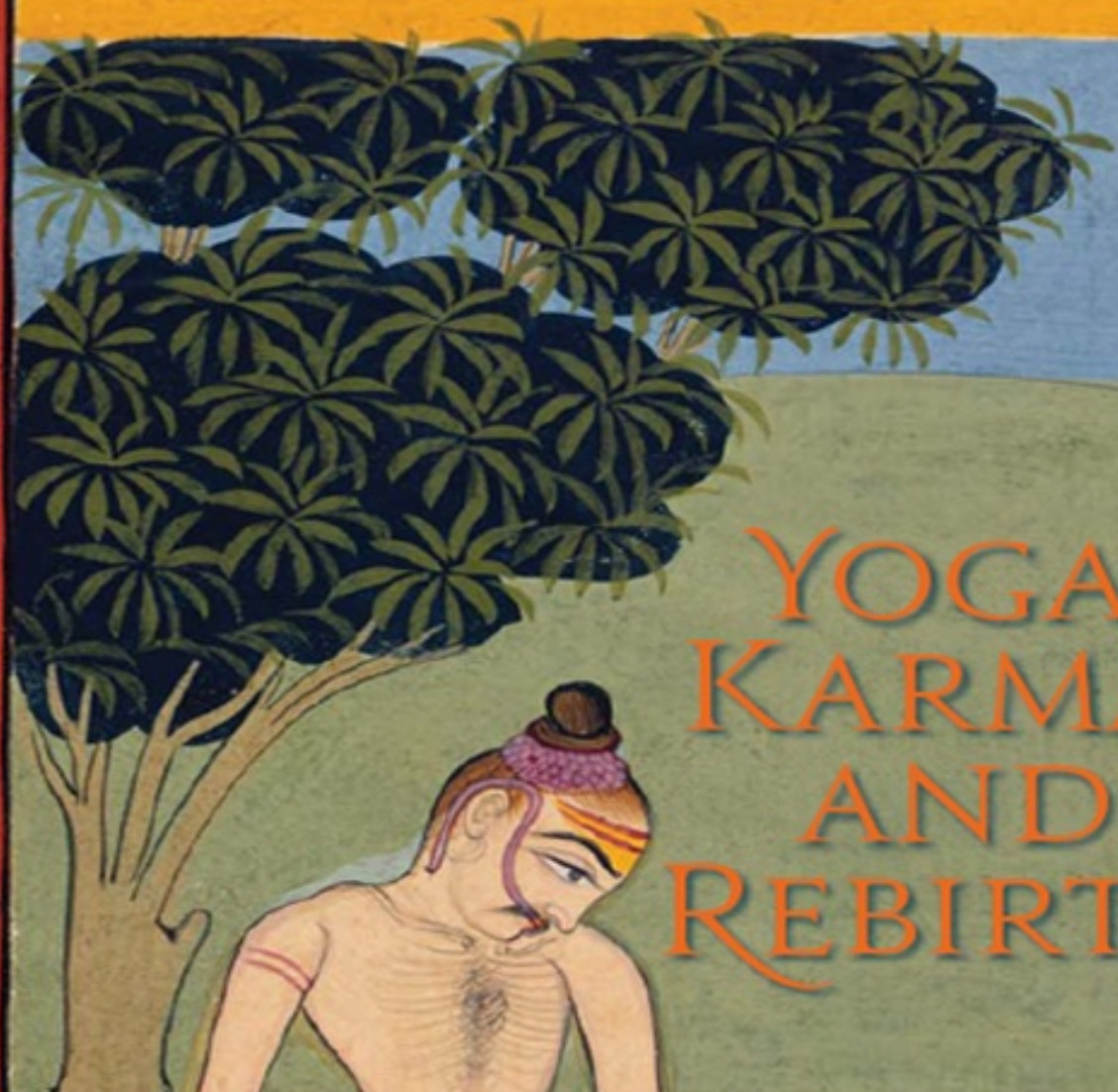


A Brief History and Philosophy



YOGA,  
KARMA,  
AND  
REBIRTH

STEPHEN PHILLIPS



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# *Yoga, Karma, and Rebirth*

*A Brief History and Philosophy*



*Stephen H. Phillip*



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## Introduction

# Setting an Intention (or, Enlivening an Intention Already Set)

*agnim ile... I call the fire, ancient priest of the sacrifice, the divine who summons (the  
divinities), bringing here jewel  
—RIG VEDA 1.1*

*This is the life energy (prana) that radiates out from every being. Knowing this, the knower  
tends not to excessive disputation. / Playing and relishing in the self (atman) with self as his  
delight, doing works he becomes the best of Brahman knower  
—MUNDAKA UPANISHAD 3.1*

*Sumedha: "Surely a buddha I shall be  
—JATAKA 1*

*Setting himself in a clean place in a steady asana (posture, seat) that is neither too high nor  
too low (to be comfortable), on a cloth, animal skin, or kusha grass, there fixing heart and  
mind on a single point, working to bring his thought and emotion along with his faculties and  
organs under control, let him practice yoga for self-purification  
—BHAGAVAD GITA 6.11–12*

