achieving flow is much easier when a person feels confident, enthusiastic, and emotionally energized. Indeed, many practitioners have attested to the inspirational and motivational significance of being in an "energized" environment, often openly discussing the differences between teachers in terms of the level of "energy" that they "radiate" or "inspire."

These aspects of a group dynamic, even if unrecognized by its participants, raise important questions concerning the norms and ideals that are involved. In MPY, for example, the use of "healthiness" to indicate status and achievement is particularly prevalent. Health is then often used as an all-inclusive and vague catchword, ranging in meaning from fitness to self-realization (Nevrin

2004). Many practitioners also tend to assume that everything that has to do with health is somehow good. In MPY, however, this will sometimes involve the naturalization of an idealized, aestheticized body (Glassner 1989)—the so-called "body beautiful"—which involves highly questionable norms. This becomes even more problematic when "healthiness" and "spiritual insight" are associated. The problem is not necessarily that someone feels or looks strong, healthy and confident, say, but when associated with "spiritual progress" this may consolidate an unquestionable status and legitimacy to certain normative ideals.

There are, of course, MPY practice environments that constitute clear exceptions. For example, some teachers will explicitly emphasize the uniqueness of a person's body. However, the general tendency is for practitioners to be influenced by largely unconscious ideals concerning the individual's possibility of living a healthy life without addressing sociopolitical issues. Moreover, because the precise meaning of being healthy is rarely discussed explicitly by MPY practitioners, its meaning is simply assumed. This will then have the consequence that normative ideals are reproduced and presented in ways that effectively hinder their reflexive assessment.

In my view, it is important to recognize the ways in which MPY address alternatives to mainstream medical care. This recognition includes identifying the employment of attentional techniques that prove useful for a variety of purposes, not least for counteracting a detachment that negatively affects people's lives. We have also seen how yoga communities may meet a particular individual's need for alternative forms of emotional solidarity by creating an arena for vitalized social interactions. Yet, many MPY practice environments are uncritically involved in a development that attempts to "locate meaning within the individual according to a selective valuing of intense experiences within the self and a closed system of cognition" (Carrette & King 2005: 82). The challenge, it seems to me, lies in being able to recognize both the beneficial and empowering effects of yoga practice and the limitations and any questionable norms that may be involved.

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Notes

- 1 The term *Modern Postural Yoga* is used by Elizabeth De Michelis (2004). MPY stresses the orthoperformative aspects of yoga, thus resorting "to very basic and polyvalent suggestions concerning the religio-philosophical underpinnings" of its practices

- (De Michelis 2004: 187). Though Modern Yoga stems from classical Hindu traditions, it is only very selectively related to historical forms, especially by concerning itself to a large extent with personal health and well-being (see Alter 2004 and Nevrin 2004).
- 2 Though the epithet “Viniyoga” has recently been abandoned by Desikachar, it is still in use by some of his students. Suffice it to say that I take it to be an appropriate name for a family of teachings and practices descending from Krishnamacharya and Desikachar. Other examples within the Krishnamacharya-inspired branch of MPY are Flow Yoga, Process Yoga, Power Yoga, Yin Yoga, and Dynamic Yoga. Most often these are attempts to synthesize yoga practices and discourses that have their origin in Krishnamacharya’s, Desikachar’s, Jois’s, and Iyengar’s teachings (occasionally including elements also from other forms of Modern Yoga), though more often than not grounded in the highly popular Ashtanga Yoga.
 - 3 Though he has not, of course, been alone in this development (Alter 2004). In another article, I discuss Krishnamacharya’s influence and the importance of his Śrī Vaiṣṇava heritage (Nevrin 2005).
 - 4 See Iyengar (1995), Desikachar (1995), and Jois (2002) for descriptions of Yoga practices by leading MPY teachers.
 - 5 When the *Yogasūtra* is chanted, this is typically done by using techniques of Vedic chant common in South India, which considerably elevates the status of the text by treating it as if it were a Vedic or Tantric text with mantras to be chanted and not sūtras to be memorized (see Nevrin forthcoming).
 - 6 “Proprioception refers generally to a sense of movement and position. It thus includes an awareness of movement and position through tactility as well as kinesthesia, that is, through surface as well as internal events, including also a sense of gravitational orientation through vestibular sensory organs. Kinesthesia refers specifically to a sense of movement through muscular effort” (Sheets-Johnstone 1998: 272, n. 13).
 - 7 The term *flow* has been popularized by Csíkszentmihályi (1990). In my reading, however, his understanding of flow does not include an adequate account of embodiment. As such, it focuses on “consciousness flow” or “altered states of consciousness,” thus underemphasizing the role played by emotionality, sociality and, indeed, the body.
 - 8 See my forthcoming Ph.D dissertation for a more detailed movement analysis of the many forms of postural training that abound. In my view, a decisive factor for cultivating responsivity and sensibility is the ability to improvise, a skill that is typically downplayed in many MPY practice environments. This is not to say, of course, that some practitioners cannot or do not improvise. However, in some cases, the specific character of postural training involves relatively restricted and self-controlled forms of body-awareness that may inhibit emotional flexibility and intensify self-assertive attitudes.
 - 9 Here I have benefited from Leder’s notion of “phenomenological vectors” (1990: 150).
 - 10 “Sun salutations” are a sequence of postures that have become centrally important to MPY. Their origin is controversial (see Alter 2004). Also see Nevrin (2005) for examples on devotional interpretations and styles of practice in Viniyoga that are derived to a significant degree from Śrī Vaiṣṇavism.
 - 11 See, among others, Burkitt 1999; Thrift 2000, 2004; Shilling 1993; Featherstone 1982; Leder 1990; and Anton 2001.

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