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YOGA PHILOSOPHY AND PERCEPTIONS OF SELF

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YOGA PHILOSOPHY AND PERCEPTIONS OF SELF

By

Christopher Jentoft

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ABSTRACT

YOGA PHILOSOPHY AND PERCEPTIONS OF SELF

By

Christopher Jentoft

How does lengthy study of yoga affect contemporary, American practitioners' conception of self? These students encounter yoga in a sociocultural context different from that in which the complex system of practical philosophy arose. The practical elements of the philosophy build on an ontology and epistemology are unlikely to be shared by most American students of yoga. I develop a tentative answer through a comparison of the classical philosophy of yoga with the experience of a small sample of current practitioners, with particular interest in the conception of self and the understanding of mind in relation to self. For the former, I studied the classical text, *The Yoga Sutras*; for the latter, I did ethnographic research (participant observation and semi-structured interviews) in an advanced yoga class in Lansing, Michigan. The students expressed a transition in self-conception, from identifying mind as self to identifying it as an instrument of the self.

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INTRODUCTION

This research project addresses the question: How does lengthy study of yoga affect contemporary, American practitioners' conception of self? These students encounter yoga in a vastly different sociocultural context from that in which the complex system of practical philosophy arose. The practical elements of the philosophy build on an ontology and epistemology that reflect Hindu roots and are unlikely to be shared by most American students of yoga. Considering the millions of Americans who regularly practice yoga, this study may be of practical concern, as well as of theoretical importance, for the fields of anthropology, religious studies, psychology, and philosophy. I develop a tentative answer through a comparison of the classical philosophy of yoga with the experience of a small sample of current, American practitioners, with particular interest in the conception of self and the understanding of mind in relation to self. For the former, I studied one translation of and exposition on the classical text, the Yoga Sutras (Iyengar, 1996); for the latter, I did ethnographic research (participant observation and semi-structured interviews) in an advanced yoga class in Lansing, Michigan.

Yoga is a complex system of practical philosophy. In its classical conception, as expressed by Patanjali in the Yoga Sutras (Iyengar, 1996), the purpose of yoga is to bring one to awareness of one's true Self¹, or *atman*². The practice does so by enabling the practitioner to develop the capacity of *citta vrtti nirodha*, reducing the fluctuations of the mind. This reduction enables one to learn to remove from one's attention all that is not

¹ The lower-case 's' self and capital 'S' Self are meaningfully distinct. The former reflects an identity without ontological distinction from the physical, psychological, and social individual; Self refers to an ontologically distinct Self, like spirit or soul. *Atman* receives clarification in Chapters 1, the distinction in Chapter 3.

² English spellings of Sanskrit words surface frequently and are italicized.

Self and to undo the illusory identification of Self with its social, psychological, emotional, and physical manifestations.

I did ethnographic research at a yoga center where I have personal connections through my wife. She has worked at the center since its inception and is good friends with Ruth, the owner of the center and instructor of the class in which I did my work. The students who participated in this research had, at the time, studied yoga from three to fifteen years. Most students began to take yoga classes to address physical injury or illness; some started yoga to manage stress. None began to study yoga with the intention of gaining a deeper understanding his or her self. Almost every student has experienced some changes in his or her understanding of self, particularly in the relationship between self and mind.

Chapter 1 presents a summary of yoga philosophy. While some of the elements of the philosophy find little or no substance in the analysis of the ethnographic data, the complexity of yoga philosophy – the interdependence of the various terms – demands this comprehensive treatment. Chapter 2 addresses the theoretical and methodological bases of the research. The heart of the analysis is Chapter 3, in which I present narrative descriptions of experiences related to me by students and describe their relevance both to yoga philosophy and to the primary themes that arose in the analysis of the ethnographic data. Chapter 4 concludes the presentation with discussion of potential biases, relevance to the research to other fields of inquiry, and potential for future research.

The central question arose from personal experience. In the fall of 1996, I began to take yoga classes with no understanding of its original purpose. Within months of my first class, I had an experience that caused me to reconsider my understanding of myself

at a fundamental level: I felt my conscious awareness dissociate from my brain and drift through my body, exploring various internal regions³. The questions that arose from this experience led directly to my graduate study and to this research project. I continue to attempt to reach a more clear understanding of that experience and its consequences through my own practice and this research.

³ A more comprehensive description of this experience is in Chapter 2.

CHAPTER 1: A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF YOGA PHILOSOPHY

Eastern thought takes one through the layers of being, outwards from the core, the soul, towards the periphery, the body; and inwards from the periphery towards the core' (Iyengar, 1996, 11).

This quotation expresses an apparent paradox in yoga philosophy: the necessary but contrasting processes of evolution from initial principles towards complex reality and the individual's journey in the reverse direction. The first, an ontology characterized by an outward direction, describes the evolution of the cosmos from original sources. The second, a methodology characterized by attention inward, provides the aspirant, or *sadhaka*, the capacity to reverse the direction and to wrest consciousness from its false identification with its corporeal manifestation⁴. The methodology results from the ontology: the nature of the cosmos determines the individual's method of returning to the core. The ontology has become clear as a result of the methodology, through the experience of the practitioners that established yoga.

It should prove helpful to begin with a brief overview of the history of yoga.

YOGA IN THE CONTEXT OF INDIAN PHILOSOPHY

Yoga is an ancient form of philosophy and practice. Its origins are unclear, but certainly date back at least 2,500 years to its first known scripture, the *Bhagavad-Gita*, assembled from other texts during the 5th century B.C.E. The various oral teachings of philosophy and practice were consolidated in the *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali. Patanjali

⁴ Iyengar's use of the term "Eastern" in this context makes an unfortunate error of reducing a complex cultural phenomenon (e.g., "Eastern thought") to a single characteristic, painting over a vast and intricate mural with an exceedingly broad brush. While many "Easterners" may not think as he describes, Patanjali certainly did.

⁵ This distinction between ontology and methodology is a heuristic nicety that does not reflect a split inherent to the philosophy.

wrote this, the core text of classical yoga, in either the mid 3rd century B.C.E. or mid 3rd century C.E (Feuerstein, 1998, 214). The discrepancy results from some uncertainty as to the person of Patanjali, arising from what appears to be two different figures, one mythic and the other historic. The mythic Patanjali was a “*svayambhu*, an evolved soul incarnated of his own will to help humanity” (Iyengar, 1993, 1), specifically to develop yoga and to teach human beings how to overcome the illusory identity of Self and world, to achieve Self-realization. The historic Patanjali was a scholar who wrote texts concerning grammar (the *Mahabhasya*) and medicine (*Ayurveda*). Some believe the two to be separate individuals; others, including B.K.S. Iyengar, the founder of the school of yoga of interest to this research project, believe them to be the same. Regardless, the *Yoga Sūtras* remains as the foundational text of yoga.

The etymology and definition of “yoga” suggest the basic tenets of the philosophy. The root of yoga, according to most scholars (e.g., Eliade, 1958, 5; Iyengar, 1966, 19; and Feuerstein, 1998, 6) is *yuj*, meaning “to yoke (as in a team of oxen) or to join,” referring to two different forms of union: the process of bringing together the disparate elements of the person, including the body, mind, and soul; and the outcome, which is the union of the seeker with the source, the individual consciousness with the soul⁶. Thus “yoga” describes both the methodology (uniting) and the end (union). The classical definition of yoga is the second *sūtra* (aphorism) of the first *pada* (chapter) of the *Yoga Sūtras*: “*yogah cittavrtti nirodhah*,” or “yoga is the cessation of movements in the consciousness” (Iyengar, 1993, 49-50). These fluctuations, the results of mental

⁶ The ninth century C.E. sage, Vacaspati Mishra, author of the second known commentary on the *Yoga Sūtras*, the *Tattva-Vaisharadi*, suggested the root of “Yoga” to be “*yuja*”, which entails “concentration,” rather than *yuji*, which entails “conjunction” (Feuerstein, 1998, 6). As this meaning is cited much less frequently and as Feuerstein presents both but prefers *yuj*, I follow suit.

activity, prevent the *sadhaka* from perceiving the Self by occupying the consciousness and thus making impossible the clarity and stillness that would allow true Self-perception.

The *sadhaka* is influenced by the self on the one hand and by objects perceived on the other. When he is engrossed in the object, his mind fluctuates. This is *vrtti*. His aim should be to distinguish the self from the objects seen, so that it does not become enmeshed by them. Through yoga, he should try to free his consciousness from the temptations of such objects, and bring it closer to the seer [*purusa*] (Iyengar, 1996, 52).

As above, this definition serves to describe both the goal (the quieted consciousness) and the means (learning to limit the fluctuations) of yoga; again, yoga is both the process and the result of that process.

Yoga is one of six main orthodox (accepting the authority of the *Vedas*⁷) systems of Indian philosophy. While accepting the Vedas, yoga arose and draws legitimacy from other premises and the learning and experiences of its early practitioners (Chatterjee, 1948, 8; Feuerstein, 1998, 4). As with many other systems, it begins with the understanding of human existence as characterized by suffering that results from ignorance of the true nature of the Self: the soul or true Self mistakenly perceives itself as the body and mind. Yoga stands out from other Vedantic systems in its exhaustively practical and specific methodology for the liberation of the Self from the illusion of identity. The methodology is sufficiently independent that, according to Chatterjee (1948, 337), it has been adopted by followers of other philosophies because of its practical efficacy in furthering the practitioner in his or her progress towards Self-realization.

⁷ The Vedas, dating to 4500-2500 B.C.E., are the foundational texts of the Indus civilization, the earliest records of Indian literature and the foundation of much of later philosophy.

The *Yoga Sutras* is a collection of 196 aphorisms (*sutras*) organized into four chapters (*padas*): *Samadhi Pada*, On Contemplation; *Sadhana Pada*, On Practice; *Vibhuti Pada*, On Properties and Powers; and *Kaivalya Pada*, On Emancipation and Freedom. The aphorisms exhaustively, if elliptically, explain yoga philosophy and practice. The *Sutras* are a collection of brief statements that reference teachings common to the teaching of yoga at the time. The brevity, which at first can seem impenetrably obscure, reflects the function of the *sutras* – to remind readers of well-known or previously learned teachings or to guide them to particular understandings thereof. Given this brevity, it comes as no surprise that scholars have written many commentaries explaining the *sutras*. Vyasa wrote the first known such commentary, the *Yoga Bhashyas*, during the 5th century C.E. The present discussion of yoga philosophy draws on B.K.S. Iyengar’s translation and exposition, Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali (Iyengar, 1993).

B.K.S. Iyengar, founder of the Iyengar School of yoga, is widely recognized as among the most revered teachers of yoga (Feuerstein, 1998, 276). He first came to America in the 1960s, and is largely responsible for its early start and popularity on the West Coast. The hallmarks of Iyengar yoga are meticulous attention to the physical details of the *asanas* (the physical postures) and the processes of *pranayama* (techniques for breath control); use of various props, such as wooden blocks and cloth straps, to enable beginning students to develop proper alignment despite insufficient flexibility, strength, or stamina; an invitation to all interested in yoga to participate; rigorous protocols for introducing new material to students (e.g., not teaching *pranayama* until

students have developed a solid *asana* practice); and an often controversial attention to the importance of the physical body in spiritual practice (Ruiz, 2001).

FROM THE CORE TO THE PERIPHERY: YOGA ONTOLOGY

Yoga philosophy conceives of the cosmos as arising in a well-defined process from a fundamental split between *purusa*, unchanging energy, and *prakrti*, fluctuating matter. This dichotomy, deceptively similar to Platonic and Cartesian dualisms, separates the realm of the soul or Spirit⁸, *purusa*, from the material realm. The latter, *prakrti*, or Nature, includes principles of both physics (e.g., physical properties and processes) and metaphysics (e.g., mind and consciousness). *Purusa* consists of the spirit or soul, either in the universal *Brahman* or the individual *atman*. This *purusa* is the core of the cosmos and of the individual; it is the animating principle, that towards which the *sadhaka* strives through the practice of yoga and, as such, is understood to be the true Self. *Purusa* remains single, indivisible and constant, while *prakrti* proceeds through a complex process of evolution that produces complexity out of simplicity. The material realm arises in a layered evolution, an unfolding from subtle and undifferentiated basic forms to a gross and complex assortments of discrete elements. This unfolding occurs along a progression identified by discrete and identifiable stages. An onion serves as a helpful metaphor, with *purusa* at the core and successive layers of *prakrti* forming around it, such that each layer presents a distinct whole that envelops and obfuscates, but does not nullify or alter lower layers.

⁸ I follow Iyengar in capitalizing a few words, notably “Self” (discussed above), “Spirit”, “Nature”, and “*Brahman*”. Iyengar capitalizes both “Sprit” and “Nature” but neither *purusa* nor *prakrti*, and I do not know why. The capitalization of “*Brahman*” follows, I infer, from the use of that name to refer to a divine entity, God. “*Atman*” receives not capitalization in regular use.

The relationship between *Brahman* and *atman* presents a puzzle. How can something that remains single, indivisible, and constant be at the same time *Brahman* and the substance of the *atman* that is at the core of every individual? How can something that is indivisible be divided? One possible solution may be that the puzzle results from an error in perspective: when we see many, individual *atmans*, we participate in the basic fallacy of *citta vrtti*, the false identification of the *prakṛti* self with the true, *puruṣa* Self. An illustration may prove helpful: imagine a bright light inside a dark box with many tiny holes puncturing its sides. From the outside, the viewer sees many individual points of light. The apparent individuality of each light results from the obstruction between the viewer and the source of the light. Perhaps the many *atman* seem individualized from the perspective of the individual, whose consciousness is enmeshed in the particularity of the cosmos. *Brahman* may not separate out into infinite specks of *atman*, but one may call *atman* that tiny glimmer of *Brahman* that one perceives when gazing deeply within.

Evolution, in the context of yoga philosophy, is not understood to be the process of natural selection. Yogic evolution refers to the process of unfolding from basic properties described in the development of the four stages of the cosmos; the characteristics of this process are transitions from simplicity to complexity, generality to specificity, and subtle to gross matter. Evolution's opposite is not devolution, but involution, the process of reducing complexity and dissolving the distinctions that define dichotomies in pursuit of unity. The former largely informs the cosmology. The method, or practice, of yoga, is addressed below in the section concerning the journey from the periphery to core.

The unfolding evolution of the cosmos consists entirely of the unfolding of *prakṛti*, in four stages: *Alinga*, “unmarked”; *Linga*, “marked”; *Avisesa*, “universal” or “neumonal”; and *Visesa*, “specific” or “phenomenal” (see Appendix 1, Table 1). Each marks a separate ontological level; the features that obtain in *visesa* are absent in *avisesa*, and so on. The potential for each further complexity arises out of the initial dichotomy of *purusa* and *prakṛti*. These levels continually develop new, specific manifestations of previous latencies without the loss of basic matter: “whatever comes into existence is not a completely new production – out of nothing as it were – but rather the manifestation (*avirbhava*) of latent possibilities. Furthermore, the disappearance of an existing object does not mean its total annihilation but merely its becoming latent again (termed *tirobhava*)” (Feuerstein, 1998, 242-3). Hence, the potential for an evolute (something that appears as a result of evolution) that manifests in each stage is present in its predecessors.

Alinga, the first stage, consists of *mula-prakṛti*, or “root nature”. It is pure potential, completely undifferentiated and uniform. Only through intuition (a form of knowledge deeper than that of the intellect and accessible only through profound meditation) can one access this stage. The *gunas*, three basic constituents of *prakṛti*, come into being here. *Guna*, meaning “strand,” denotes “the irreducible ultimate ‘reals’ of the cosmos,” much as atomic structure denotes the irreducible ultimate ‘reals’ of the physical cosmos” (Feuerstein, 1998, 12). The *gunas* are: *sattva*, illumination, which gives rise to knowledge and wisdom; *rajas*, vibrancy, which leads to the capacity for action; and *tamas*, inertia or darkness, which gives us the potential for lethargy, resistance, and consistency. The varying natures of the *gunas* in subsequent stages make

potential the fluctuating nature of *prakṛti*, thus the nature of the physical world as we experience it. The *gunas* exist here in equilibrium, such that no differentiation of *prakṛti* results.