*atha yoga-anushasanam... Now instruction in yoga. Yoga is the stilling of fluctuations of  
thought and emotion (chitta). Then the seer (the conscious being) rests in its true nature. /  
other times, fluctuations are identified with the seer  
—YOGA SUTRA 1.1–2*

*Yoga is the unity (ekatva) of one thing with another  
—MALINI-VIJAYOTTARA TANTRA 4.4*

**T**he consciousness traditions of ancient India constitute the roots of yoga  
teaching. Buddhism carried yoga eastward, and all Eastern spiritual  
traditions—including the martial arts—have common background with the  
yoga traditions of India. Some have argued that Christianity too is influenced by  
yoga, perhaps in the figure of Jesus himself. Clearly Sufism is. In India, tradition

of yoga practice include or overlap with Vedantic, Jaina, Buddhist, Sikh, Vaishnavite, and Shaivite teachings. These are multidimensional complexes of ideas and culture, and are in large part the origins of yoga training programs that have spread all over the world.

There is, for example, the invocation, dedication, or other ritual beginning of a typical yoga class. This can be as simple as a single out-breath of the chant *Om* which is a mantra or sacred syllable according to very old Upanishads. Upanishads are “secret teachings” composed in Sanskrit, which was the lingua franca of ancient and classical India.<sup>1</sup> Upanishads are the oldest texts in which the word *yoga* is used in our sense, our anglicized “yoga” (some earlier usages carry a different meaning). The meaning and symbolism of *om* is laid out very early in the Mandukya Upanishad (c. 500 B.C.E.) and elsewhere: “*Om*—the syllable is all this (universe)” and so on.<sup>2</sup>

There are indications of yoga practice even earlier than the earliest Upanishads. The Rig Veda (“Rig” from Sanskrit *rik*, which means “verse”), the oldest text in Sanskrit (c. 1200 B.C.E. or earlier), is a source for yoga teachings, although, to be sure, there are disputes about its meaning. We will survey yoga literature in the last section of [chapter 1](#), setting the Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, Yoga Sutra, and other yoga texts in chronological order, as we identify the main themes of Yoga philosophy and trace their development up to the modern period. This book will become a first-person defense of a contemporary view that all yoga practitioners and sympathizers can stand behind confidently. But first we will review our Yoga inheritance.

Another example of reverberations of the Indian past in the modern studio is the practice of a teacher’s asking everyone to “set an intention” for the class. To come, the session of an hour or so of asanas and conscious breathing. Sometimes it is suggested that one might “tune into” or refurbish an intention already formed. Such setting of an intention (*samkalpa* in Sanskrit) and *bhavana* (enlivening an intention already set) are found in the Upanishads in stories of young people going to a guru to learn the truth of the self (*atman*). Because intention resolves what is possible, much emphasis is placed on intention, *samkalpa*, in yoga traditions—on the idea of what is to be accomplished through yoga practice. Yoga philosophy has long held that practice follows thought, as well as that what we do is what we become. Traditionally, the “thought” here in this mantra is *samkalpa*. Yoga asks us to set our sights high. In the Upanishads the names of some of the seekers, such as Satyakama in the Chandogya (c. 800 B.C.E.), “He whose desire is the truth,” conform to the theme.

A wonderful dramatization of setting an intention occurs in the earliest texts of Buddhism (c. 300 B.C.E.) in the story of Sumedha and the Buddha’s “first vow.” Wealthy, well educated, and of high social status in the “town of Amara, a place of

beauty and delights,” a young man named Sumedha, despite the surrounding splendor and advantages he has in society, comes to the realization, “What misery to be born again, and have the flesh dissolve at death!” And he resolves to find freedom from evil through yoga. Then after years of yogic discipline Sumedha hears of the arrival in Amara of a buddha (awakened one), Dipankara by name, a person of such radiance, power, and wisdom that throngs gather to strew flowers at his feet. Sumedha joins the crowd, loosening his long, matted hair to form part of the buddha’s path. As the Blessed One approaches, our yogi is inspired to want to be like that, setting an intention that, according to Buddhist tradition, remains firm through lifetimes of more moderate practice and progress (the Middle Way)—until he is born Siddhartha Gautama of our age.

Recognizing the sincerity of Sumedha’s intention, Dipankara stops and announces, “Surely a buddha you shall be.” From his words echoed by the crowd, Sumedha comes to carry with him not only the intention but also a deep confidence. One of the tasks of a Yoga philosophy (Buddhist or another) is to protect such confidence from attack.

Similarly, in the Bhagavad Gita, which is of about the same time (c. 300 B.C.E.) as the Jataka tale of Sumedha, it is the sincere aspiration of the character Arjuna that provokes his divine charioteer Krishna to instruct him in yoga and provide a whole worldview to boot (see the introduction to [appendix B](#)).