Linga marks the origin of the phenomenal cosmos, that which can be sensed, but not phenomenology, the perception thereof. In this stage arises *Mahat*, “cosmic intelligence... the great principle, embodying a spontaneous motivating force in nature, without subject or object, acting in both creation and dissolution” (Iyengar, 1993, 25). This is the first specific formation of *prakṛti*. The *gunas* (*sattva*, or illumination; *rajas*, or vibrancy; and *tamas*, or inertia) fall out of balance, leading to the constantly shifting nature of *prakṛti*. The particular nature of this imbalance determines the manifestation of *prakṛti*; the greater the *rajas*, for example, the more active the manifestation. The complex array of possible interactions among the *gunas* would require a lengthy discussion of little relevance to the current study⁹. It is also in *Linga* that individual consciousness, *citta*, first arises. *Citta*, which receives greater attention below, is the first recognizable manifestation of individuality; its constituents provide the link between *purusa*, the individual soul, and *prakṛti*, the psychological and physical manifestation of the individual.

In *Avisesa*, the immediate underpinnings of the perceivable universe evolve. This stage is accessible by the intellect, but not the senses. The *tanmatras*, the “subtle characteristics” of the senses emerge: *prthvi*, smell in earth; *ap*, taste in water; *vayu*, sight or shape in fire; and *akasa*, sound in ether. These characteristics resemble the atomic structure of the elements: materially real, imperceptible, but intellectually identifiable basic constituents of matter. Here, the constituents of *citta* – *manas*, mind; *buddhi*,

⁹ For those interested, see Iyengar’s explication of chapter 2, *pada* 19 (Iyengar, 1993, 126-128).

intelligence; and *ahamkara*, ego¹⁰ – emerge. These elements remain undistinguishable and separate until the next and final stage of evolution.

Visesa is the stage at which Nature (in the sense of the fully complex manifestation of fluctuating *prakṛti*) comes fully into being. This level, in which we are aware of our existence, is fully accessible to the senses. Here, the individual elements of *citta* differentiate, creating the internal tensions among these constituents – mind, intellect, and self-conception – that lead to false Self-perception. Here also the 16 “principles of nature” emerge: the five elements (earth, water, fire, air, and ether); the five *jñānendriyas*, organs of perception (ears, eyes, nose, tongue, and skin); the five *karmendriyas*, organs of action (arms, legs, mouth, generative and excretory organs); and *manas*, mind.

The development of human beings follows the same evolutionary process as that of the cosmos: increasingly complex, specific, and gross levels emerging consecutively from more basic potential. The split of *prakṛti* from *puruṣa* creates the potential for this individuation. Individual evolution follows a pattern of developing consecutive levels that host the emergence of increasingly specific potentials coming to fruition in layers consecutively removed further from the core. This process creates an illusory identification of *puruṣa*-Self with the *prakṛti*-self, the root of suffering. The function of yoga is to undo that process.

¹⁰ This is not the Freudian understanding of Ego. It is perhaps unfortunate that scholars of yoga have chosen to translate *ahamkara* in this way, for the meaning is more clear in the other expression of “I’-principle,” or basic understanding of self as an individual entity. While “*ego*” means “I” in Latin, the terms seems to have taken on additional meaning due to the English translation of Freud’s work.

FROM THE PERIPHERY TOWARDS THE CORE: YOGA METHODOLOGY

The methodology of yoga guides the individual development of the *sadhaka* towards Self-realization, an involution from the periphery to the core. Iyengar's description of this process is very complex, mapping the development along many channels (see Table 2 in Appendix 1). The features measured by these channels often overlap, while the boundaries defining transitions between stages therein are often staggered; the overlapping and staggering results in a confusing panoply, a result in part of the great cultural and chronological gap separating the context of the *Yoga Sutras* from Iyengar's explanation and my reading of both. However, the broad patterns of development surface in three main categories: the structural description of human nature; the eight yogic disciplines, or *Astanga Yoga*; and the development of the individual *sadhaka*. Each of these categories presents a distinct characterization of the same process – the movement of awareness through and integration of the understanding and control of the external, gross manifestations of *prakṛti* towards the core of root-matter and *purusa*.

The Structural View – The Kosas

The structural view of human nature is very similar to the cosmology described above: a series of layers, or sheaths, that have evolved around a core of *purusa*. Each sheath is the site of the unfolding of distinct evolutes that arise from the potential inherent in previous layers. These sheaths, *kosas*, surround the core Self (see the first column Table 2 in Appendix 1). As the *sadhaka* progresses towards Self-realization, his awareness penetrates to increasingly “deeper” *kosas*, integrating increasingly subtle

elements of his natural existence in his awareness. *Kosas* are not the specific evolutes, but the stage at which those evolutes become manifest; e.g., *Annamaya Kosa* is not the structure of the body, but the stage of evolution in which physical structure is prominent.

The natural condition of humans prior to the journey towards Self-realization is to be firmly absorbed with the material world of the physical body, activity, and sensory stimuli. Here, the Self is fully engaged in the illusory attachment to *prakṛti*; the soul falsely apprehends itself as identical to the evolutes that are associated with it. The development of the *sadhaka* reverses the processes that led to this false belief. The description of the *kosas* reverses the order of the evolution in cosmology, following instead the order in which one encounters or becomes aware of them.

In the first two sheaths, the anatomical and physiological dominate. *Annamaya Kosa* contains the structural, physical body – the skeleton and basic tissues (e.g., organs and connective fibers). *Pranayama Kosa* consists of the physiological processes, most notably breathing and the movement of energy throughout the physical form. (*Prana* means both “breath” and “vital energy”.) Together, these sheaths define the gross body, or the full physical manifestation of the individual. That yoga philosophy conceives of the structures and processes as linked but distinct demonstrates the importance of the development of both awareness and control of the body, and of different forms of control: the *sadhaka* learns “to know the body well and to distinguish between motion and action: motion excites the mind while action absorbs it” (Iyengar, 1993, 29).

Manomaya and *Vijñānamaya Kosa*, stages of the “subtle body,” contain the mental evolutes. The functions of the senses and the mind – the *tanmatras* and *manas* – arise in the first; the ego and intelligence – *ahamkāra* and *buddhi* – arise in the second.

The first gives rise to the capacity for emotional experiences; the second enables reasoning. *Manas*, *ahamkara*, and *buddhi* are the constituents of *citta*. *Manas*, the outer covering of *ahamkara* and *buddhi*, provides the capacity for information to travel between the consciousness and the body and the senses. *Manas* is “the eleventh sense,” the only element of an individual that can access both the external – *prakṛti* and its evolutes – and the internal – *citta* and *atman*. *Manas* conveys information between physical body and *citta*. Mind is understood to be entirely distinct from the Self. Mind functions both as an implement for developing greater discrimination and clarity of apprehension as well as a potential source of distraction – the stimulation of the mind is the source of *citta vṛttis*, disturbances of the consciousness.

The fifth sheath, *Anandamaya Kosa*, “blissful sheath,” is the “causal body” that provides the capacity for discrimination. It receives very little description either in the *Yoga Sūtras* or Iyengar’s exposition. Discrimination (*viveka*) is the perception of *vṛttis* as they are: the false understandings and thoughts resulting from the influence of the gross world on the sense, hence the mind, and hence the consciousness. The extent to which one can discriminate *vṛttis* is another channel for measuring the progress of the *sādhaka* – the greater the capacity to discriminate, the nearer the awareness to the Self. At the stage of complete development, *viveka* is the true perception of the distinction between *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*.

Citta and *Atman* – consciousness and Self – form the core of the individual. The *Yoga Sūtras* and Iyengar’s exposition are ambiguous on the question of whether one ought to consider them to be individual and separate sheaths, or the constituents of the core, surrounded by the sheaths. In some instances, Iyengar numbers the *kosas* at five

(corresponding to the five elements, Iyengar 1993, 12, 51) and, in others, at seven (including *citta* and *atman*, 100, 141). This confusion marks the general problem of accounting for the dualistic relationship of *purusa* and *prakṛti* in the form of Self and individual, reminiscent of the basic trouble with Cartesian dualism. How does one account for a causal relationship that cuts across the boundary between the realms of Spirit and Nature? Neither Patanjali nor Iyengar offer a clear solution to this dilemma. This solution lies at the end of the journey towards Self-realization; the answer may be accessible only through direct experience of the soul without awareness of the elements of *prakṛti* that attach themselves thereto, which is the definition of *samadhi*. This resolution is the ultimate purpose and end of yoga. As I have not had that direct experience, this issue necessarily remains unresolved here.

These sheaths form the context of the *sadhaka*'s journey within. The question remains: what moves through these sheaths?

Citta is the basic element of the individual, the least evolved element of *prakṛti* that can be understood as individuated. It is distinct from the Self, *atman*. At its base, it is the potential for individual identity and the reflection of the total awareness and experience of the individual. *Citta* takes on discernable characteristics in the particular manifestations of its constituents – *manas*, *buddhi*, and *ahamkara*, or mind, intelligence (intellect), and ego (sense of self). *Manas* is the outer layer of the consciousness, the least subtle of the constituents, and serves as the portal through which external stimuli (via the organs of perception and motion) enter the consciousness. The lower one's skill in filtering these stimuli (discrimination), or the weaker one's Self-awareness, the greater the influence fluctuations have on one's consciousness (*citta vṛtti*). *Buddhi* is the

individual manifestation of the universal intelligence, *Mahat*, which is identified with and serves the individual. This intelligence in its pure form provides the capacity for reason and discrimination. *Ahamkara*, the basic conception of self as individual, binds the consciousness to the mind – it is that element of the citta that provides identity as an individual and with the mind – and thus completes the continuum from gross body to soul.

What of the relationship between mind and brain or, more broadly, mind and body? *Manas* is ontologically and methodologically distinct from and intricately related to the body, but the terms of this connection are not entirely clear. Consider the following:

It should be understood that the brain is a part of the mind. As such, it functions as the mind's instrument of action. The brain is part of the organic structure of the central nervous system that is enclosed in the cranium. It makes mental activity possible. It controls and coordinates mental and physical activities. When the brain is trained to be consciously quiet, the cognitive faculty comes into its own, making possible, through the intelligence, apprehension of the mind's various facets. Clarity of intelligence lifts the veil of obscurity and encourages quiet receptivity in the ego as well as in the consciousness, diffusing their energies evenly throughout the physical, physiological, mental, intellectual and spiritual sheaths of the soul (Iyengar, 1996, 13).

The relevant issues here are complicated: at this stage, it should suffice to posit that mind and body are both evolutes of *prakṛti* and thus differ in ontological origin from the Self; they manifest at different stages of evolution; they share a particularly intricate, mutually effective and causal relationship in which events in each can produce reactions in the other.

The self that moves through these sheaths and integrates the complex of *citta-ahamkara-manas* is *asmita*, which has different meanings that connote a subtle and

remarkably flexible concept of self as a reflection of *atman*. *Asmita* can mean both “self” in the sense described here, and “ego,” in the sense of a misconception of the self:

In the temples of India, we see a base idol, an idol of stone that is permanently fixed. This represents the soul (*atman*). There is also a bronze idol, which is considered to be the icon of the base idol, and is taken out of the temple in procession as its representative, the individual self.

Asmita’s existence at an empirical level has no absolute moral value, as it is in an unsullied state. It takes its colour from the level of development of the individual practitioner (*sadhaka*). This, ‘I-consciousness’ in its grossest form may manifest as pride or egoism, but in its subtlest form, it is the innermost being, nearest the *atman* (Iyengar, 1993, 11).

The development of the *sadhaka* correlates to the development of the relationship between *asmita* and the *kosas* – the more fully *asmita* is enmeshed with gross nature, the less developed the seeker. As the seeker progresses, *asmita* disentangles from *prakrti* and moves nearer to the core, thus reflecting more closely the *atman*, the process necessarily integrating more elements of deeper sheaths into the understanding of self.

The Eight Disciplines of Astanga Yoga

Astanga yoga, the eight disciplines or eightfold path of yoga, is the list of practices that form the complete practice of yoga. These practices enable the *sadhaka* to develop the skills necessary for Self-realization.

The yogic disciplines are *yama* (restraint) and *niyama* (practice or observance). These disciplines channel the energies of the organs of action and the senses of perception in the right direction. *Asana* (posture) results in balance, stillness of mind, and power to penetrate the intelligence. *Pranayama* (control of energy through restraint of the breath) and *pratyahara* (withdrawal of the senses) help the *sadhaka* to explore his hidden facets, and enable him to penetrate the core of his being. *Dharana* (concentration), *dhyana* (meditation) and *samadhi* (total

absorption) are the fulfillment of yogic discipline, the essence or natural constituents of yoga. They develop when the other five disciplines have been mastered (Iyengar, 1993, 29-30).

Each discipline cultivates a particular skill to aid the *sadhaka* on the path towards the Self, whether by limiting the causes of *citta vrtti* or by increasing the depth of the perception within. While the seeker pursues each discipline on its own in the order listed, and while the skills learned are distinct, there are important relationships among the disciplines. Capacity in one may lead to an affinity for another – as with the *yamas* and *niyamas* – or may be necessary in order to begin to learn a later discipline – as *asana* is for *pranayama*. The order of the disciplines largely reflects the periphery-to-core ordering of the *kosas* – the first stages address more external and peripheral concerns then moving consecutively towards the core; however, each discipline is added to rather than eclipsing its predecessors, remaining an important element of the work for the *sadhaka* throughout the journey towards Self.

Yamas and *Niyamas*, the first stages of the yoga practice, are moral codes of restrictions and observances that assist the seeker in cultivating an appropriate attitude for the spiritual practice of yoga. The *yamas* are *ahimsa*, *satya*, *asteya*, *brahmacharya*, and *aparigraha*, or non-violence, truthfulness, non-stealing, continence or chastity, and non-possessiveness. The *niyamas* are *saucha*, *santosa*, *tapas*, *svadhyaya*, and *Isvara pranidhana*, or cleanliness, contentment, fervor, study of scriptures and of Self, and surrender of Self to God. Each individual guide provides an important foundation for the journey to the Self, each providing a basic tool necessary for the journey. These guides are neither elements of abstract morality, nor arbitrary rules to follow; yoga philosophy holds that the *yamas* and *niyamas* have the practical result of reducing the distractions that lead to

citta vrttis. They also have a cumulative effect: “the observances of *yama* brings about *niyama*, and the practice of *niyama* disciplines one to follow the principles of *yama*” (Iyengar, 1993, 31). The *yamas* and *niyamas* reduce the causes of the suffering, the *klesas*, or afflictions: *avidya*, *asmita*¹¹, *raga*, *dvesa*, and *abhinivesa*, or ignorance, egoism, attachment, aversion, and clinging to life. *Yamas* and *niyamas* must be maintained through the duration of the journey to Self-realization, even should the *sadhaka* realize the goal. Even the fully realized adept, who has achieved *samadhi* and witnessed the Self, can fall back into the suffering of Self-misidentification if he fails to adhere to these injunctions.

Asana, or “posture,” is the most physical discipline of *Astanga Yoga*. It is the practice of assuming physical positions to develop flexibility and stamina so that the *sadhaka* may sit still for meditation. This discipline is the subject of a great amount of detailed extrapolation. To begin, there is a broad distinction that applies to all *asanas*:

Asana has two facets, pose and repose. Pose is the artistic assumption of a position. ‘Reposing in the pose’ means finding the perfection of a pose and maintaining it, reflecting in it with penetration of the intelligence and with dedication (Iyengar, 1993, 31).

This distinction reflects the yogic distinction between action and motion, mentioned above in the discussion of *annamaya* and *pranamaya kosas* on pages 13-14. More specifically, there are hundreds of individual *asanas*, and hundreds of ways to combine them, such as particular orders of postures (often called sequences) and theories concerning how one ought to assume or move through postures. *Asana* also “forces us to live intensely in the present moment,” without attention to concerns about the past or the future, which

¹¹ This is another use of the word *asmita*, here referring to the capacity of self-understanding to limit the true Self-understanding, along the lines of *citta vrttis*.

has both a strengthening and a cleansing effect: physically in the rejection of disease, mentally by ridding our mind of stagnated thoughts or prejudices; and, on a very high level where perception and action become one, by teaching us instantaneous correct action; that is to say, action which does not produce reaction. On that level we may also expunge the residual effects of past action (Iyengar, 1993, 32).

The dedicated practice of *asana* also prepares the body for *pranayama*.

Asana is both a stage in the process and a microcosm reflecting the whole of yoga. *Asana* trains the seeker to penetrate the full physical body with the mind and the intellect, thus beginning the process of involution, in which the distinctions among particular evolutes dissolve as the specifics resolve into the more basic, latent potential. This penetration limits the body's capacity to create *citta vrtti* by developing control over some of the root causes of these fluctuations. As a microcosm to the macrocosm, *asana* can demonstrate the full process of individual development.

Asanas act as bridges to unite the body with the mind, and the mind with the soul. They lift the *sadhaka* from the clutches of afflictions and lead him towards disciplined freedom. They help to transform him by guiding his consciousness away from the body towards an awareness of the soul (Iyengar, 1993, 32).

The aim [of *asana*] is to recreate the process of human evolution in our own internal environment. We thereby have the opportunity to observe and comprehend our own evolution to the point at which conflict is resolved and there is only oneness, as when the river meets the sea. This creative struggle is experienced in the headstand: as we challenge ourselves to improve the position, fear of falling acts to inhibit us. If we are rash, we fall, if timorous, we make no progress. But if the interplay of the two forces is observed, analysed and controlled, we can achieve perfection (Iyengar, 1993, 12).

Pranayama is the controlled movement of breath and "vital energy". The *Yoga Sutras* indicate a specific relationship between *asana* and *pranayama*: stability in *asana* practice must precede beginning *pranayama* study. Iyengar explains that *pranayama* entails very detailed control of the muscles surrounding the lungs and the spine:

“Inverted postures, forward bends, backbends – the whole range of postures – are therefore essential if we are to derive from pranayama the maximum benefit with the minimum strain” (Iyengar, 1993, 33). The individual practices of this discipline are varied and precise, involving very specific control of the muscles and structures of the respiratory system, similar to the physical specificity of *asana* practice. *Pranayama* divides breathing into three portions: inhalation, exhalation, and cessations between the two. Iyengar calls inhalation “internal *pranayama*,” and describes it as rising from the core towards the surface. When the in-breath is completed, “the *purusa* embraces *prakṛti*”. Exhalation reverses this order, moving from the external towards the core: “It is involution, or the descending order of *prakṛti* to meet its Lord, *purusa*” (Iyengar, 1993, 165).

Pratyahara is the withdrawal of the senses from the external world, and marks the first step in controlling the senses and the mind. Rather than a simple closing down of the avenues through which stimuli come into awareness (e.g., closing one’s eyes), this practice entails the development and exercise of control over the attention, the extent to which the *citta* draws directly and without discrimination from the senses. Practicing *pratyahara*, one need not close one’s eyes to avoid seeing, if one’s visual attention is turned inward. This practice effectively seals the *citta* and its constituents off from the external, cosmological, and material realm. It enables the practitioner to feel indifferently towards the material realm, thus limiting afflictions (*klesas*) and the sway of the sensory stimuli. To this stage, *yama*, *niyama*, *asana*, and *pranayama* have prepared the seeker to turn the attention, the light of the consciousness back onto the consciousness and, ultimately, to the source, *atman*.

Through *pratyahara*, he develops willpower, detaches himself from the organs of senses and acquires clarity of thought. This is the beginning of culturing the brain. Once he has become indifferent to worldly matters, he is fit to proceed on the inner quest, enriching the mind through *dharana* (Iyengar, 1993, 178).

This discipline is the last of the external aids of yoga and marks the beginning of the true practice of yoga, *citta vrtti nirodha*, which occurs in the practice of *dharana*, *dhyana*, and *samadhi*. The transition from *pratyahara* to the following practices marks the end of the practices of yoga that Iyengar describes as varying individually to those that practitioners experience universally (Iyengar, 1993, 173).

Dharana and *Dhyana*, or concentration and meditation are the stages of controlling the mind and stilling the consciousness. *Dharana* is the practice of “fixing [the] consciousness on one point” by reducing and eliminating the interruptions of the mind, whether the objects of those interruptions are external or internal. It is the “sublimation of the mind” (Iyengar, 1993, 178). *Dhyana* is the “steady, continuous flow of attention directed towards some point,” or the application of the concentration of *dharana* over an extended period of time. It is the “sublimation of the consciousness” (Iyengar, 1993, 179).

Samadhi is clear perception and apprehension of the true Self. The common translation of *samadhi* is ecstasy; however, Eliade’s interpretation of the meaning as “enstasy” seems closer to the point (Eliade, 1958, 77, Feuerstein, 1998, 3). “Ecstasy,” with the prefix *ec-*, meaning “out, ” indicates a state (*stasis*) of standing outside of oneself. *Samadhi*, as Eliade rightly indicates, is the terminus of the journey within, hence his use of *en-*, meaning “in,” or standing inside oneself. Iyengar describes *samadhi* as the level of meditation in which the object of meditation engulfs the meditator, who loses his

or her sense of self-awareness (Iyengar, 1993, 181).

The Development of the Sadhaka

The *Yoga Sutras* offer one elliptical phrase regarding the ordered development of the *sadhaka*: “There are differences between those who are mild, average and keen in their practices” (Iyengar, 1993, 76). However, from the earliest commentary, sages have offered a more detailed overview of the progression of the *sadhaka*. This process consists of four stages (Appendix 1, Table 2, “Level of *Sadhaka*”), which describe the characteristics of the practitioner and the extent to which the mind, consciousness, and awareness can penetrate towards the core Self. A brief overview of these stages follows.

The *mrdu*, or mild practitioner, is aware only of the mechanical nature of the physical realm and, thus, only of his existence at the level of the structural, anatomical body (*annamaya kosa*). The beginning student starts to develop an understanding of the gross body through the behavioral and physical disciplines of yoga, *yama*, *niyama*, and *asana*. As yet unaware of the nature of the relationship among Self, consciousness, and mind, the *sadhaka*’s effort focuses on the development of the capacity to disengage from external sensory stimuli.

As the seeker moves into the *madhya*, or medium, stage of development, his attention shifts to the more subtle level of the gross body as the attention and consciousness can now penetrate to the physiological processes underlying the anatomical structures. This correlates with the *pranamaya kosa*, the second sheath, and the movement of energy, as developed in the practice of *pranayama*. In addition, and in

part as a result, he begins to develop *pratyahara*, the capacity to withdraw the senses. This capacity enables the awareness to begin to move towards the internal forms of the individual, the subtle body.

Having developed the capacity to observe and calm first the structures and then the processes of the gross body, the *adhimatra* or intense *sadhaka* turns his attention towards the constituents of the *citta*-consciousness, *manas*, *buddhi*, and *ahamkara*. With the practice of *dharana* comes the consistently deepening awareness of *manomaya kosa*, the sensual and emotional mind, *vijnanamaya kosa*, the psychological and intellectual mind, to the underlying *anandamaya kosa*, the blissful body, and finally to the *buddhi*, the underlying intelligence of consciousness. By developing the capacity of concentration, the seeker subjugates desires and limits the brain functions, which make possible mental quietness. Once the seeker can ease the previously tumultuous activity of the mind, he can finally see past the gross and subtle bodies to the underlying, core constituent of the individual, *citta* itself.

The final stage, of *dhyana* and *samadhi*, is the realm of the *adhimatraman*, or supremely intense practitioner. Here, one witnesses the root of the *citta*, the stage at which the constituents (*manas*, *buddhi*, and *ahamkara*) are balanced in an integrated, non-individuated whole. *Citta vrttis nirodha* – the *sadhaka* quiets the fluctuations of the mind. One would experience fleeting moments of enlightenment, but the work is, as yet, incomplete. Only through sustained, even heightened, efforts of renunciation and practice can one develop the capacity to see past the consciousness to the depth of the Self, the *atman*. This is *samadhi* – enstasy (or ecstasy) and enlightenment.

CHAPTER 2: THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

THEORY

The teaching and practice of yoga in the modern, American context differ greatly from those of the classical era, as described by the writings of Patanjali. While a full description of these differences lies far beyond the scope of this work, some become clear in a brief comparison of the teaching and learning of yoga in the very different contexts of classical, Indian yoga and modern, American yoga. Then:

If a man wanted to study yoga, he would find a guru. If the guru chose, the man would be permitted to tend the yard. If he proved reliable and showed promise, he would later gain the privileges of gardening and hanging laundry. If he persisted, he would eventually be invited to clean the interior of the home, perhaps eventually coming to cook for the guru and his disciples. Eventually, he might come to sit with the guru and students and to begin the education in earnest. The tasks in the preceding period of time served to emphasize the yamas and niyamas and to allow the guru to observe the character of the would-be student (Palkhivala, Aadil, 2003, personal conversation).

Now:

A person, more often a woman than a man¹², interested in yoga looks through a phone book or magazine, searches the internet, or asks a friend for a listing of a yoga teacher or yoga center. She might call the teacher before coming to her first class or may attend unannounced. The class consists of a centering activity, likely sitting quietly, an asana practice, and concludes with *savasana*, or corpse pose. After class, the student pays the teacher for the class, or perhaps signs up for a sequence of classes spanning several weeks.¹³

These dramatically different scenarios demonstrate some of the more prominent differences in the social and pedagogical contexts of and characteristics of teaching of

¹² The individual, personal pronoun used to refer to students will shift from masculine to feminine to reflect the significant majority of women participating in yoga either as teachers or students at the center. Similarly, “teacher” replaces reference to “guru” and “student” replaces “sadhaka”.

¹³ I wrote this from personal observations of several new participants in yoga classes at the yoga center. I formatted as though it were a quote (indented and single spaced) to match the format of the Palkhivala quote.

yoga. Other significant differences arise in the reasons that people begin to study yoga and the relationship between yoga and the dominant culture.

One basic shift that may underlie many of these changes is the secularization of yoga. The practice of *asanas* was, in the classical system, a significant step in a full and complex, spiritual – if not religious – philosophical way of life for few dedicated and carefully selected men; *asana* is now an activity open to all who choose and can afford to pursue it. The ethical, philosophical, and spiritual limbs of *Astanga Yoga* have largely disappeared, save where they surface through the microcosmic representation of *asana* and in advanced training outside of the Monday night class. People of many faiths, including major religions, eclectic “New Age Spirituality,” and atheism, attend yoga classes and find God, Goddess, Divinity, Self, or self through the same practice; this diversity is apparent even in the limited sample of this project. One incurs no religious or spiritual obligation simply by attending class and practicing *asana*.

The social context of yoga teaching has changed entirely. In classical teaching, students lived with their gurus and participated in an exchange based entirely on service. Current teaching at the yoga center, representative in this respect of modern, American yoga, occurs in weekly gatherings and is conducted through financial exchange. Teachers today have much less opportunity to observe their students than did the co-resident gurus. Similarly, today’s student has limited access to the knowledge and guidance of the teacher. Should a student want to pursue an interest not covered in class, she must do so independently. To this end, significant collections of books covering a seemingly endless array of topics related to yoga are available at bookstores and libraries, as are popular-press magazines – *The Yoga Journal*, *Yoga International*, and *Yoga* – and

a massive number of websites.¹⁴

The extent of knowledge accompanying the development of the physical practices for current students contradicts the order prescribed in the *Yoga Sutras*, suggesting a significant change in the structure of the practice. Current students can develop quite advanced *asana* practices and remain largely or entirely ignorant of the other seven limbs of *Astanga Yoga*. More broadly, students can do yoga without understanding the role of the physical practice, and the reasons for doing it, in the context of the system of practical philosophy. This difference reflects the relationship between yoga and the dominant culture. While yoga stands as its own system of philosophy and practice, it arose in a predominantly Hindu cultural context, the influence of which is clearly expressed in some key elements of yoga philosophy, such as the division between spiritual energy – *purusa* – and the material cosmos – *prakrti*, the confusion of the latter for the former as the source of suffering, and contemplation of the former alone as the route to liberation from that suffering (Chatterjee, 1948, 299). These ideas would have been more readily accessible to people socialized in that context, those culturally literate in their own society’s dominant ideas. In modern America, these ideas challenge or have little relevance to the dominant cultural context.

The practice of yoga presents present-day American practitioners the opportunity to engage in a form of introspection and of inquiry into the nature of the self that may be quite different from those otherwise available to them. In my experience, this opportunity provided a surprising experience that had a profound affect on my self-

¹⁴ As examples of this commercial proliferation, a book search on Amazon.com (December, 2003) with subject, “yoga,” results in 2305 listings; amazon.com has a separate web page, called “Yoga Corner,” and titles include perhaps the high-water mark for the universal accessibility of yoga in America today, a Yoga for Dummies video.

conception. This experience, which occurred early in my first regular study of yoga, posed questions that have led directly to formulation of the central question of this research project.

Just after entering *savasana*, closing my eyelids rolling my eyes up to concentrate my attention inward, I felt a tremendous tug inside my head from deep inside my body. It was not painful, and I remain unsure of the physical nature of the experience. The metaphysical experience, however, was profound. I was suddenly, starkly, sensually aware of the interior of my body. I found myself traveling down my throat and into my stomach. I saw and felt the soft, orangish-pinkish-brownish lining of the dark, cavernous pouch and heard the soft rush of fluids. I wandered around the interior of my physical form with a light and gliding motion and a wondering gaze.

I was no longer looking out on the world through my eyes.

Returning to normal awareness, I found myself disoriented, confused, and delighted. I *knew* that the physically reductive view of humanity was missing an absolutely essential element, that the body and the spirit coexist in a mutually necessary, symbiotic relationship. The form is not simply some shell that houses a Cartesian mind, nor is mind some biological property arising out of neurophysiological complexity. We are more than we appear. I *understood* then, as physical certainty, animism, higher selves, free will, right action, the role of bodily health in spiritual practice, and the desire of the Creator for human beings simply to be happy. These bits of information welled up from inside me, from my own relationship with my inner self, from my intuition. I briefly tasted the complete epistemic privilege of knowledge one generates within one's own experiences.

Most of this knowledge and understanding, sadly, has faded. What remains, indelibly imprinted, is a certainty that neither the dualism of Descartes nor the physical reductionism of modern science offer a satisfactory explanation for my experience that evening. I did not experience a stark division between body and mind, but an intricate relationship, less a dichotomy than a cline, an intermingling of two entities such that the centers of each are visibly distinct, yet no clear boundary separates them as they gradually fade into each other. Nor was what I saw mere visual hallucination, but a unified, complex, multi-sensory, experience.

This experience inspired some questions in the moment that have informed my thoughts and study for the years since. One of those questions, regarding the nature of the self, has led almost directly to the central question of this research project: how does

the practice of yoga affect the individual's understanding of self? And a corollary follows: How does this effect compare to what one would expect from the philosophy of yoga?

METHODOLOGY

Given that the yoga class offered the only consistent experience across the group as well as my only opportunity to observe and interact with them, I did participant observation in the class and designed the interviews to reflect the class. An initial interest in phenomenology led me to curiosity about consistencies and changes across the students' experiences of the *asanas*, themselves. In addition, yoga philosophy is very practical, emphasizing the importance of development through the practice of doing yoga. The practice of doing *asana* is a meaningful, spiritual endeavor on its own, as well as a stage in a complex process.

I cannot argue that the experience and understandings related by students in the context of *asana* practice reflect the experiences of *asana* practice alone. It is simply impossible to discount or to control for and keep separate those thoughts and feelings that have roots in other realms of experience, such as study of philosophy, *pranayama*, meditation, childhood experiences, social encounters, and life in general. For some students and teachers, *asana* is of secondary, even tertiary importance behind other practices, such as *pranayama* and meditation. Most of these more advanced practitioners have encountered these other elements of yoga in this modern context and that after prolonged *asana* training. So while this is not a pure study of the impact of *asana* on

self-conception, it maintains an *asana*-centric viewpoint and, more importantly, a valid point of comparison between classical and current yoga practices.

Participant Observation

I started this research as a project for ANP 829: Research Methods in Cultural Anthropology (Spring, 2002). The primary data sources for the ethnographic portion of this project are field notes from observation and participatory observation and interviews with students and the teacher from the yoga class. I collected field notes from observing the class as a non-participant (sitting in the back of the room and jotting in a small notebook) every Monday from January 28 until March 25 of 2002. From April, 2002 to December, 2003, I attended the class as a participant observer. I took “head notes” during the class and wrote them down following the class. These notes are of varying depth, breadth, and utility, as my capacities of observation and recollection improved at a frustratingly slow pace.

I initially approached Ruth, the teacher and owner of the yoga center, with a request to do research at the center and in her class two weeks before I began. Ruth’s agreement to allow me to do this research reflected both her openness and my personal relationship with her. She and my wife, Julie Ann, had been good friends for several years. Julie Ann has worked at the center, and served as informal assistant director, since its beginning in 1995. Ruth was one of the first people I met when I moved to town in the fall of 1999, and has been a close friend, as well as yoga teacher, for the intervening years.

I started collecting data by sitting quietly in the back of the room with a notebook and pen. At the beginning of the first two classes I attended, Ruth introduced me as Chris, “Julie’s husband,” and explained that I was here to do some research for “medicine or anthropology, or something”. At the time, I was not well known at the center, having only intermittently attended classes. That I was Julie’s husband served me well, and granted me a level of immediate acceptance among the students that I would not otherwise have enjoyed. As Simon told me, “I knew you were Julie’s husband, and anybody’s who’s with Julie is okay by me”.