Yoga is more than postures and breath control. It comprises processes of psychological transformation complementing physical development and maintenance of good health. The Yoga Sutra, for example, lays out asana and breath control (pranayama), but only as practices among other practices, specifically, as two limbs within an “eight-limbed” ashtanga yoga. The ashtanga yoga of Patanjali includes meditation and right focus as well as ethical and personal constraints (yama and niyama). One goal of this book is to help yoga teachers and practitioners appreciate the breadth and depth of yoga. Traditionally, yoga is a way the sacred can come into life.

There are of course many kinds of yoga: hatha yoga, which targets the body and breath; meditational or jnana yoga; karma yoga, which is the yoga of action and self-sacrifice; bhakti yoga, which is the yoga of devotion and love; tantra yoga aimed at uniting with Shiva/Shakti; Kundalini yoga to open the occult chakras or centers of consciousness and awaken the “serpent power” (kundalini) to rise in the central channel (sushumna); the “eight-limbed” ashtanga yoga of the Yoga Sutra focused on quieting the mind; the specialized yogas of japa (repetition of mantras or sacred syllables); yogic sleep (yoga nidra); and so on. The list is long. A second purpose of this book is to chart common and uncommon suppositions of the central manuals of the more prominent types.

Practices of yoga are not only grounded in ancient spiritual traditions but also defended by certain Eastern philosophies. This book, despite the attention to its history, is itself a work of Yoga philosophy, extending classical Yoga traditions. As a practitioner, I think of it as yoga for the buddhi, for the intellect, or svadhyaya, or self-study, in the phrase of the Yoga Sutra (2.1). The point is to develop intellectual confidence about ideas used in yoga practices. Thus the central goal beyond sorting and clarifying, is to defend central concepts involved in the practices, especially certain psychological concepts (such as karma and its underpinnings in mental dispositions, samskara), as well as pieces of Yoga philosophy from the past.

The phrase “Yoga philosophy” (with a capital Y) is sometimes used by scholars to refer to the views of the Yoga Sutra and its commentaries. These views are without question important for this book. But here “Yoga philosophy” is construed much more broadly, and the resources for our own Yoga philosophy include Vedanta and the Upanishads, the little-known school of Nyaya, Buddhism, Jainism, tantra, and other Eastern and now Western philosophies centered on yoga practices. Indeed, as practices of spiritual development from all over the world, including from Western traditions, are by analogy “yogic,” so too are philosophies. Thus Rumi’s is in our usage a Yoga philosophy. Patanjali’s Yoga Sutra is mentioned here probably more than any other single instance of yoga literature, and a new translation is appended ([appendix C](#)). But my intention is not to defend the philosophy of the Yoga Sutra. In general, “Yoga” (with the capital) will designate a framework of ideas about self and reality connected tightly with yoga practices by way of explaining the experiences or abilities to which the practices lead. By this definition, there is much that qualifies as Yoga within classical Eastern and now some modern philosophy with a global audience. The classics of Yoga are, however, mainly Indian: Vedantic, Buddhist, Jaina, Nyaya, and tantric texts as well as the Yoga Sutra and its Sanskrit commentaries. Especially from such classic sources, which are mostly in Sanskrit, I try to frame a Yoga philosophy that is not so much new as useful to, in particular, yoga students and teachers. This book is dedicated to everyone who has led or will lead a yoga class, or has begun a serious practice. It is also, to be sure, written for philosophers and students of philosophy—with a global interest.

[Chapter 1](#) opens with a section on the nature of yoga theories, which is followed by a description of a yoga class (what it’s like from a first-person point of view) along with some suggestions for yoga teachers and practitioners, and then a section on yoga literature. First-person description shows levels and types of theoretic commitment, although nothing more bold practicewise will be undertaken than what goes by the name of Sun Salutations (along with two varieties of breath control and a couple of mantras).



**Chapter 2** takes up a challenge to Yoga theory from scientific materialism and recent work in metaphysics by academic philosophers. Theoretic commitments and options for Yoga are laid out. Yoga philosophic inclusivism is the disjunction of views that together form a spiritual camp, opposed to a collection of views that are materialist. Materialism locates causal power solely in objects, things that are material and only material. Yoga does not, locating our power over ourselves in something subjective, something more than a brain. Yoga philosophy is not limited to any single position on the relation of body to mind or spirit to consciousness, but all Yoga philosophy stands in opposition to certain claims held in common by materialists. Indeed, at the heart of Yoga, I shall argue, is a commitment to two-directional causation and possibilities of self-development.

**Chapter 3** takes up the psychological concept of karma and explores its metaphysical and, especially, its moral dimensions as well as its importance for yoga practice. Karma constitutes habits and is summed up as character, character built up from below, from choices we make. There is also a special meaning of the word in “karma yoga,” which is explained following the Bhagavad Gita. The concept of karmic fate is also illuminated, as well as the foundations for the yogic practice of non-harmfulness (ahimsa, nonviolence). A view of ecological responsibility flows from a right understanding of karma.