After two months, I began to participate in the class as a student and an observer. I still had my notebook and pen and jotted down short-hand notes during the class and took head notes. After class, I extrapolated these to more extensive field notes. During this time, I felt conflicted by dual roles of observer and student. The first required me to pay attention to details in my immediate environment; the latter required me to turn my attention inward. My observation of other yoga students limited my experience as a yoga student. I often felt anxiety that I was overly sacrificing one for the other or doing neither well. After roughly one year of participant observation, I set the pen and notebook aside and came to the class as a student only. I enjoyed this transition very much, and found that my awareness of my experiences in yoga significantly heightened in the period following my active fieldwork. Perhaps due only to the end of this continual “distraction” from my introspection, I find my capacity to “look within” improved significantly.

Surveys

I used a simple survey (see Appendix B) to collect basic, mainly demographic information about the students in the class. I learned from this survey that no student had started yoga to develop a deeper understanding of the self, that all had done so either to deal with a physical illness or injury or to learn relaxation skills. The survey also showed that students had practiced yoga for an average of six years, ranging from three to ten years. I also used the survey as an initial screen to determine which students might be willing to participate in an interview.

Interviews

Before starting to conduct interviews with students, I recorded two open-ended conversations with Ruth. I had written some questions and notes prior to the interview, but used those notes only as a guide during the conversation. She told me how she first encountered yoga, how she decided to study it with the intention of teaching, and how she came to open this yoga center. Her first experience with yoga came following an injury. While performing as a theatrical dancer, she fell and sustained a serious neck injury. Frustrated with the limited success of initial medical interventions, which only subdued the pain, she turned to yoga at the suggestion of her dance instructor. It worked. She quickly grew enchanted with yoga and, when she learned of other students training as yoga instructors, leapt at the opportunity. She opened a yoga center in Santa Cruz, California (which remains open at the time of this writing) and, after moving to Lansing,

Michigan, opened this, her second yoga center.

I used convenience sampling, “a glorified term for grabbing whoever will stand still long enough to answer your questions” (Bernard, 2002, 184) to select students for interviews. After class, I stood near the doorway and asked students whether they would be willing to participate in an interview. I did this three times. During this time, 14 students expressed their willingness and I recorded their names and contact information. I did not record the names of those who chose not to participate in the interview, but recall that they indicated busy schedules as their reasons. Of the 14, I was able to schedule interviews with 10; I missed the remaining four because of continual schedule conflicts. I recruited three additional interviews through similar, although more casual, requests following classes as my research progressed. I attempted to capture a range of ages and also to interview all of the men (three) who attended class.

The students who agreed to be interviewed did so enthusiastically. Many students, engaged in academic professions, saw the interview as an opportunity to participate in the research process from the unusual position (for them) of participants or subjects. All who agreed described the interview, or agreed with others’ observations, that the interview should provide an opportunity to discuss something of importance to an attentive audience.

The semi-formal interview had three sections (see Appendix 2 for an interview questionnaire). First, questions addressed personal history and previous experience with yoga (e.g., why the student started and how they came to participate in this class). The second portion of the interview consisted of a yoga practice that reflects the general tenor of the yoga class. I chose postures that were common to most, in most if not all classes,

and presented them in the order in which they normally appeared. Beginning with centering, one of the two most consistent portions of the class (the other is *savasana*), I led students through the practice using instructions Ruth had given for those postures during my observation of the class. The interview followed the pattern of the class with a series of seated postures before beginning the practice in earnest with downward dog, standing postures, and inversions. It ended with *savasana*, corpse posture, as every class did. During most postures, I included comments from Ruth that I had noted while observing the class. Some of these comments were direct quotations or paraphrases of common comments (e.g., “Find the stillness; check the mechanical part and then sink into the stillness.”). Others were less commonplace; for example, I only noted one occasion on which she said, “Dump the contents of your brain onto the floor”; and students often remarked with surprise that Ruth would say such a thing. Some of Ruth’s comments preceded the posture (e.g., “Before going up into headstand, organize your mind.”) while others attended it. Before beginning the *asana* portion of the interview, I told the student that they could respond to the prompt at their comfort, whether that meant speaking while in the posture or after coming out of it. I asked the students to share their own understanding of the comment and how it felt to attempt to put the instruction into action. I explained that I wanted them to relate their own experience, rather than what they thought Ruth meant¹⁵

The interview was not an authentic representation of the experience of an *asana* practice. As one student pointed out, “I mean, this is a bit of an artificial [setting]”. The

¹⁵ As seems obvious now, these were not entirely separate. The attempt to understand the intention of the instructor in the instruction was part of the individual experience of attempting to follow that instruction. Students made this clear in a number of ways, sometimes by explicit reference to what they thought Ruth meant.

many distinctions between the interview and the home practice included my presence, an individual who both led the practice (i.e., naming the postures) and asked questions about the experience of doing yoga. If a student practices at home, she often does so alone. In the rare instances of students who practiced at home with somebody else (three out of twenty), both practiced and, if one asked questions, they were of a very different nature (e.g., concerning physical alignment: “Are my hips level?”). Students, even those who practice with others, limited conversation or avoided it altogether. For those who practiced in company, the conversation stopped after centering.

The interview resembled the class more closely than it did home practice. Both interview and class consisted of *asana* practice in a social setting and a structured order of events. However, the interview occurred with only two people present rather than 20-25. In the interview, interaction was largely interrogative, in contrast to the congenial, social scene of the class. Students participated in the interview with the understanding that they should not only perform the *asanas* and note the experience as a personal guide for deepening their personal practice, but also pay explicit attention to how the *asanas* caused them to feel and to report those experiences – a very unusual experience, save, perhaps, for some who have pursued yoga teacher training. The observer effect clearly had an influence on the process and outcome of these interviews (see Conclusion, page 103).

I attempted to mitigate this influence by participating in the *asana* practice with the students. At the beginning of a posture, I stated both the Sanskrit and the English names, as was the practice in the class. Then I enter the posture with the student and read the prompts while in the posture. At times, this presented an awkward, even comical

situation. In several interviews, my reading of a few prompts were muffled by the exertion of a posture. That we both participated in the postures comforted the students during the interview, particularly as they came to understand that proficiency in postures was not an important consideration for the interview. Many students spoke openly and without prompting of a sense of self-consciousness or discomfort concerning their *asana* practice. This fragile sense of self-consciousness could have easily led to an awkward experience of the interview, if they had felt vulnerable due to my observation. My participation eased most of this potential concern and, in most cases, assisted students in sinking more fully into the experience of their *asana* practice.

The interview clearly presented an alternative, perhaps strange, setting for *asana* practice. I would stretch the truth, perhaps to the point of breaking, if I claimed that my findings reflected consistent and common aspects of yoga practice even for this limited sample. However, no yoga practice is predictable and no two practices are the same. Most teachers regularly remind students that bodies change daily and that minds do so even more. That these interviews are distinct thus neither invalidate nor impugn the resulting data.

The relationships among my reading of the yoga philosophy, my observations of the class, these interviews, and my own experiences present a broad body of data from which to draw general conclusions about the relationship between yoga and comprehension of self for these students who incorporate the practice of yoga into complex and often very busy lives.

Analysis of the Data

The analysis has been a lengthy and complicated process. I began to analyze interview transcripts and field notes with an inductive approach, following the approach of grounded theory (Bernard, 2002, 463). I developed themes from the transcripts, collected excerpts from transcripts in appropriate categories, and developed models based on the relationships among these excerpts and themes. The themes that arose in initial analyses were: mind, body, breath, going within, energy, progression, and relationship. These themes arose because students repeatedly commented on them with emphasis: they came to be of importance to me because they seemed important to the other students.

As my understanding of these themes increased, I developed further refinements, dividing each major category into more and more subcategories. These divisions seemed to offer the capacity to make very precise measurements of discrete elements within the broader and vaguer themes. For example, I thought it profitable to divide “Going Within” into “Decreased External Awareness” and “Increased Internal Awareness”. I continued to specify terms, introducing further divisions of these sub-themes. The final version of this coding scheme (Appendix 2) proved very complicated; it took great effort to explain the meaning of and distinction between sub-sub-themes. Finally, when attempting to review data collected under this rubric, I found this extent of specification not useful. As a result, I set this scoring template aside and began again with a different theoretical outlook.

The addition of the study¹⁶ of the *Yoga Sutras* introduced a more concrete basis for comparison. At the center of the complex system of Yoga are the paired processes of evolution and involution, the latter speaking directly to the central question of my research. I attempted to incorporate some relevant and important elements of yoga philosophy into my next round of analysis, particularly those elements that relate to the Self (*atman*) and its relationship to its manifestations (e.g., *citta* – consciousness, *manas* – mind, the senses, and the body). With lists of central ideas from yoga philosophy and of early inductive themes, I began the final round of analysis. This stage consisted of another close reading of all interviews, noting quotes relevant to yoga as a practice of developing self-awareness. I marked the start and end of each quote by hand on printed copies of the interviews and gave it a reference number. I kept supplemental notes, in which I commented on each quote’s meaning, importance, or relevance to other ideas. I then tabulated these quotes and comments. (A subset of these data is in Appendix 2). This master table contains entries for 422 quotes.

To prepare for analysis of the interview transcripts, I sorted the quotes by their source, to which the interview question each statement was a response. For each section of narrative (organized by the interview structure, in turn based on the class chronology), I separated out relevant comments and printed a separate table of only those quotes and comments. For example, I excerpted all quotes from responses to the question, asked during centering, “What does going within mean to you?” and used those quotes, primarily, to draft the narratives. I often found individual quotes, pulled out of context, confusing, even inscrutable. In order to understand the comments more fully, I read

¹⁶ At the outset of my research, I had not intended to incorporate the philosophical work. I introduced this aspect of the project in response to some difficult but helpful questions from a professor.

interview text preceding and following the quote and sometimes used word searches or recollections to find other portions of the interview that addressed the same or similar ideas.

The Narratives

In the following chapter, I present my analysis of the interviews and participant observation through a description of one session of the yoga class. While I never observed the exact sequence of events presented here, I assembled the following narrative to describe and emphasize elements prominent in *most* classes. I use brief vignettes to portray the thoughts and experiences of the students. I developed these descriptive portraits primarily from the transcriptions of the interviews, with support from participant observation, and my lengthy familiarity with the individual students. For each moment of the class (e.g., arriving, centering, and individual postures), I used relevant quotations as primary material from which to write the narrative; given the complexity of these experiences, I also found it necessary to rely on the context of these comments, from both the interview and my familiarity with the individual students. For example, in describing Tori's experience in centering, I used comments from the centering portion of the interview as well as later portions, follow-up questions, and my experiences of having watched her seem very peaceful during class and admit to having turbulent mental activity. These portraits are fictional: while based on interviews and observations, I paraphrase heavily, use comments out of the sequence in which they appeared, and include my own observations without distinction in each vignette. These ethnographic

fictions allow me to communicate, more intimately and subtly, the nature of these experiences and the meanings students attribute to them in the complex context of lived human experience. This format also allows room for my non-narrative, critical “voice” that speaks between narratives and discusses the students’ experiences in reference to yoga philosophy. Given my particular gifts and limitations as a writer, I found (through much trial and slightly less error) that the use of these portraits enabled me to express, simply and clearly, some subtle and important points about why these people do yoga and how they understand their experiences in the practice. I often rely on the narratives to emphasize important points while still in the narrative voice of the student without further extrapolation in my more analytical voice.

The instructor, Ruth, is almost entirely absent from the narrative description of the class. She appears only in a brief description of her and in the frequent inclusion of her instructions as prompts (both in the interview and to mark the distinct sections of the narrative). This absence resulted from a choice to focus on the experiences of the students rather than one *not* to describe Ruth, who is the central figure of both the social context of the class and my relationship with these students. My interest, in the present work, is to attempt to understand the impact of yoga practice on self-perception of these students. Ruth does not participate in the group activity of the class from the same perspective; rather than coming to class to gain experiences and to learn about her self (or her Self), she comes to class as our teacher, our guide. Hers are the responsibilities to provide us the tools necessary to look within and to ensure that we do so safely, in terms of our physical, emotional, and spiritual health. Ruth’s understandings of self and Self have changed dramatically as a result of her study in yoga. During a number of

conversations, I have learned much from her about yoga and Self, among many other subjects (including marriage, children, and cooking).

This exclusion of Ruth from the narratives is perhaps the greatest distinction between the following narrative analysis and what it is like for us, the students, to attend yoga class. She is the central figure of the class, due not only to her role but also to the particularly flamboyant and ebullient way in which she fills it. Her instructions are only one way in which she influences our perceptions and experiences. She models yoga as a way of life, directly and indirectly. She offers direct guidance when she advises certain types of practices for certain times of day and certain seasons of the year, recommends dietary and hygiene practices based on yogic principles, and offers general guidance about how to live in a way that reflects central yogic principles, such as the *yamas* and *niyamas*. Her less direct guidance takes the form of descriptions of her own experiences with postures when teaching them, veiled hints at broader truths in instructions (e.g., “Find that deep understanding of yourself.”), the décor of the center (signs guiding visitors to be respectful of how their use of the bathroom may affect that of he or she who will next use the same), and through the public performance of her life as a yoga teacher in the broader community.

Ruth’s influence has significantly impacted the experience of yoga for many of the students who participated in my research. My research tools – the observations and interviews – proved insufficient in distinguishing Ruth’s influence from other influences, such other teachers, study of yogic literature, and direct experience in *asana* or other practices. Nonetheless, I found a rich body of data in the students’ descriptions of their experiences in the postures as well as their responses to Ruth’s instructions. In the

following chapter, I attempt to present a cogent analysis of these experiences *as* experiences, acknowledging that the significance of the influences (Ruth, other teachers, philosophical study) remains vague.

Individual experiences both vary and share significant commonalities. The bulk of the narratives and discussion reflect that latter, with prominent exceptions noted. The potential resulting sense of uniformity is an artifact of the presentation. The many strong commonalities that run through most accounts of *asana* experience are of greater interest to me than are the distinctions, because it interests me that a group of people should have such broadly comparable experiences of this practice. The distinctions that I consider the most important and interesting, and to which I devote more detailed attention, arise in the interpretation of the nature of the self at the moment of deepest experience thereof, in *savasana*, the final posture.

CHAPTER 3: NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION OF THE YOGA CLASS

BEFORE CLASS

The yoga center is housed inside a small and nondescript brick building near a large university in Lansing, Michigan. The entrance to the building is on a large and busy road, with constant and occasionally heavy traffic. The parking lot and building are set back from the road, behind other large buildings, so that the center and its immediate vicinity are buffered from the road by some distance. Nothing on the exterior of the small, office complex style building indicates that something very different from small offices lies within.

The center entryway is a mix of activity and calm. The activity results from the mixing of groups, as ten to thirty people arrive while similar groups depart, often crossing each others' paths while removing or donning shoes, jackets, and other accoutrements of daily life. Shelves for shoes, hooks for coats, and benches for sitting and removing both line the narrow, 'L'-shaped hallway. The calm atmosphere results in part from the trappings of the center: a small, electric fountain provides a light sound of spilling water, posters present artful depictions of yoga postures, and a general softness of color all contribute to a muted and easy ambience. It has been my experience, shared by many other students, that the calming of the center exceeds the combined contribution of these physical elements. Whether due to their patterns of thought and behavior or to some inherent character of the center (or both), the students all find the entrance welcoming and soothing.

The class takes place Monday evenings from 5:30 P.M. until 7:30 P.M.. Twenty to twenty-five students gradually come into the Center for Yoga, Movement and Massage. One student is Hispanic, the rest Caucasian. Ages range from 19 (an undergraduate student) to the mid-50s, with more towards the latter than the former. A few students attend the local university; one young woman works at a local health food store; and three have retired or live on their spouse's income. The rest of the class consists of business owners, professors, lawyers, scientists, physicians, and other people with similarly advanced and well-paid professions. Most lead very busy lives.

Students Interviewed

Anna, whose eastern European accent flavors her speech, is a warm and friendly woman. She and her husband, Simon, both work as lawyers for the state. They are both quite weary with their employment and see this class as an escape from and a balm for the business of their days. Simon, a tall and lanky man, is exceedingly friendly. He warmly greets just about everybody he encounters in the center. He is always among the first to arrive. He and Anna have incorporated yoga fully into their lives, viewing it as of equal importance as eating or sleeping (as he has told me on more than one occasion). They have turned their living room into a permanent yoga room, furniture shoved to the side, mats and props spread out, ready for use, and a tapestry hung in front of the television. Both have read a great deal of yoga philosophy, including practical *asana* guides and the philosophical commentaries on the nature of Self.

Jackie, short and muscular, is among the more physically gifted students of *asana*. She is quiet and reserved among people she does not know, but becomes warm and chatty after initial acquaintance. She leaves her children, a young girl and twin babies, with a baby-sitter for the two hours of the class, making her time at the center all the more precious and relaxing. During the time of the study, she was working only part-time and, with the financial support of her parents, getting back on her feet after her divorce.

Tori, a teacher and student, spends all of her time in the center in what seems to be a state of constant pleasure, as evidenced by her constant smile and warm greeting. Whether she is sinking deeply into a posture or finding a physical limit she would rather bypass, she responds with a soft-voiced comment of “well, that’s yoga,” and a gentle laugh. She seems unimpeachably happy. She holds an appointment as a professor at the university.

Kathy, who also teaches at the center, has made a serious study of the full system of yoga practice and philosophy for a number of years. Her presence, from the muscular body, remarkable spill of frizzy, black hair, and a combination of self-confidence and willingness to speak her mind makes her quite noticeable in nearly any setting. She attributes her retirement from a tenure-track position at another university to her experience as a student and teacher of yoga.

Jerry is a quiet and affable fellow. His conservative appearance of short hair and plain clothes made his history with eastern philosophy surprising to me. He has investigated philosophies and meditative practices of eastern origin for many years, yoga the most recent and long-lasting among these. He is the executive director of a state-wide, non-profit agency.

Blaire, a petite woman with short, sandy blond hair and a very quick smile, also teaches at the center. Her manner in the center seems to reflect a quiet sense of confidence and ease. She occasionally substitutes as a teacher for this class. She has recently retired from a research position in the university in order to pursue the study and teaching of yoga.

Sarah is a very tall woman whose physical presence demands attention. Despite her imposing physical presence, she is very quiet and unobtrusive. She started to study yoga just after a transition to a stressful new position at the university. Since then, she has retired from the position, a decision that she attributes to her experience in yoga, and is training to teach yoga.

Amy, a tall, slender, and athletic woman, started practicing at the same time that she began to explore trauma from her early childhood. While she began yoga for physical reasons and therapy for emotional reasons, the two have become deeply intertwined in her experience. She has a long-standing interest in what she calls “Western Buddhism”. During the time of my study, she was a graduate student in a scientific field and taught at a community college.

Liz, a full-figured woman with a slight touch of southern accent, seems so naturally flexible as to do the postures without effort. Her bright smile and ready laugh were an enjoyment for the time that she attended the class, before she moved away. During the time of my study, she did not have professional employment. She had recently moved to Michigan from outside of Atlanta, Georgia, with her husband, and with whom she would return to the south shortly after our interview.

Erin, a very slender, athletic woman, has an interesting and distinct history with yoga. Her mother taught yoga professionally and exposed her to the practice in her early years. During her early teens, she grew distant from her mother and grew to dislike the manner of her mother's presentation of yoga, which she described as "a great excuse to... indulge herself and think that you're doing something great for the universe". She is now quite skeptical of outward display of spirituality. She holds a tenure-track professorship at the university.

Tammy, pregnant during most of the duration of this study, came to yoga through dance, likely explaining the ease and grace with which she moved through postures. She seemed shy when I first met her, but soon showed herself to be friendly. During the time of the study, she was a graduate student, doing research towards her dissertation in the social sciences.

Sally is a short and quiet and shy woman. When she does speak, she often comments about the physical difficulty of the postures and her struggles to do them. She spends very little time in or around the center before or after class. She had no professional employment during the time of my study. Her quiet, unobtrusive presence makes her difficult to notice, and thus to describe.

Ruth, in her early 40s, married with two young boys (who turned 7 and 10 during this research), has been practicing yoga for 20 years and teaching for 18. She is short (just over 5' tall), slender, with a great shock of curly red-brown locks (reminiscent of the mane of Bonnie Raitt). She is a remarkably popular yoga teacher in the Lansing area, where she has taught for nine years. She teaches five classes each week, each filled with 20-30 students. For the bulk of her teaching in this area, she has focused almost entirely

on teaching the *asana* yoga; that is, she has concentrated on teaching how to enter and hold physical postures. She expresses, in word and action, a great enthusiasm for teaching yoga. Her manner is bubbly and excitatory, peppering classes with stories of her children, little bits of song, and singsong versions of instructions.

GETTING THERE

*****¹⁷

Leaving her office, Anna once again ignores the not-always friendly jests from her colleagues about riding the bus. They don't understand why anybody would *choose* to ride public transportation when she could afford the luxury of a car. Ah, well, she's not trying to convince anybody of anything. She just wants to follow her own heart.

On the bus, Krishna Das sings to her through her headphones, drowning out the noise of city and people, providing a precious buffer between the surrounding chaos and the inner search for peace. It's a long journey from here to there, and she hopes to make it during class tonight. With the day's work of intense mental activity, she needs all the help she can get. It's harder to let go of the thoughts than it is to relax the muscles, and more important.

The faculty meeting is calm, thankfully, so Tori feels quite comfortable leaving at her usual 5:05. The students and faculty have come to accept her regular Monday absenteeism. She used to feel fiercely defensive about leaving so early. They remember. She closes her eyes for a moment, and offers thanks for her newly developed sense of

¹⁷ The five centered stars indicate a transition into, between, or out of narrative description.

equanimity about leaving early for yoga class.

She hopes that the traffic is light. With no big delays, she'll get to the center early enough to have about fifteen minutes before class begins. It's important to get to the center before class so that she can begin to tell her brain that it's okay to relax, that it doesn't need to be in charge.

The other lawyers in his office don't call him "Mad Dog" any more; he's lost that courtroom fire. He doesn't miss it.

Simon dabs a bit of holy basil water on his neck and breathes deeply, beginning to let go of the day's mental exertion and tension as he walks to his car. He's glad for the short drive between his office and the center, as he always gets there in time to set up mats and blankets for Anna and himself. But Monday's class starts at 5:30, which doesn't leave him enough time to stop at home, so he has to change out of his work clothes at the center. That's too bad; he'd much prefer to leave all work-associations, physical and mental, behind *before* getting to the center. It's hard enough to clear the shit out of his head without bringing the smell of the office into the center.

I sit at my desk in the back room of my house. The pile of papers to one side and stack of books to the other vie for my attention. There is always something else to read, something else to write, something else to grade. I am distracted and a bit worried about the upcoming class. I know that I am not as advanced a student of *asana* as are most of the other students. So I fret, try to spend some time before leaving calming myself down, and fret some more.

And I wait for my wife, who will drive me to the center. I like to get there before 5:15, before most of the other students have arrived. Today, like most days, I am lucky to get out of the house at 5:15. On the way to the center, I am frazzled, equally glad to be going and regretting the loss of several hours of what could be valuable time for other work.

From the outset, these students describe mental stillness as one of main reasons they come to class and do yoga. It is of such significance and so difficult to attain that they begin to work towards it even before they leave their workplace for the center. We¹⁸ agree that we rarely reach this stillness during the centering period at the beginning of class, during which we sit silently, with our eyes closed, chant briefly, and do some preliminary postures. Sometimes we reach this state later in the class, perhaps during a posture with which we're particularly comfortable. Our best opportunity for stillness arrives in *savasana*, the least physically demanding posture. It isn't guaranteed, however; we go through some classes without achieving the quiet mind, which allows perception of what lies beneath the conscious comprehension of the self.

We mark the yoga class as a special time of the week, consciously identifying the two hours we spend in the class as qualitatively distinct from the rest of the week, as evidenced by comment and action: students comment on their commitment to class and

¹⁸ Through the analysis, I use both the third person plural, "they," and first person plural, "we," when offering general observations. This switch reflects my relationship to the class as both researcher and practitioner. When my findings reflect my own experiences, I use "we". I use "they" in describing findings that do not reflect my own experiences, or when I attempt to set aside my opinions while analyzing questions of mind and self.

how they shape their very busy schedules to accommodate the class. During the opening of every class, Ruth says, “this is your sacred time that you have set aside for yoga” (or something very similar).¹⁹ This marking is reminiscent of Victor Turner’s description of rituals as *liminal* (Turner, 1986).

The concept of liminality offers several ideas instructive to an understanding of the ritualistic nature of this class. As mentioned above, the participants understand the time and place as separate from “normal” life. In this distinct setting, the class is a form of cultural performance, in which participants both repeat known patterns of behavior, such as the seated “centering,” sounding the *Om*, and ending class with *savasana*, or the corpse posture; and improvise others, such as the varying series of postures and foci that define each class. In this performance, the teacher and students can act in conscious criticism of elements of society, reshaping themselves and the manner of their participation in the social order. In a departure from Turner’s description of liminality, the participants in this ritual attempt to restructure not the social order, but the personal and internal order. The focus here is explicitly on the individual’s internal relationship with his or her self, a reordering among mind, body, and spirit. Returning to Turner, the practice is reflexive: “The ‘self’ is split up the middle – it is something that one both is and that one sees and, furthermore, acts upon as though it were another” (Turner, 1986, 25)²⁰.

At its core, the practical philosophy of yoga aims to guide the practitioner towards a deep experience and understanding of his or her self or Self. This term, “self,” is

¹⁹ The meaning of “sacred” varies across students, as discussed under Centering, below (pages 66).

²⁰ While Turner used the term to describe individual, rather than repeated practices, such as rites of passage and pilgrimages, in which the liminal stage separates two socially defined stages of life, the underlying concept fits neatly here.

problematic and quite complicated, as the earlier description of yoga philosophy indicates. In its truest, most yogic sense, this self refers to *atman*, that the spark of *Brahman* that lies at the ontological and methodological core of the person. Both “self” and “Self” are complex, prismatic terms. A more conclusive discussion of these terms and the meanings students attribute to these experiences follows in the discussion of the final posture, *savasana* (pages).

ARRIVING

Before class, students take off their shoes in the doorway and hang up their coats. Some students come dressed in their yoga-clothes, others (the majority) use one of the Center’s two bathrooms to change. Their yoga clothes are typically tights or shorts and t-shirts or tank tops. Conversations begin and grow, as does the number of students. If a class is ending in the studio during this time, then students tend towards caution and softness of voice. Gradually, the students filter into the large studio and begin to prepare for class.

Students gather the yoga mats and props²¹ and move to their spot for the night. For some students, this spot remains the same week after week, while others move from place to place. Once in the room and settled in place, students begin stretching in preparation for class. Many students repeat a fairly consistent pattern of stretches. For others, the stretching seems something of a second thought, as they engage in conversation with other students. Many of these people clearly like each other and have

²¹ Props are straps, blocks (wooden or foam), bolsters (cushions), and other implements used to support students working towards the flexibility, strength, and stamina necessary to enter and maintain postures.

developed close friendships over a number of years. Some students rarely interact with any other students, whether out of preference for silence, social discomfort, or simple reticence.

The studio is dark and quiet. Only Simon, Tori, and Tammy are here at 5:15, fifteen minutes before class usually begins. Simon is at his usual spot, at the front of the room, next to Ruth's spot at the front of the class, and the doorway to the prop room just beyond. He relishes the opportunity to say hello to everybody as they go in to grab their mats, blankets, and props, even though that's not why he chooses to sit there. He indulges in a sense of community, of participating in this group endeavor so far off the current of the mainstream. It's pleasant to share company with like-minded people, so different from the people in the environment he just left. He sits, stretches his hips, and waits for the rest of the class to come in.

Tammy has set up her spot, directly in front of Ruth, as always, but is currently stretching out at the rope wall. Her pregnant belly protrudes out and down as she extends into downward dog, *adho mukha savasana*, hands and feet on the floor, hips up and pulled back by the ropes attached to the wall, head hanging down.

Tori stays close to the floor. She does some seated and kneeling postures to begin bringing her attention in to her body. It's a struggle, pulling her conscious thoughts away

from the electron diagrams and chemical equations, but mostly from the challenges of working in a department dominated, apparently, by the pursuit of ego and self-advancement. It might be nice to do some standing postures, but she knows that she would just, *ssshwip*²², leave the present moment for memories or worries. So she stays on the ground.

By the time Anna walks in, most of the class has arrived. This is the drawback of her decision to take the bus. She walks swiftly through the studio, greeting people, wishing to go change *now*. But, glad to see her friend, she stops to embrace Tammy. Then she goes to the prop room, where Simon has put their bag, and gets her yoga clothes. After she's changed out of work and into yoga clothes, she comes out to sit next to Simon, and to begin doing some simple stretches to get her body ready for yoga. Sitting all day has left her hips and hamstrings tight, and the writing and typing has led to tight shoulders. She hopes that Ruth will be a little late, as she often is. That'll leave her enough time to lie on her back with her legs splayed out on the wall, getting rid of the junk in her head.

I've just now switched to a new spot in the room. I'd grown quite comfortable in my spot at the back of the room, near my former spot of observation and note taking. But it's time for me to take a brave plunge further into the class, to set up where people can see me, as well.

²² This "*ssshwip*" was a sound-effect that she made during the interview. It communicated so clearly a sense of sudden departure that I chose to include it here.

I didn't get here as early as I'd like. The pursuit of stillness is such a challenging task, particularly as I try to follow not only my own work in yoga but also the actions and interactions of my teacher and fellow students. I lie on my back, knees in the air, and gradually rock my legs back and forth, swiveling at the hips. My mind races to my research, to my class work, to my wife, to the next band practice, to my body and the to other students in the room. I'm not good enough; I don't belong. I don't practice enough, hell, can't even stand still in *parsvotrikonasana*. I take a deep breath in and let it out, close my eyes, and try to follow the breath, only the breath.

The period before the class serves two primary purposes for the students: preparation and socializing. For some, these activities are mutually exclusive, for others complementary.

We use the time between our arrival and the official beginning of the class to prepare physically and/or mentally for the class proper. Most students do some light stretches or postures to prepare the body for the strenuous class most of us expect to follow. For some, the primary focus for this time is on loosening stiff joints and muscles. For others, the primary struggle is to begin quieting the mind. For many, these two struggles are not distinct. The tightness in the body reflects tightness of mind, and *vice versa*.

Many of the students engage in conversation while stretching. These interactions begin with fairly standard greetings and inquiries as to well being often heard at an office or a grocery store. Discussions vary from there.

Most intentionally and explicitly mark this time as the start of the journey within, the search for stillness. During this time, we act independently, for the most part, many of us improvising our specific actions in pursuit of the larger goal – stillness of the mind. Tori draws on her knowledge of postures to pick ones that address how she feels each day. She may do a posture that addresses a particular physical limitation or tension; she may follow a more intuitive, internal sense of working towards stillness to guide the choice. She always stays close to the floor, but varies the postures.

Ruth enters with the class nearly full, only the physicians yet to arrive, talking in her singsong way about the changing season, her boys, and her new sweater, and walks through the studio to change in the bathroom. By the time she sits at the head of the class, the pre-class chatter has dwindled to silence, and we all sit quietly, legs folded, backs straight, awaiting her instruction to close our eyes, sit straight and tall, and go within.

This period marks the final transition between the profane world of and the sacred world of the yoga class. The ritual takes hold at Ruth's instruction, and the class proper begins.

CENTERING

Ruth speaks from her seat at the front of the room:

*Okay, come forward to sitting. Sit straight and tall.
Exhaling, close your eyes from top to bottom.
Feel your sit-bones, spread your weight evenly over them.
Draw the tongue off of the roof of your mouth.
Let go of the worries of the day, of the tasks that await you on the outside.
Inhaling, lift your spine from the top of your head.
Exhaling, lift your spine from the base. And look within.
Find that deep understanding of yourself.
Remember, the frontal brain is soft and receding.
This is your sacred time for practicing yoga.²³*

With these words, Ruth marks the beginning of class-time. We all sit quietly in *virasana*, knees folded and feet tucked alongside hips, some on blocks, and others on the floor as bodies allow. Conversations have stopped, and silence fills the studio. Students attempt to follow Ruth's instruction, or "invitation," as Simon phrases it, to "find that deep understanding of yourself."

Asanas act as bridges to unite the body with the mind, and the mind with the soul. They lift the *sadhaka* from the clutches of afflictions and lead him towards disciplined freedom. They help to transform him by guiding his consciousness away from the body towards an awareness of the soul (Iyengar, 1993, 32, cited above, page 21).

Tori sits still on her soft block. To the observer, she seems quiet, still, peaceful. She is not. Her mind races, as it does most of the day when it is not immediately occupied with the intricate details of analytical chemistry. She *knows* the feeling of stillness, knows it well enough to note its absence. She wrests her attention from thoughts outside of the room, outside of yoga, by taking a deep inhalation and following it with her awareness within.