**Chapter 4** examines Yogic views of rebirth, sifting superstition from occult psychology. Principal arguments for and against reincarnation are examined. The nature of possible cross-life continuity is of primary interest. The soul-making model of the Gita is contrasted with an underappreciated tantric top-down model that posits a status for the individual beyond embodiment and embodiments, as part manifestations of a larger type of self, not just developments along lines continuous with previous births. In this tantric view, spiritual enlightenment is not such a big deal, being both easy to come by and often secondary to the ends of the Divine Mother for the individual, the compulsions of divine shakti or energy to finite manifestation.

**Chapter 5** takes up further ethical and social dimensions of yoga practice along with traditional claims of extraordinary capacities and “powers.” What is the point of yoga? What are the legitimate goals? Does yoga have social value? The good of holistic health is explored along with traditional teachings. In our age, can yoga be more than physical exercise? I shall argue in favor of an expansionist program, discussing yoga in life, especially bhakti yoga, as well as the yoga of beauty and art along with the theme of psychic transformation. Traditionally, however, extraordinary powers called siddhis, if not to be renounced, are thought best directed to the spiritual (adhyatmika). We shall examine the tantric among other answers and attitudes, worldly and otherworldly combinations.

Five appendices present new translations from Sanskrit of classic yoga (and

Yoga) texts: the Upanishads, the Gita, the Yoga Sutra, the Hatha Yoga Pradipika and a few other tantric texts drawn from Kashmiri Shaivism.

As mentioned, I have thought of part of the audience for this book as yoga teachers, teachers of asanas and pranayama, who are now perhaps the principal conveyors of Yoga philosophy, and their interested students. To you let me say please be patient with my tentativeness ("What is true is A or B or C or..."). Probably many will feel a need for metaphysical doctrines that are more specific than anything here. But nothing here rules out faith in the power of consciousness beyond that defended here explicitly. Versions of theism are discussed, for example, without endorsement, but definitely without rejection (in the last section of [chapter 3](#) the idea of God's goodness is defended by doctrines of karma and rebirth). The point is to open a Yoga umbrella sheltering a whole family of views and spiritual paths. This attitude is in line with the spirit of inclusivism found in many Yogic texts, including the Yoga Sutra itself, which presents alternative methods to achieve the yogic goal.<sup>4</sup> As Yoga philosophers, we have to denounce materialism; its causal theses have to be opposed, as explained in [chapter 2](#). But our Yoga philosophy tries as far as possible to be friendly to a broad inheritance of philosophies encouraging yoga. Such inclusivism demands abstraction, and details are inevitably overlooked as our plane, our intellectual vahana, rises and we scan a wide expanse. And like a difficult asana, philosophic flights, although Yogic, are not for every practitioner. The basic idea is, however, entirely simple and we may have confidence in our Yoga inheritance.

Thus our Yoga philosophy not only is inclusivist but also has to be in a sense minimalist: trying to say as much as necessary to support the practices and to understand the experiences and abilities they lead to, but not more, especially not more as a matter of strong commitment. This attitude is motivated by the facts of our global times and circumstances and the diversity of belief systems in the Yoga camp. Note that an attractive alternative to minimalism is the relativism or perspectivalism developed by Jaina philosophers, anekanta-vada, or nonabsolutism. This position will be examined closely at the end of [chapter 3](#), but the gist is to treat all views as having a grain of truth, as right with qualifications. In the Jaina spirit, I find a rough trade-off—though hardly a zero-sum game—between ways of weakening the content of claims, mainly abstraction and alternation, and levels of justified confidence. (Devadatta sees what looks like a snake crawl into the doghouse, but is not entirely sure and says, "I saw something [abstraction] crawl into the doghouse. I think it may be [less than absolute confidence] a snake.") The genius of the Jainas was to forge a logic of the maybe (syat) that, we shall see below, is able to disarm metaphysical conflicts with an intellectual ahimsa, nonharmfulness. The logic of the maybe has both an epistemic and a metaphysical dimension, and my minimalist strategy, though not



*the same, is similar.*

*All this suggests another story from Buddhist tradition and a final reminder about the spirit of Yoga theorizing. The story of Sumedha is from the Pali canon of southern Buddhism, where are also found the “Sermons of the Buddha” that scholars view as the oldest Buddhist texts. In a famous sermon in the Majjima Nikaya, the Buddha warns against too much intellectualizing. There are questions that “do not tend to edification,” and the Buddha draws analogies to a house on fire and to a man shot with an arrow. Just as one would not discourse on the nature of fire, its composition or source, but would rush to put it out if one’s own house were ablaze, and similarly a man shot would not discourse on the nature of the arrow but would pull it out, so we should act to change ourselves and win the highest good, not wasting time in idle talk.<sup>5</sup> But it seems to me—as it has to hundreds of previous yoga (and Yoga) enthusiasts, including hundreds of Buddhist philosophers—that a little theory is needed. Otherwise, we might be discouraged, for example, by the materialists, and miss opportunities that yoga presents. Thus is our attitude pragmatic, humble, and not to claim the final word.*