²³ I present all instructions and comments made by Ruth in this format: centered and italicized.

Seeking silence, she struggles with her brain, which races, unwilling to relinquish its normal control. She has spent nearly her whole life living in her head. She has some memory of dancing as a child, not as a mental but a physical experience. But that was a long time ago. Today, she is on the other side of decades of intellectual, analytical life experience. Her brain is primary and enjoys its place of authority, determining what will happen and when.

Yoga, as she experiences poignantly during centering, is one of the few opportunities she has to allow her brain to take a back seat to other experiences and forms of action, primarily the emotional and the physical. But the process is not easy, and success rarely immediate. So she sits, trying to bring her attention into her body and heart-center²⁴, by focusing her mind on her breath.

She wonders how on earth she will do it tonight.

The noises of the room fill Anna's awareness, dragging on her awareness as she tries to pull it inward. Another student breathes deeply and loudly. A car passes, bass-line thumping. She thinks about the food she'll buy after class. She struggles to bring her attention within, but feels pulled outward by all these distractions. There is so much stimulus going on in the room now, so much from the day just past, and so much in time yet to come.

When Ruth says, "This is your sacred time for practicing yoga," Anna remembers that this is not like the rest of her day. She's rushed to get here, to the center, in order not to miss any part of the class, but she reminds herself that she need rush no longer.

²⁴ The heart-center, although physically located, is important in its function as the seat of emotions and love in the individual. It is one of the nodes of the *chakra* system.

One deep breath allows her to begin to let go of the *rush*, the sense of needing to hurry. Another breath brings to her an awareness of how hard and tight her mind is from the intense cerebral work of the day. Her first stop on the journey inward is the brain, a far cry from the experience of a deep understanding of self. She begins to soften her brain by turning her attention away from it.

She begins to let go.

Simon turns his awareness inside his head, into his brain. He feels the tautness of his overly exercised mind. It's tight like a muscle that has been overworked, strained and knotty. He rolls his eyes up, visualizes his third eye²⁵ turning inward, and intentionally eases the thoughts to loosen the tightness. He reminds himself, cued by Ruth's comment about the frontal brain, that this is not a time to think his way through things, but to watch himself and to watch his body, to do these things without analyzing them.

Before the intensely detailed physical practice of the class, the teacher and students explicitly mark the activity as an opportunity to work towards a deep understanding of the self. As is clear from the narratives above, students broadly share agree that the goal of this work is to find the self that lies beneath the distractions resulting from the mental business of daily lives, such as concern for events past, worry about those pending, or general preoccupation. Even though an experience of deep

²⁵ The third eye is an element of the *chakra* system of the energetic body, thought to serve as a portal for non-physical energy to pass into the individual from the outside world, the universe. It often is described in mystical or magical terms, but for Simon it seems a more practical, physical element.

understanding is uncommon during centering, students explicitly emphasize its importance as a primary goal of their yoga practice. For most, such moments of awareness are reached only through the significant effort of the *asana* practice.

The central question, both of this research and of yoga, remains: what is this self that is to be deeply understood? And in what ways are students' conceptions of it similar and different? While a complete answer to this question is not (now nor may ever be) accessible, I can begin to describe some of its general characteristics, beginning with terminology.

Descriptions of this deep understanding vary: Simon calls it the "big self"; Amy describes an "energy body"; Liz uses the term given in the instruction, the "true self". Several students (Tori, Jerry, Blaire, Sarah, and Erin) describe this self in terms of how they experience rather than giving it a name; they describe the experience of finding "the deep understanding of yourself" as moving attention within and finding a sense of stillness or quiet. Only Kathy, a student and teacher, uses the Sanskrit term, *atman*, which is the personified distillation of *Brahman* that serves as the most divine aspect of an individual human being. Jackie refers to it as the Spirit of God within herself, drawing on her Christian belief, but uses a Hindu story of a god finding the best place to hide from man inside man's own heart.

The character of this deep self is, at this early stage of the class, experienced as memory from previous practice, meditation, or other moments of clarity, than as a current experience. For example, as is clear from Tori's comment above, she knows what that understanding feels like and is keenly aware of its absence. Anna describes it primarily as a journey within, lessened awareness of the external and increased awareness of the

internal. Simon describes it in philosophical terms, as an opportunity to encounter “the big self, not the little self, not the ego.” Rarely does a direct experience of the deep self occur this early in the class. Of the twenty to twenty-five students who attend class, only a few have regular, or even occasional experience of the deep understanding of self during centering, which reminds students that the purpose of the class is to work towards this understanding.

External to Internal

I have come to understand the students’ descriptions of their experience of this “journey within” as a cline²⁶ rather than as a dichotomy, that positively values the internal and negatively values the external. The elements of this cline include sensory stimuli and thought processes. Noises and lights in the room and around the center lie towards the external, and physical experiences of the body lie towards the internal. Anna, for example, hears the noises of traffic passing. Thoughts from the day past or towards time after class (perhaps even later in the class) lie towards the external in contrast to quiet, non-narrative awareness of physical and emotional states in the particular moment. When Jerry’s mind wanders to errands he needs to run, he reminds himself, “Okay, we’re doing yoga now,” and brings his attention back to his body.

The movement from external to internal parallels the process of involution and the increasing depth of the penetration of awareness described in yoga philosophy (pages 13-

²⁶ A dichotomy indicates a clean division between mutually exclusive groups, resembling a mathematical clarity of less than or greater than zero. Clines are fuzzier, describing a gradual progression from one side to another, like black fading to white along a gray scale. Clines allow for indeterminacy, and thus more closely reflect lived, human experience.

18). The defining boundary is neither the structural boundary of the yoga center nor the physical body of the individual practitioner. It is not clear that there is any such clear boundary. The positively valued end of this spectrum is the deep experience of self, however conceived or termed. Emotional, physical, and intuitive experiences seem to define its immediate correlates.

Students differ in both their attention to different variables and their emphasis on the cline. Anna repeatedly refers to the transition from the external to the internal, describing many experiences of the class in what she calls “the category of letting the outside world go... and focusing inward rather than outward.” She associates this process with the experience of stillness, which comes to the fore during the discussion of *savasana*, at the end of the class. Tori holds to a similar understanding; however she puts more emphasis on the significance of the analytical mind, the thinker of narrative thoughts of the not-here and not-now. The subjects of thought, such as departmental politics, ongoing research, and the general business of mundane life, that lead to distraction along the journey within are external. Simon places far less explicit emphasis on this transition at this stage of the class, stating only that he visualizes turning his third eye inwards.

Students generally agree that the cline of external-internal maps directly (or very closely) onto the cline of mind and body, such that moving from mind to body is equivalent to going within.

Mind and Body

As may already be apparent, centering provides students an opportunity to break from an implicit, experiential dichotomy between mind and body. The dichotomy arises as an absence of awareness of the physical through consistent attention to the mental. Most students are engaged in professions that involve mental rather than physical work and identify themselves as intellectuals. The dichotomy between mind and body has arisen by default, as those who have led mind-centered lives came to neglect their physical existence. The body has become secondary and fallen out of regular conscious awareness²⁷. Tori says of the relationship between mind and body, “this has been one of the foremost battles of my life. I would say, before yoga... 90%, 95% of my life was lived from the neck up”. Sarah recalled an experience from her teacher training²⁸, which, she said, “really reinforced to me how much my head ends up controlling my life”. Yoga offers an opportunity to turn attention from the mental to the physical. Through this experience, students gradually come to find a relationship best described as a unity, or a very close interweaving.

The axis of mind and body maps along a spectrum of tightness to softness. Just as *asana* is a process of developing physical flexibility from tightness, it also leads to a mental softening. Ruth’s reminder that the “frontal brain is soft and receding” appears to hit close to home for some students²⁹, as they describe the experience of moving away

²⁷ It is important to understand that this neglect of the physical does not refer to a neglect of physical health such that bodies fell into disrepair; most student got enough exercise and ate well enough to maintain their health.

²⁸ She had experienced some irregular heartbeat patterns, for which she received no reasonable explanation from her health care providers. Her diagnosis, by a physician working at the center where she did her yoga teacher training, concluded that most of her energy was in her neck and head, very little of it in the body.

²⁹ For others, this quote makes little sense. They do not remark on it and presume either that the actual

from mentally dominated experience into the yoga practice as a softening of the mind. Tori “can consciously ask it [the brain] to sit back, soften, and let go to the experience that will happen.” Simon hears Ruth’s comment as an invitation “to loosen the grip... of the cerebral.” Anna describes the experience of letting go: “to first get the focus away from [the hardness of cerebral work] and then letting it soften.”

The Sacred and the Profane

The time and the place are special, both in and of themselves, and in their distinction from the business of mundane, quotidian lives. The students each have committed the weekly time slot to the class, setting all other activities as secondary. Ruth’s comment, “This is your sacred time for practicing yoga,” makes this separation explicit. For most, this statement confirms their perception of yoga class as a sacrosanct time, during which they only attend the practical details of the *asana* practice and the journey within.

While most students accept Ruth’s description of yoga class as sacred time, they vary in their understanding the meaning of “sacred”. Some (Simon, Anna, Tori, Kathy, Jackie, and Sarah) describe the Self in religious terms comparable to the yogic conception of Self as *atman*. Others accept the term, “sacred”, without the religious connotation. For these students (Jerry, Amy, and Erin), the experience of removing attention from its normal foci and drawing it within is a sacred act. Tammy described this understanding of

practice lies beyond their capacity or that Ruth used the frontal brain as a metaphor, which they do not understand. Students occasionally find Ruth’s instructions inscrutable. When this occurred during the interview, the student would say that they do not understand the quote and make little other comment upon it. It appears that students are accustomed to missing the meaning of instructions but not dwelling on that lack of understanding.

self in purely secular terms, stating that the deep understanding of self is “too much for me”. Sally, who repeatedly emphasizes her Christian belief, had a simple understanding of this internal awareness: “I work more on just being calm and in the present more than anything else”.

That students set other details of their lives aside means that the yoga class is special, in the sense of unique and separate from other times. Ruth’s use of the word “sacred” implies an additional significance³⁰: the endeavor of yoga is predicated on a journey towards Self and an identification of that Self with the Divine, as suggested by the *purusa* nature of *atman*. While a few students chafe at or ignore this term³¹, most acknowledge that in yoga class, and yoga practice more generally, one has an opportunity to experience something of a wholly different ontological order than a deep but still individually identifiable self, directly related to one’s psychological and social identity.

Mircea Eliade, an early 20th century scholar of religions³², described this experience in this and other contexts. The sacred, as described by Eliade, lies wholly outside of the profane world; it is something “wholly other”. Eliade describes the role of hierophany, “the *act of manifestation* of the sacred in some ordinary object” (Eliade, 1959, 12). This awareness of the wholly other fundamentally differentiates an individual’s ontology from that of one who has no such understanding. A religious person understands the world to be porous, penetrable by the sacred, where a nonreligious person sees a closed cosmos. Without such an experience, “desacralization

³⁰ I understand this to be Ruth’s understanding from many conversations about yoga we have shared over the past several years.

³¹ Tammy says that “But because I’m not a religious person, those words usually – I don’t connect to that language...,” but agrees with the sentiment of yoga class as a special time.

³² Eliade wrote a great deal about yoga, including Yoga: Immortality and Freedom (1958) and Patanjali and Yoga (1969).

pervades the entire experience of the nonreligious man... he finds it increasingly difficult to rediscover the existential dimensions of religious man" (Eliade, 1959, 13).

Here, it is necessary to describe the relationship of the sacred and the profane to the paired relationships of internal and external and mind and body, in terms of Eliade's division. These spectra map on to each other directly: the sacred *is* the conscious relationship of the deep self (internal), the profane that which distracts us from that awareness (external). Note that when the hierophany occurs within the individual, the sacred manifests in the physical experience of the student. Applying Eliade's understanding to the experience of the yoga student, it follows that if some element of the individual, some aspect of or part within the self, can manifest the sacred, then the student encounters the possibility that he or she may be something more than a physical being. The capacity to experience this internal hierophany can introduce a radical change into the individual's perception of the self³³. Just as the tree or stone becomes special due to its sacredness, so, too, must the individual. How does this *juxtaposition* of the wholly other and the self affect those who encounter it? How do they understand it? Does it shape their later experience and, if so, how?

Of interest here is whether this description applies to the experience of the students, raising the interesting problem of whether yoga should be considered as a religion, a spiritual practice, or a secular activity. I suggest that this determination depends on individual choice and experience; students, of course, vary on their interpretation of this issue, depending in part upon their personal history prior to beginning to practice yoga and in part upon their experience of yoga. As with the terms used to describe the deep understanding of self (above), the majority of students who

³³ It did so for me. Other students' experiences have varied. See the discussion of *savasana*, pages 87-99.

participated in an interview used spiritual or religious terms to describe their experience of yoga. Tammy and Erin³⁴, the most secularly inclined students, both used the word “spiritual” to describe some aspect of their experience with yoga. Sally scrupulously avoided all possible echoes of non-Christian religious origin, not participating in sounding the *Om*, chanting, or saying “Namaste”. She still described the function of yoga in religious terms: “if you clear your mind, you have an empty space and then God can come in. I just have to make it’s my God”. While many different views of yoga as a spiritual endeavor surface, the experience of looking deeply within intersects with each student’s understanding of their own spirituality.

OM

Every class begins and ends with a group sounding of the syllable, *Om*. Ruth starts by inviting us, as we sit with our eyes closed, to bring our hands together at our heart and to join her for three *Oms*. We each join our hands together, as though in prayer, inhale, and listen for her to begin. The syllable sounds like a very drawn out “aum,” lasting as long as each person’s breath, let out very slowly, allows. The class tends to harmonize, so that the sound itself is pleasant. Sounding an *Om* requires a low but constant vibration of the vocal chords, which, in contrast to the experience of chatter or of silence, is noticeable. We feel as much as hear the *Om*.

³⁴ Tammy, who had a great deal of experience in dance, came to yoga with an understanding of physical exercise as an important element of her self-awareness and incorporated yoga as a more detailed version of the same. Erin had been exposed to yoga through her mother and, based on complications of that relationship and other reasons, was very hesitant to adopt and even critical of, spiritual elements of religion. She was particularly concerned to avoid “new aginess... it gives all of the salvation without any of the repentance”.

The nature of the syllable, the syllable, *Om*, is the verbal pronunciation of a Sanskrit symbol. According to the *Yoga-Sutras*, *Om* is the audible and visual representation of “The self that is untouched by troubles, action, success, or memories,” the true self that lies beneath the activities of daily consciousness. “He is represented by the sacred syllable *aum*, called *parvana*. The mantra *aum* is to be repeated constantly, with feeling, realizing its full significance” (Iyengar, 1993, 80-81). According to yoga philosophy, then, the sounding of the *Om* is not simply an act of concentration, of marking transition, or of attending to the physical in the present moment, but an explicit attempt to gain insight into the nature of the self.

Experiences of students during the *Om* vary. Some, such as Simon and Anna, who have an interest in yoga philosophy, have studied the meaning of *Om* and embrace its philosophical importance. Sally does not make the sound at all. Most enjoy the experience of sounding the long syllable with the rest of the class, but put little stake in the meaning of the experience. The experience of internal and external vibrations is common. Everybody enjoys the experience of this vibration. This moment is one of few in which students have increased awareness of those around them, if only through the medium of the sound, consistently agreeing with Erin: “I find the *Om* is kind of a centering thing, it brings us all together”.

THE ASANAS

Ruth calls the class out of centering and into a posture practice. “On an exhale, release your hands. As you inhale, gently open your eyes.” She leads us through a set of

opening stretches and postures that varies little over several weeks: while seated in *virasana*, stretching arms overhead with fingers interlocked, sweeping arms together into a twist, and a gentle side-to-side twist of the torso. We then come out of *virasana* to *upavista* and then *boddhikonasana*. These poses nearly always move us into the more active physical portion of the practice. Following these poses, classes vary dramatically, focusing on types of postures, such as standing postures, backbends, inversions, or areas of the body, such as hips or shoulders.

Upavista

*Plant the heels on the ground, press the thighs into the floor,
and stretch open the backs of the legs.
Inhaling, lift the pit of the abdomen out of the pelvis.
Allow the energy to flow up and down³⁵.*

Jerry looks down at his legs, checking their placement and rotation, then lifts his eyes and attempts to activate the leg muscles, to put some energy into the posture. He pushes down with thigh muscles, grounds his heels. As he bends over, he runs through the details of the physical posture: press hands together, lengthen out from the hips and thighs, lengthen the back, broaden shoulders, open the chest, straighten the spine... As he lifts up and bends to the other side, he smiles, looking forward to the day that he experiences meditation in motion.