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## *Principles of Yoga Practice and Types of Yoga Theory*

*Insofar as yoga practice is a form of bodily movement (and sometimes effortful absence of bodily movement), it does not require much theoretical knowledge. Although yoga is not mere exercise, intellectually it's often only a matter of knowing the meaning of words that refer to basic body parts and motions, like lifting your arms and holding your palms together. A yoga teacher conveys skills of mastery of the body, breath, and so on from his or her own first-person point of view. It's "knowledge how" rather than "knowledge that," like how to ride a bicycle or to swim as opposed to certain facts or laws that obtain. Asanas or postures and the transitions between them in a class require little theoretical knowledge, no knowledge of aerodynamics, for instance, although all movement is governed by aerodynamic laws.*

*Of course, in yoga practice not every body part needs to be known and identified, only those capable of being moved as targeted in the instructions of the teacher—the left hand, for example, as opposed to the spleen. One of the purposes of doing the posture called Corpse Pose, shavasana, is to learn to identify body parts, but not as one would in an anatomy class.<sup>1</sup> The main purpose of the asana is to relax the entire body and psychological system consciously, as you lie flat on your back on the floor without going to sleep. Learning to locate and relax a specific part mentioned is a means to this end and is how the asana is taught to beginners in some traditions: toes, arches, ankles, heels, calves, upper and lower thighs, fingers, hands, arms, shoulders, and (to quote a contemporary teacher) "loosening hip sockets and relaxing the buttocks, moving from the tailbone and relaxing through the lumbar, the thoracic vertebrae, relaxing the back of the neck, and softening the throat, releasing any tension from the muscles of the jaws, lips, and tongue, relaxing the cheeks" [parting the lips and moving the tongue to lie away from the teeth], "feeling the eyeballs grow heavier and softer as they drop down away from the eyelids, the eyelids floating lightly above the eyes as you relax the eyebrows and forehead and make the temples grow soft and hollow, relaxing the scalp and crown of the head."<sup>2</sup> Let me stress that these two are not the same: the ability to identify and move or relax a body part as required to do yoga, and knowing the location and function of an anatomical part, such as the pineal gland, as explained in medical science. This distinction is of enormous importance to Yoga philosophy.*

*Yoga teachings engage, like a "how-to" book of practical instruction, a first*

person point of view as opposed to the externalist, third-person point of view of science. Thus Yoga philosophy has a touchstone in the utility of its ideas for the practices. Medical science does not have the same orientation, and although often scientific hypotheses overlap with Yoga principles, the phenomenology (how they appear or are present to consciousness) of the practices as well as the experiences to which they lead carries Yoga philosophy into its own special area of psychological theory and, as we shall see, metaphysics.

To move more slowly, let us ask whether knowing the body's anatomy, the bones and muscles, the pulmonary, digestive, and cardiovascular systems, could be of help in yoga practice. Shouldn't the ideal yoga instructor, if not the weekend practitioner, know the body parts and their functions as explained in medicine? The answer is complex, and surely not entirely negative. Some such knowledge could prevent injury in imaginable circumstances (though few get injured in yoga since, unlike in sports, we attend closely to bodily feedback). Nevertheless, Yoga instructors need not be medically trained. The direction of the question is misleading. We should not lose sight of the fact that in yoga practice, as in sports, our intellectual knowledge is in the service of what we are doing.

Consider the illiterate yogin or yogini. Many unschooled in letters have without question thrived, being accomplished in the practices—for instance, the revered Sri Ramakrishna, the nineteenth-century illiterate Bengali mystic and guru of Swami Vivekananda (Vivekananda taught Vedanta to William James, among other achievements, at the Chicago 1893 Congress of World Religions, and translated the Yoga Sutra). To be able to pull the shoulder blades down away from the ears and relax them, for example, or to spread the toes requires no scientific knowledge whatsoever.

Let us look at instructions and descriptions of Corpse Pose, shavasana, in three current yoga manuals: first one that tries to explain scientifically the relaxation process in the midst of instructions, and then two other, more traditional renditions of instructions for the same asana.

Relax completely, allowing your body to rest on the floor under the influence of gravity. When you first lie down most of the motor neurons that innervate the skeletal muscles are still firing nerve impulses, but your breathing gradually becomes even and regular, and the number of nerve impulses per second to your muscles starts to drop. If you are an expert in relaxation, within a minute or two the number of nerve impulses to the muscles to your hands and toes goes to zero. Then, within five minutes the motor neuronal input to the muscles of your forearms, arms, legs, and thighs diminishes and also approaches zero. The rhythmical movement of the respiratory diaphragm lulls you into even deeper relaxation, finally minimalizing the nerve impulses to the deep postural muscles of the torso. The connective tissues are not restraining you. Pain is not registered from any part of the body—the posture is entirely comfortable. This is an ideal relaxation.<sup>3</sup>

*There are at the very least two referential expressions in this passage that are not phenomenological, not identifiable in a yoga practice from the inside, from a first-person point of view: “motor neurons” and “nerve impulses.” These are part of a theory, of an explanation, not of instructions telling the yoga student what to do or watch for. If they were pared away, you could be told to do the same thing. The term “respiratory diaphragm” is phenomenological; it can be identified proprioceptively in direct inner feeling and control. But in this passage the diaphragm is mentioned as part of a mechanism that, with this asana, is dissociated from conscious control. In a traditional teaching, in contrast, the diaphragm would not be in such sharp focus, the emphasis being instead on “breath energy,” prana, sometimes translated “life energy,” as will be explained.*

*Next, two “how-to” presentations of Corpse Pose that are woven into traditional Yoga theories.*

*In what has become the most popular asana manual in the United States, B.K.S. Iyengar, who has trained yoga teachers in Pune, India, for more than fifty years, quotes, on shavasana, three verses from the Hatha Yoga Pradipika (HY 1.32, which describes shavasana, and then 4.29 and 4.30, which provide occult interpretation) along with another classical text. Having just previously spelled out the physical positioning, Pandit Iyengar provides a translation of the verses along with some commentary. In the ideal Corpse Pose, one draws in the senses into a generic sense awareness (called pratyahara), which has no particular object. This in turn is drawn into the breath or prana and then the prana into a deeper, essentially blissful consciousness:*

*In good relaxation one feels energy flow from the back of the head towards the heels and not the other way around....*

*[From the Hatha Yoga Pradipika:] “The mind is the lord of the Indriyas (the organs and senses); the Prana (the Breath of Life) is the lord of the mind. When the mind is absorbed it is called Moksha (final emancipation, liberation of the soul); when Prana and Manas (the mind) have been absorbed, an undefinable joy ensues.”<sup>4</sup>*

*In Iyengar’s usage and translation, “Prana” is not just the breath but an energy that flows in occult cavities and canals, not only the lungs. It animates the physical but also a subtle body. Normally the main pranic energy has an upward buoyancy, but, as the master teacher says, in Corpse Pose one begins to feel flow in the reverse direction. This is an important yogic experience. Deep breathing and shavasana help eliminate restlessness, agitation, and “stress,” Iyengar says, but getting rid of these in turn is part of a larger process of controlling and harmonizing the “Breath of Life,” as he translates prana.*

*Philosophers might expect that this “Prana” is bad theory. But it is clearly more*



a matter of direct experience than the earlier “motor neurons.” The concept may have a theoretic side, but here the word even in the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* expanded sense has concrete meaning for yoga practice and in yogic experience.

Gestalt psychologists and others have taught us about “seeing as,” about how our beliefs and conventions influence our perceptual language, even basic depictions of that which we perceive. Do you see the faces in the trees, the duck or the rabbit? A doctor will see a hairline fracture in an x-ray if she thinks there is one on other evidence, and not if not. Standing on a cliff overlooking a movie set the uninformed will see an old western town. But when told it’s just a set, a person will suddenly see the façades. Perception is theory-laden. This does not mean that we should be skeptical about tables and chairs, but it might mean that we should be skeptical about “Prana.” For theory impinges on even the lowest-level use of names to pick out something of which we are directly aware, and not everyone talks about prana as they do about tables and chairs.

However, in yoga it is common to become aware—directly, intimately—of objects of which formerly, before the practice, we were unaware. And this is true even though these things or phenomena are parts of ourselves, of our very own bodies or consciousness! Thus, in good faith Iyengar and many others, including myself, say that in yoga we become aware of prana—which is at a minimum more than filling and emptying the lungs—phenomenologically. This is perhaps most readily evident in breath and attention being directed and merging at specific spots. In any case, the claim is that pranic energy, which includes but is more than breath, is a matter of as immediate an experience as anyone’s own inner feeling of legs and arms.<sup>5</sup>

Before moving on to another traditional explanation of Corpse Pose, let us note that whatever the precise nature of “Prana” in Iyengar’s usage, the object of which the yogin or yogini is aware stands outside science. You will not find prana mentioned in any medical textbook, no “Breath of Life” as understood by Iyengar or any other traditional yoga master. Though not all agree with Iyengar overall, there is a common phenomenology of prana, of “life energy,” in yoga shastra, the traditional literature that teaches yoga practice and Yoga philosophy.