³⁵ I had not intended for students to comment on the physical instructions of *upavista*, having intended them only to serve as reminders of the class. However, given the importance of postural detail in the class, these comments proved fortuitous, as the students' descriptions of the struggle to balance the physical and mental demands of the postures taught me a great deal about how the active practice of yoga has a mentally sedative effect, as will become more clear in the discussion of downward dog.

Two surgeries to repair torn tendons in her left knee and really tight hamstrings make *upavista* a less-than-enjoyable posture for Amy. She pauses, propped up on a bolster to relieve pressure on her lower back, to remind herself to respect her limitations and not to judge herself for not being able to stretch as far as she thinks she ought to. Remembering previous experiences, she reaches out to her energy body, tries to feel it occupying the same space plus a little more than her physical body. After relaxing into the posture, she feels more integrated between the two.

Blaire inhales deeply as she stretches up with her torso and out with her legs, then exhales deeply as she folds over to one side. She trusts her breath to lead her body into appropriate alignment. She inhales deeply and the breath lifts the pit of her abdomen; exhaling deeply from the lower abdomen straightens the lower spine. And so it goes. She knows that energy moves through her along its normal pathways, but she cannot yet feel it. That comes later in the practice.

Kathy stretches out into the posture, thinking through the physical details. While she focuses on the physical, she is closed to the more subtle awareness of the energy. Once she is comfortable in her balance and in the stretch, she begins to let go of that attention to the physical. But here, in *upavista*, she doesn't have such a sense of energy moving, but of groundedness, of sit-bones firmly pressing into the floor and of being firmly rooted in place, both physically and energetically.

These comments demonstrate a basic tension, experienced by all students, between actively assuming complex, sometimes physically challenging postures, and passively relaxing into the posture. This tension summons a complex of issues relevant to yoga philosophy: involution (opposite to evolution), the development of increasingly subtle awareness, the distinction between motion and action, and that between posing and reposing in *asana*. The latter two receive further attention in the discussion of *adho mukha savasana*, downward dog, below. The first two reflect one basic idea, although they receive distinct treatment by Iyengar³⁶. Involution describes the general process of resolving singularity from complexity, moving from a differentiated periphery towards a unified core. The penetration to increasingly subtle layers describes the individual's experience of moving through and integrating, outer layers towards the core.

Among the interviews, I have noticed a common theme of tension between attention to the physical details and deepening awareness. Doing the postures – attending to the particular physical details of hips open, knees pressed, thighs activated, heels down, and the rest – is essential to developing the capacity for that awareness. In the moment of doing a posture, attending to these details engages the awareness at a level superficial to that subtler layer. Sarah, for example, said of the class that “it feels like a lot of focus on details of the body, and sometimes, I feel really resistant to that, it’s just like, let me just do yoga, forget all these little minutiae, you know, I just [want to stop]”. Through constant attention to this physical detail, students learn the postures and develop the ability to enter them with decreasing conscious attention on those postural details, freeing their awareness to descend more deeply. This deepening is a long-term,

³⁶ That they arise in different points in Iyengar's discussion of the *Yoga Sutras* does not indicate that they are unrelated. He returns to idea repeatedly over the course of the text.

developmental process. Most often, one begins with little or no depth of awareness, and gradually develops the capacity to deepen it. This deepening builds not only over the longer term, but also in the immediate context of an individual asana practice. Sarah commented that the result of this attention to “all these little minutiae” would ultimately prove useful: “there’ll be a place and time perhaps where it becomes of value”.

On both scales, within a practice and across many practices, this progressive deepening of awareness resembles the development of the *sadhaka* as described in the *Yoga Sutras*, particularly in the transition from the stage of the *mrdu* to that of the *madhya* (see page 24-25, above, and Table 2 in Appendix 1). This deepening awareness reflects the movement of the *sadhaka* through the sheaths, or *kosas*, nearer to *purusa*. The initial sheaths, the *annamaya kosa* and the *pranamaya kosa*, are anatomical and physiological. These sheaths describe both the setting and the limits of developing self-awareness early in *asana* development.

The comparison falters in that the classical philosophy suggests an orderly and clearly identifiable progress through well-defined stages. The students’ experiences suggest a messier and less readily segmented progression. The first complication is that of “two steps forward, one step back”. Usually, a student consistently develops during the course of any individual practice, such that when she begins the next practice, she will be further along than when she starts this practice. Even this description is overly simple: sometimes the steps back outnumber those forward. Given the subtlety of the measure of development and its sensitivity to experience outside of yoga (recall students’ experiences leaving work to come to class), the progress is not so steady. Generally, these small advances sum up to a general progression, so that the microcosm of

development appears choppy and erratic while the macrocosm seems more fluid and orderly³⁷.

Boddhikonasana

Find that place of stillness, deep inside. Let the stillness seep into your cells.

Jackie tries to turn her attention to her heart center. All the input – from other students, from the building’s ambient noises, and from the street – coming through her eyes and ears drags on her attention as she brings it first to the space between her eyes and then down, towards her heart, where she knows she’ll find a sense of stillness. She closes her eyes. She finds it, or remembers where she found it before, in the middle of her chest, in her heart center. She keeps her eyes closed.

After sitting in *boddhikonasana* for a little bit, Anna’s groins begin to loosen. She finds an emptiness in her mind – a releasing of the junk from the day – and a stillness in her body together. A warmth and a quiet come, both in the gut and in the brain. She bounces back and forth, noting the emptiness of the mind, then stillness of the body, and back and forth. First, a little emptiness starts, then the stillness begins, which grows the emptiness, and so on, the relaxing brain and body, urging each other towards stillness.

Relaxing into the posture, Sarah’s head clears, her brain softens, her breaths ease and lengthen, and she feels very calmed and peaceful at her center. That sense of calm

³⁷ The teachers at the center recognize distinct levels of yoga student (e.g., the Level IV class described here); these levels measure the level of a student’s *asana* practice, not the development of their journey towards the Self.

and peace expands vaguely, like warmth or light from an uncovered light bulb. It spreads generally, not specifically in physical locations, more figuratively than literally.

Jackie's experience here is reminiscent of comments on the struggle to turn attention inward during centering. This is a common point, which has been mentioned at least once during each interview. Sensory stimuli exert a powerful pull on the mental awareness. This struggle recalls the practice of *pratyahara*, the withdrawal of the senses, through which the *sadhaka* "develops willpower, detaches himself from the organs of senses and acquires clarity of thought" (Iyengar, 1993, 178, cited above, page 23). It is particularly intriguing to encounter this reflection of another limb of *Astanga Yoga* in the context of *asana* practice. One possible conclusion is that, in current practice, the boundaries between the different practices of yoga are not as well maintained as they once were; although it is unclear whether they were entirely separate. Another conclusion, with support from Iyengar's interpretation of the *Yoga Sutras*, suggests instead that this hint of *pratyahara* in *asana* practice demonstrates the microcosm/macrocosm relationship of *asana* to the whole of *Astanga Yoga*. In the practice of the physical postures, one can experience the whole of yoga (as discussed on page 21).

Anna shows another commonly shared experience – the tight intertwining of the mental and physical in the progress toward stillness. This commingling – stillness in one leading to quiet in the other – surfaces repeatedly in descriptions of the struggle to find comfort and ease in a posture, to get past effortful to effortless *asana*. As a student works towards an awareness of the internal, the physical and mental form a positive feedback

loop: the physical relaxation improves mental stillness, which, in turn, improves physical relaxation, and so on. This progress may reflect awareness penetrating through the layers or the individual's experience of involution (as touched on above, in *upavista*, and dealt with in greater detail below, in *adho mukha savasana*). As the awareness penetrates to deeper and deeper levels, these disparate, more surface elements are integrated into an increasingly singularized and simplified understanding of self.

Most students see the struggle to balance pain and effort with relaxation as overcoming the former (which they value negatively) to reach the latter (valued positively). Erin stands out – she finds the struggle a useful point of orientation – awareness of the struggle enables her to reduce the struggle. In contrast, Sarah shows what might be considered a fairly ideal experience of an effortless sinking into stillness.

Adho Mukha Savasana – Downward Dog

Find that stillness... check the mechanical part, then sink into the stillness.

Erin chuckles to herself. “Great, tell us that and then give us a bunch of mechanical things to think about.” So she thinks about these details – lifting the ribs, rolling the triceps down, pressing the hips back, knees open, and heels down... and then realizes that she's lost in the details of the process, forgotten that there's a whole posture for the whole body, a whole stillness for that whole posture. You can think about everything or you can think about nothing.

Tempted to sink into stillness before checking the physical, Jackie knows that she wouldn't do the posture correctly, instead sinking into whatever's easiest. So she checks the posture, particularly making sure she's not dropping her chest too much. She cycles through physical adjustments, again and again, until she feels the crown of her head resting on the floor. She pauses to check that her chest is lifted, then stops thinking about the physical and starts thinking about the spiritual stillness that she seeks.

Before going up into the posture, Kathy reminds herself of her tendency to struggle in this posture, as though through some gentle resistance, which can lead to an endless process of tweak and adjust, tweak and adjust, tweak and adjust... Once she's up and in a reasonably comfortable version of the pose, she exhales deeply and takes in a *ujjayi* breath³⁸. That shifts her attention from an intellectual, detail-oriented way of doing the posture, to shut off the conscious mind, and to bring thought into balance with feeling.

Moving past the “mechanical” into “stillness” in a physically challenging posture is a fundamental stage in the development of one's *asana* practice, the *sine qua non* of a decent practice for most students. This is a difficult skill to master (and only loosely transferable across different *asanas*): downward dog is a physically demanding posture that requires normally non-load-bearing muscles, such as the triceps, to bear a heavy load, the relaxation and stretch of other, normally over-stressed muscles, such as the lower back erectors, and generally unique alignments of most major muscle groups and

³⁸ *Ujjayi* is a breathing technique that yoga students learn as part of *pranayama*.

joints. To do all of this and then to turn one's attention away from doing it is more challenging, and the main reason to practice *asana*.

Iyengar repeatedly stresses the importance of moving past the active, physical work in *asana*:

Through *asana* we learn to know the body well and to distinguish between motion and action: motion excites the mind while action absorbs it (Iyengar, 1993, 29).

Asana has two facets, pose and repose. Pose is the artistic assumption of a position. 'Reposing in the pose' means finding the perfection of a pose and maintaining it, reflecting in it with penetration of the intelligence and with dedication (Iyengar, 1993, 31, cited above, page 20).

In the beginning, effort is required to master the *asanas*. Effort involves hours, days, months, years and even several lifetimes of work. When effortful effort in an *asana* becomes effortless effort, one has mastered that *asana*. In this way, each *asana* has to become effortless. While performing the *asanas* one has to relax the cells of the brain, and activate the cells of the vital organs and the structural and skeletal body. Then intelligence and consciousness may spread to each and every cell (Iyengar, 1993, 31-32).

This is the central project of *asana* practice for most of these yoga students, whether the obstacles they experience are physical or mental, to do the yoga without thinking about it. Or, in Amy's words: "That's the... coveted yoga place of being able to relax in your poses". I understand the students' experiences in light of this process of developing the capacity to relax in postures that normally require intense effort. The struggle provides the students a focus for the incessant chattering of the mind; working towards release of the physical effort at the same time leads to a quieting of mental activity. The result is perhaps the greatest fruit of the physical endeavor, for the result – achieving repose in the posture – enables the mind and body to reach greater conformity in stillness and quiet and thus provides the student the opportunity to look within more deeply and with less

distraction. Simon affirmed as much: “That’s very much the meditative aspect of yoga, which is exerting oneself with great intensity in a physical posture, and then releasing it, just allowing the body to sink, without bringing to it all this crap that you had going on in your head during the day.”

Tadasana — Mountain Pose

Use your breath to draw your attention inward.

Postures that involve balance, like *tadasana*, cause Tori’s mind to wander immediately. When her mind drifts away from the present, the only way to constrain it is to ask it to focus on one thing. The breath is the easiest thing for that focus in this posture, because it involves the movement of the energy into the body and out of the body. That movement in and out of the body following the breath is the easiest way to ask the mind to let go of its world.

Jerry’s mind wanders. “Okay,” he tells himself, “we’re doing yoga now.” Breath helps bring him back.

Standing still makes Anna want to do something. She doesn’t need to work on balance or exerting herself physically to get into or stay in the position, so she has no activity to occupy her mind. This makes mentally falling out of *tadasana* easy. But the breath brings her back.

Sarah, at first tense in the posture, consciously softens her breathing. The easing of inhalation and expiration allows her body and brain to soften as well. It's like there's a real connection between those three... by letting the breath go, she can let the body go and let the brain go, and so get to that state of peacefulness.

Breath provides one major avenue for students to bring their attention within. This holds true for breath in any posture, particularly so in *tadasana*. The particular challenge of this posture is to find stillness without a rigorous physical effort. In the absence of physical effort, the work of the posture is only to focus the attention; breath's role in that process becomes particularly clear here as in centering and in *savasana*. Attending to the breath alone brings students' awareness inside in two ways. First, breath provides a focus that fills the attention, thus limiting distraction. Secondly, and more importantly, it seems to connect the practitioner's mind with his or her body in a unique fashion. Iyengar speaks to this special role of the breath:

Bracing of the inbreath is the evolution of the soul or the ascending order of the *purusa*. When the self comes in contact with the physical body, inhalation is complete. Here, the *purusa* embraces *prakrti*. The outbreath moves from the external body towards the seer, layer after layer. It is involution, or the descending order of *prakrti* to meet its Lord, *purusa* (Iyengar, 1993, 165).

Students vary in their understanding of the breath. Few of these students – primarily those who also teach and have studied the philosophy – would agree with the principles of Iyengar's description. For most, the role of breath in bringing attention within is largely experiential, with little explanation, as in the following exchange:

Jerry: Focused on the breathing, that's—that brings my attention to myself, into my body, to relax... get ready to, ready to do the next posture.

Me: And breath... accomplishes that, attention to the breath accomplishes that?

Jerry: It helps bring me back.

When asked how breath brings the attention in, non-teaching students tended to respond in one of two ways: either physiologically – “breathing moves my attention into my chest,” or an admission that they don’t know – “It just does”. The experience of breath functioning as a conduit between body and mind, lying underneath any experiential or philosophical distinction, remains consistent.

Trikonasana – Triangle Pose

This posture is among the most comfortable for Jackie. She steps wide and bends to the side quickly and easily. She knows, well, her body knows where to go on its own, without thinking through the physical details. This is being physically grounded, she thinks, and she moves into an internal level of the posture, not just paying attention to the muscles. She’s paying attention to the breath from the moment she enters *trikonasana*.

Parsvokanasana – Side-Angle Pose

Find your stamina by using your breath. It’s not usually an adversary.

Jerry struggles to find the posture... this is a difficult posture, and he finds himself holding his breath, which keeps everything tight. He lets his breath go with a

quick exhalation and a steadier inhalation, moves his knee back, lifts through the groins, shifts his pelvis forward. Consciously choosing to breathe eases the struggle. As he relaxes into a more comfortable pose, he realizes (again) that the struggle was with his continuous mental chatter about the posture – thinking the posture rather than doing the posture. He takes another breath.

Sally hurts in this posture. This is where she really feels her fibromyalgia. So she fights it, she struggles, and holds her breath. She tries to find her nice, blank mind; she tries to breathe smoothly; and she tries to relax. She starts with one (although she doesn't know *which* one, maybe the breath?), then another comes, and gradually they all come together, step by step. The blank mind, the easy breath, the relaxation of the body... each brings the others.

In both comments, the student describes encountering physical difficulty, even pain, in a posture – not an uncommon occurrence, particularly if a posture is new to a student or requires the use of muscles compromised by previous injury or illness. Tightness of breath accompanies the muscular strain, and both Jerry and Sally find themselves holding their breath. Whether the physical, mental, or respiratory block is at the root of the overall struggle is unclear – and perhaps a meaningless distinction – but breath clearly plays as intricate a role in reposing in the pose as either the body or the mind does.