By reputation the most popular asana manual nowadays in Europe, *Asana Pranayama Mudra Bandha*, by Swami Satyananda Saraswati of the Bihar School of Yoga, provides instructions for Corpse Pose that include a dramatic and even more controversial example of a mysterious but reputedly phenomenological item, i.e., a “spiritual center of consciousness,” or chakra. Chakras are crucial to tantric occult psychology. The instructions also include a nicely complementary uncontroversial phenomenon of yogic awareness, *pratyahara* (also mentioned by Iyengar; see above), “pulling the senses back from their objects.” We’ll take up



*Relax the whole body and stop all physical movement.*

*Become aware of the natural breath and let it become rhythmic and relaxed.*

*Begin to count the breaths from number 27. Mentally repeat, “I am breathing in 27, am breathing out 27. I am breathing in 26, I am breathing out 26,” and so on to, back zero....*

*Duration: According to time available. In general, the longer the better, although a minute or two is sufficient between asana practices.*

*Awareness: Physical—first on relaxing the whole body, then on the breath and counting.... Spiritual: on ajna chakra [the “third eye,” or center of consciousness located between the eyebrows].*

*Benefits: This asana relaxes the whole psycho-physical system. It should ideally be practiced before sleep, before, during and after asana practice, particularly after dynamic exercises such as surya namaskara [Sun Salutation, an asana series that marries breath and movement]; and when the practitioner feels physically and mentally tired. It develops body awareness. When the body is completely relaxed, awareness of the mind increases developing pratyahara.<sup>6</sup>*

*This “pratyahara” is limb number five of the eight-limbed yoga, ashtanga yoga, of the Yoga Sutra, literally “pulling back.” At YS 2.54– 55, it is spelled out as “the disconnection of the sense organs from their objects as if in imitation of the tale of the chitta,<sup>7</sup> ‘thought and feeling’ (to be still). From that comes supreme control of the sense organs.” The Bhagavad Gita also has several verses on this (e.g. 6.24–27; see [appendix B](#)), as do other yoga manuals, old and new.*

*Such “withdrawal (of the senses from the objects of sense)” is the yoga equivalent of phenomenology as practiced in philosophy, it seems to me. Philosophy students, I think, will naturally like the exercise. Something similar is taught in the tradition of Descartes. It involves paying attention not to the dog that is barking but to the sound of the bark and the “canoid shape” (in the phrase of Bertrand Russell); the smell of the flower, not the flower itself; the “sense data” of colors and so on, taken altogether, multidimensionally, regarded as mere objects of the senses. In classical India as in the West, a presentation dissociated from its objective indication is viewed as having a type of objecthood (vishayata) when veridical experience is the same as illusion. The snake that is a rope looks real. In pratyahara, the rope that is real looks like an illusion. We witness sense presentations as though their objects were not there, “pulling back (the organs of sense)” into a generic “sense mind” (manas).*

*In the yoga studio, a modified pratyahara seems all that is possible, since one has to hear and trust the words of the instructor transmitted through the sound of his or her voice. One can, however, close the eyes, as one does normally with a*

least certain postures, and while practicing breath control, pranayama, by itself (as opposed to in conjunction with a flow or sequence of postures). And closing your eyes heightens other capacities, as is traditionally taught. With Corpse Pose, shavasana, though, mastery requires pratyahara, at least according to Swami Satyananda and other traditional teachers.

Just how to interpret the sense data of yoga will occupy us in the next chapter on the mind-body problem, where we will look at top-down approaches to the relation of theory and practice. Now, in contrast, let us look at Yoga theories from the bottom up. Through pratyahara and other practices, changes occur in experience; there are new phenomena. How should we think about these?

For example, consider the obviously controversial term, “ajna chakra,” in the last quote on shavasana. I say it is controversial because I presume not everyone is aware of this “center of consciousness.” I would guess that among the entire human population, few would report being conscious of anything such. But there are many yogis and yoginis who are committed to its existence as a matter of immediate experience, prototypically a yoga master such as Satyananda in line with a confluence of traditional texts. It is hard to know how to interpret such experiences. But any self-respecting Yoga philosophy has to defend their possibility and their value. Of course, not everything traditionally imputed to the center of consciousness has to be endorsed. But one point of Yoga philosophy is to remove intellectual blocks (granthis, pratibandhas) which might have to this or another line of yogic self-development. The ajna chakra is traditionally taught as the “third eye,” a mystic center of consciousness in a subtle body somehow connected with the center of the forehead, between the eyebrows (see [figure 4C](#)). It is traditionally described as luminescent, bluish or camphor white (as seen in inner vision), and comprised of two lobes or petals spanning the body’s midline. In Yoga psychology and cosmological theory, the third eye is not itself made of matter but is capable of transmitting spiritual influences on us and our physical selves. Such influences or energies are said to originate in other worlds or planes of being or from a deeper or higher self. Yoga philosophy does not necessarily endorse all of this, but it legitimates intellectual as well as practical exploration of such ideas.<sup>8</sup>

In much the same vein of occult psychology are the bandhas of hatha yoga. These, however, are physical contractions, certain muscle tightenings, which are under our direct control. Masters of yoga talk about them as both bodily and spiritual—unlike ajna chakra, which is said to be only spiritual and not ordinarily under our direct control. The bandhas are, furthermore, much exercised in hatha yoga, especially in advanced practices. They are locks (bandha = [psychic] lock) said to enable transition to a sense of energy flow in occult pathways and between or in and out of chakras such as the third eye. Again, unlike chakra

centers of occult consciousness, bandhas are voluntarily exercised in asana practices as well as in breath control, pranayama. One does not have to believe in or be able to identify chakras in order to exercise a bandha. Ordinarily we do not pay them much if any attention. But we do not “awaken” to their activity. We initiate their activity through conscious engaging or letting go.

There are three bandhas prominently referred to in hatha yoga: mula bandha, uddiyana bandha, and jalandhara bandha, respectively Root Lock, Stomach Lock, and Throat Lock. A fourth, maha bandha, the Great Lock, is the simultaneous practice of all three. Let us look again at our three manuals, in reverse order this time, starting with Satyananda explaining the bandhas in the tantric psychology of chakras, then Iyengar on Stomach Lock, and finally our contemporary anatomist on Root Lock.

From *Asana Pranayama Mudra Bandha* (see [figure 4C](#) for the chakric system that Swami Satyananda mentions and [figure 4A](#) for the theory of vital and mental bodies or “sheaths,” kosha, which he refers to obliquely):

*These three bandhas directly act on the three granthis or psychic knots [which block the flow of psychic energy].... The granthis prevent the free flow of prana along sushumna nadi [the central channel of tantric psychology: see [figure 4C](#)] and thus impede the awakening of the chakras and the rising of kundalini [psychic energy asleep in the lower chakras].*

*Brahma granthi is the first knot and... when brahma granthi is transcended, the kundalini or primal energy is able to rise beyond mooladhara and swadhisthana [the first two of seven chakras, linked to the base of the spine and the area above the genitalia respectively, which are said to control the survival and sexual instincts] without being pulled back by the attractions and instinctual patterns of the personality.*

*The second knot is vishnu granthi, associated with manipura and anahata chakras [the next two chakras, at the level of the navel and of the heart, respectively].... Manipura sustains... the physical body, governing the digestion and metabolism of food. Anahata sustains... the mental body and the energy body. Once vishnu granthi is transcended, energy is drawn from the universe and not from the localised centres within the human being.*

*The final knot is rudra granthi which is associated with vishuddhi and ajna chakras [the next two chakras, at the level of the throat and in the middle of the forehead, respectively]. Vishuddhi and ajna sustain... the intuitive or higher mental body.... When rudra granthi is pierced, individuality is dropped, the old ego awareness is left behind and the experience of unmanifest consciousness emerges beyond ajna chakra at sahasrara [the seventh chakra located just above the crown of the head].<sup>9</sup>*

*From Iyengar's Light on Yoga:*

*Uddiyana means flying up. The process in Uddiyana Bandha is to lift the diaphragm high*

up the thorax and to pull in the abdominal organs against the back of the spine. It is said that through Uddiyana Bandha the great bird prana is forced to fly up the sushumna nadī, the main channel for the flow of nervous energy, which is situated inside the meru-danda or the spinal column.<sup>10</sup>

From the *Anatomy of Hatha Yoga* by H. David Coulter, quoted earlier:

*mula bandha* (the root lock) is a gentle contraction of the pelvic diaphragm and the muscles of the urogenital triangle. It... seals urogenital energy within the body, controlling and restraining it during breathing exercises and meditation (again, this is a literary rather than a scientific use of the word “energy”). What actually happens is more easily sensed than described, so we’ll begin with a series of exercises.<sup>11</sup>

Here such “literary” usages are unavoidable, dare we say? Of course, according to the two traditional teachers, the literary is literal in an experiential sense. But the explanation tying the practices to occult energies and chakras is at least one level of theory higher, or more abstract, than the system of terms used to teach the exercise. Nevertheless, as with breath exercises, there can be little question that these do indeed expand one’s sense of bodily energies—Iyengar’s “nervous energy” and the like—to the point of developing special yogic “powers” or *siddhis* (a theme and major preoccupation of this book). The difficulty of how to square different interpretations of these phenomena is pretty apparent.

Our contemporary Yoga philosophy cannot avoid the conflict between the tantric and other traditional explanations, on the one hand, and science, on the other. One of many common texts Iyengar and Satyananda share is the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, which belongs to the fifteenth century but summarizes and echoes yogic and tantric texts of more than two millennia. In the university setting, the instinctive suspicion would be that the rich tradition of common sources would be responsible for an identical confusion on both gurus’ parts, despite their insistences that chakras, etc. are experiential. Let us call this the historicist worry. We shall return to it along with the issue of a partial intersubjectivity in [chapter 4](#) and again in [appendix E](#).<sup>12</sup>

For the present, it is sufficient to note that the conflict is not just about theories, since the one camp takes as experiential what the other rejects as explanatory and wrong. The distinction between the phenomenological and the theoretical applies to traditional Indian theories as much as to anatomical accounts, but no one tries through practices of controlling the breath to master medical science. The theory of the chakras, et cetera, is supposed to be backed up by rather immediate and convincing experience brought about by, or facilitated by, breath control, *bandha* mastery, *asanas*, and other practices, so experts tell us.



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