Comments about the importance of breath in *asana* practice surfaced frequently during the interviews, often without the prompt of an instruction or question relating to

breath. As discussed under *tadasana*, above, the importance of breath in *asana* has a basis in Iyengar's description of the *Yoga Sutras*. The classical philosophy identifies breath and "vital energy" together, the term *prana*. This relationship goes largely unmentioned in the interviews and my observation of the class. Comments regarding "energy" deal with the concept in terms of either physiological activation, exertion, and endurance (as in "running out of energy") or the *chakra* system (which receives very little treatment in the *Yoga Sutras*, and thus little attention here). Particularly intriguing is the absence of comment on this relationship between breath and energy, of clear importance to Iyengar:

Prana is an auto-energizing force which creates a magnetic field in the form of the universe and plays with it, both to maintain, and to destroy for further creation... It permeates each individual as well as the Universe at all levels. It acts as physical energy; as mental energy, where the mind gathers information; and as intellectual energy with a discriminative faculty, where information is examined and filtered... This self-energizing force is the principle of life and of consciousness. It is the creation of all beings in the Universe. All beings are born through it and live by it. When they die, their individual breath dissolves into the cosmic breath (Iyengar, 1993, 161).

One possible cause for this absence may be my own limited understanding of the relationship. Perhaps I did not (and do not) know what questions to ask or how to phrase them in order to elucidate information about this relationship. While that may hold some truth, I asked questions about other subjects that were, at the time, beyond my understanding, and have come to greater understanding of ideas that were not known to me before. Therefore, I suggest that this identity of *prana* as both breath and energy does not have the same meaning to American students as it did to those more culturally literate in the context of the *Yoga Sutras*. We lack the contextual understanding of *prana* and how it functions in our lives to understand its relationship to breath.

Salamba Sirsasana -- Headstand

Before going into the posture, organize your mind.

Jackie sets up one foot away from the wall, acknowledging her psychological block. She knows that the wall is close behind her (but pretends it isn't), and goes up into the posture smoothly, finding her balance after tapping the wall with her toe only once – and that one time probably just for reassurance.

Erin gets ready for the big mother pose, headstand. Here, she needs to be attentive and a little intellectual, thinking carefully about where her hands, forearms, elbows, shoulders, head, and neck need to be before she even brings her hips up. This organizing your mind isn't just being careful... but that doesn't mean *not* being careful, either.

Coming out of headstand, Sarah relaxes all the muscles that she used – arms, shoulders, torso legs. Even though she was comfortable, the pose was physically demanding. Coming down and relaxing in child's pose, she feels all the muscles melt... and the brain does, too.

The aim [of asana] is to recreate the process of human evolution in our own internal environment. We thereby have the opportunity to observe and comprehend our own evolution to the point at which conflict is resolved and there is only oneness, as when the river meets the sea. This creative struggle is experienced in the headstand: as we challenge

ourselves to improve the position, fear of falling acts to inhibit us. If we are rash, we fall, if timorous, we make no progress. But if the interplay of the two forces is observed, analysed and controlled, we can achieve perfection (Iyengar, 1993, 12, cited above, page 21).

A number of students clearly agree with Iyengar's description of *sirsasana* requiring a balance of courage and caution to develop competence in this challenging balance posture.

Sarah's observation of the relaxation after a strenuous posture is another common feature of *asana* practice for these students. The extent of one's capacity to let go and to relax after a posture correlates directly to the intensity of the physical endeavor. Ruth has repeatedly emphasized this during class, calling it the frosting or gravy on top of the substance *asana*.

Sarvangasana – Shoulderstand

Up in the inversion, Amy struggles to relax. She knows that she can find that switch to relax everything, all at once, in this posture. Somewhere, she's holding on, tightly, and that's keeping the whole thing tight, the body, the mind, the breath. Then, something changes and, "Oh," she lets go. She balances easily on the blankets. She knows that some muscles are still tight – some muscles are *always* tight – but she is now relaxed around and underneath that tightness.

Savasana – The Corpse Pose

*Allow yourself to feel the physical, emotional, and psychological release in the body.
Consciously surrender the mind into the body and the body into the breath.
Find that place of openness deep inside... and go within.*

With these words, Ruth marks the final posture of class. We all lie quietly on our backs, arms and legs splayed out slightly. The only sound in the room is our breathing. *Savasana* marks the end of class, opposite to centering. In both sets of instructions, Ruth speaks directly to the journey within. As with centering, the experiences of *savasana* center on pursuit of an understanding of a deep self. The experience of the preceding strenuous exertion and focused *asana* practice makes these experiences of *savasana* quite unlike those of centering. This attempt at going within is less an active wrenching away of attention from mental activity than a passive release into quiet.

Jerry sinks inside himself. As he sinks down, away from the sensory awareness and the emotional and social elements of his self, it flits back and forth through a door... first in and then yanked out by some thought about something he ought to have done or has yet to do. Passing through the door brings a physical sensation in his heart and a color. Today it's blue.

Jackie notices that there's a part of her holding on to something on the outside. She focuses on that. She remembers something Ruth said: "Feel your body sink into the

floor”. This instruction worked, and it stuck in her memory of *savasana*. She turns her attention to the sensation of her body sink on the floor, which pulls her mind, her consciousness, her point of view, out of the external world, into the breath and then fully into her body. Now she only pays attention to the breath and to the spirit, inside.

Tori goes through a lengthy physical preparation before allowing herself to release into *savasana*. She knows that she must put her arms, legs, hips, shoulders, sacrum, sternum, neck, and head just so if she wants any chance of finding that place of mental effortlessness underneath her thoughts. The physical arrangement allows her to feel very safe, very comfortable, and now she has to get her mind to stop, the hardest part of *savasana*. She starts by withdrawing her senses in *pratyahara*, and then turns her attention to her breath. Perhaps, after a few breaths, her mind will let go and be drawn down into the heart. Perhaps she’ll just lie there, practicing *pranayama* for the duration.

This is it for Simon, the culmination of the practice. *Savasana* is the best shot at reaching an awareness of the big Self, of the Divine. He’s grateful for this, the basic project of yoga, why he’s done all that work. He knows that, after the intense, physical work, his awareness of his body is refined and that, if his breathing is right, he’ll overcome the anxieties and the tape constantly running in his head. He’ll clear that out and find that deep awareness that gets covered by shit in the daily experience of cerebral work in a shallow, manipulative, materialistic world. What’s under that shit has been there all along, he thinks, but covered and inaccessible. He hopes to keep scraping away until he can consistently reach a sense of peace and touch his inner self.

Anna begins with a sweep of her body, not so much an inventory, but a checking in on all the parts. Then the breath takes her in, almost as though some inner eye turns from the external sensory perception. She knows that, after *savasana*, she'll be surprised to find herself in a room full of things and people after this deep dive inward, and towards... what? Towards what? It's a very difficult thing to feel, a difficult thing to describe.

After adjusting her position, socks on, something under her knees, an eye cover, and – most important – something over her abdomen, Amy begins by focusing her attention on input from her body. What does she feel, right now? What does she see? A visual person, she can see things, when she feels them. It's like she's seeing behind her eyes, seeing and feeling different parts of her body. She senses the other body, that energy body that accompanies her physical body, filling something like the same space, but accessible through an alternative route of awareness. That's the only aspect of your consciousness, your whole self, that you can control, after all, the attention, the awareness. That's why she comes to yoga.

Blaire sits, wrapped in a blanket, against a wall. It's only five minutes, why bother lying down? If she were at home, she'd do just a brief *savasana*, and then sit for meditation. So she takes what she can get, skips *savasana*, and sits. She draws her attention away from the scattered, fragmented monkey mind jumping all over, from here

to there to everywhere, and towards an internal experience of oneself. She sinks into stillness.

Erin lies back and, after counting the spots on the ceiling tiles again, closes her eyes, and begins to release. She sinks in, mind into body and body into breath, but then the breath takes her back out again. It's like a Kitchen Maid mixer, whirling a batter in to the middle, down, and back out again. Going deep inside brings her back out again. It pulls stimuli, mostly noises from the room, into her awareness, but in a weird way, in a good way. Rather than disturbing her, this inward-outward-inward cycle creates a still, calm, comforting kind of awareness of everything around her. She finds herself in a kind of atemporality, a timeless and mysterious now, until breath brings her back to time and duration... how long is a breath? Now I exhale. Now I inhale. Her body tingles, she sinks into that suspension, like she's just hovering in the room, but fully and delicately aware of all the movements and sounds of the room, perhaps as though the room were somehow part of her now.

Sarah feels the *savasana* in her body – a complete, physical release. She feels it in her breath – easy, steady, effortless inhalations and exhalations. But her mind chatters away, “ja-ja ja-ja ja-ja ja-ja”. In a posture, a more physically demanding posture, her mind would occupy itself with the physical sufficiently to pacify it. But in *savasana*, it has nothing to bite. She's gotten better over the past few years. She has moments without chatter, but just moments. It's a time thing, a practice thing, a patience thing.

Kathy focuses on the rise and fall of her belly as she breathes. She focuses on her breath. Her mind begins to slow down, allowing her to bring herself in. But then her mind moves outward, leaping at something from the practice that caught her attention, something she wanted to remember. What was that? She lets it go on for a moment, thinking without her volition. She then turns her attention to the heavy feeling of her body on the ground and to the tide of her breath. She focuses her breath on that tight spot, visualizes the breath penetrating into that knot, and feels it release.

Senses withdrawn in *pratyahara*, she turns her awareness, which is to say, her mind, to the internal. It moves inside, from the self towards the Self, from the personality and psychology, the physical and the historical, towards that greater sense of who she is, that unchanging witness, or *atman*, or *purusa*.

At least, that's where she intends to go. It's a long journey to get there, one she's been on for years. She has reached her destination on occasion, though perhaps not tonight.

The experience of *savasana* varies across students, as does that for each posture. Students arrange their bodies with blankets, bolsters, and socks to maximize physical comfort and release of tension. They lie back, close their eyes, and turn their attention towards their breath, which brings their attention into their chests. For some, the lack of physical challenge provides an opportunity to relax completely after strenuous exercise. For others, the lack provides an opportunity for the mind to take flight in distraction. If

successful, they experience a sensation like falling asleep or passing into another state of consciousness. Once in this state, this experience can be quite fleeting or flickering – in and out, in and out. What conditions determine the experience of *savasana* are not entirely clear. While the level of physical exertion of the *asanas*, general stress in life outside of yoga, and consistency of home practice seem to have effects, the depth to which they journey within is at least in part independent of all factors external to *savasana* itself. Having released the normal contents of their awareness, as deeply as their basic thought processes and physical sensations, the students still find something that they identify as their self or Self.

The challenges in *savasana* – and for some, these are the greatest of the class or the practice – are to quiet the mental narrative and to withdraw attention from ambient sensory stimuli. Having spent two hours “thinking about nothing but yoga” (Anna) and making great physical effort, one has cause to wonder why the mental narrative should continue. Those students who struggle with the “monkey mind” (Blaire and Sarah) in *savasana* all describe their lives and careers as mentally stressful: attorneys, physicians, professors, students, and other professionals whose expertise are in the analysis, synthesis, and expression of information. However, some with similarly demanding professions don’t express the same difficulty, while some who don’t fit into this category do. This mix suggests that the struggle with the mental chatter is more personal than professional. Nor does the difficulty of withdrawing attention from sensory stimuli follow any easily predictable pattern.

Quieting the chatter and reducing sensory awareness have similar roles in inhibiting the journey within. The similarity comes clear in the methodology of the

journey, in answers to the question: “What goes within?” Students generally agree upon a single answer: that which goes within is attention, the consciously controllable content of their thoughts. They use different words, such as “attention”, “mind,” and “consciousness,” but their description of it centers on the same concept. Here the comparability of inhibition resulting from the chatter and the sensory stimulus comes clear: attention is that which is filled by both sensory stimuli and narrative thoughts. This concept relates very closely to the classical yoga philosophy concept of mind, *manas*, “the eleventh sense” that can access both the external and the internal, conveying information between the physical body and *citta*, consciousness, the outermost layer of *atman*. When students bring their attention within, they limit the extent to which it is filled with reflections of the external world, comparable to *prakṛti* – the development of *citta vṛtti nirodha*.

How do students understand this experience of exclusion from the awareness of all external influences? What do they perceive at this, the conclusion to the journey within?

Few students speak clearly on this point. Two, Kathy and Simon, describe their experience in terms that concur with classical yoga philosophy. Tammy responds at one point in strictly reductive terms, describing the deep awareness in physical terms, but also admits to a more ambiguous view: “I think in general yoga connects me with something in me. I don’t know how I would verbalize it”. Other responses, in agreement with Tammy’s comment, are vague and don’t speak beyond the sense of having delved deeply within, quieted the mind, and shut out awareness of sensory stimuli, without identifying what’s left. They offer description by elimination, an understanding of what they’ve

learned that they are not, but not what they are. These students generally speak of an awareness that the mind and self/Self are distinct, that the former serves as an instrument of the latter as *manas* does *citta*. The awareness of this distinction often comes as a surprise, as Sarah recalled from an earlier experience, “What the hell are we if we aren’t our thoughts?”

In retrospect, I realize that the structure of the interview questions may have contributed to this vagueness. I asked the following questions regarding the experience of *savasana*:

What does “going within” mean to you? Do you feel that you go within?
What is it like for you to go within? What goes? Where does it go? How
does it relate to you? How do you come back?

I realize I left out an important question: “What do you find there?” The question “Where does it go?” does approach the matter, but does so indirectly. Even those who offer an answer, don’t address the basic question.

However, the structure of the interviews is not solely responsible for vagueness on this point. Many students commented on the difficulty of speaking on this point, most in clear agreement with Anna: “It’s not only difficult to describe, it’s also difficult to feel”. Even those students whose responses matched in great detail the yogic philosophy commented on the difficulty. Take, for example, Kathy’s observation:

It’s an incredibly complicated aspect of yoga that is really incredibly simple at the same time. It’s like, you are this perfect thing, this perfect thing is you. That is divine, that is you. It’s all the same. And yet, wrap your mind around that one, you know? Because it’s not about the mind. So we try to understand it intellectually through words, and it can’t really be understood. And so, we read about it, and I try to understand it, you know, as I study, there’s that intellectual aspect of wanting to understand things. And understanding them intellectually, I’m finding in yoga, is very different from understanding them.

Another suggested using alternative media, such as drawing or coloring, to express these seemingly fickle ideas so difficult to conceptualize and to verbalize.

I suggest two standpoints from which to interpret these data and to account for the confusion: first of the journey within towards the Self and, second, that of the journey towards the self, suggesting two competing hypotheses, which differ on ontological grounds:

- (1) Students shift their mind (*manas*, inwardly-oriented sense organ) from mechanical to more subtle layers, from the physical and physiological to the cognitive, emotional, and intuitive. This view relies on the ontological claim of yoga philosophy, the basic nature of *purusa* and *prakrti*.
- (2) Students limit the content of their conscious attention, the storage of short-term memory and awareness of sensory stimuli. Rather than attending to the standard quotidian stuff of their mental lives, they attend to their bodies and their breath.

The first hypothesis supposes that Patanjali and Iyengar were right, that the ontology and epistemology of yoga philosophy presents a valid description of human nature that can transcend the vast sociocultural divide between classical Indian philosophy and current, American practice. If *atman* lies at the core of our being as a manifestation of *purusa*, then the variance in the students' capacity to quiet the mind – the level to which they have advanced in *citta vrtti nirodha* – causes the variance in what they find when they look deeply within. The greater is that capacity, the more clearly the student can apprehend the Self.

As suggested by the understanding of the development of the *sadhaka* (pages 24-26 and Table 2 in Appendix 1), the internal depth to which one's awareness can penetrate and the extent of the resulting integration relates to the level of the practice. The depth of the journey within is commensurate with the consistency of, devotion in, and surrender to the practice of yoga. The students vary in many factors that inform this development.

Perhaps more significantly, the measure seems very much an internal quality, and thus difficult to measure by any other than the truly adept. So the varying experiences of the Self and comments thereupon may demonstrate the varying extent of the development of the student in their practice.

If this interpretation holds, then the encounter with the Self in *savasana* is an example of what Eliade referred to as hierophany, the manifestation of the wholly other, *purusa*, in the profane, the manifestation of *prakṛti*. This is what Simon means when he talks about the opportunity to encounter “the big self” and drives Kathy’s struggle with language: “And understanding them intellectually, I’m finding in yoga, is very different from understanding them”. Both these students are inclined to view yoga in its broader, philosophical context, the project of encountering the Self; I do not know whether they understand these experiences in light of that belief or they have come to that belief because of those experiences. Others, notably Sarah and Jackie, described experiences of encounters with self in *savasana* that match my own surprise at finding something of an entirely different nature but still part of the self beneath the mind, body, and breath.

Most other students, without directly relating such an experience, comment on the dramatic ways which practicing yoga has changed their lives. Five students (Simon, Anna, Kathy, Sarah, and Blaire) decided to retire early from successful careers and attribute the decision to experiences or insights from yoga practice, and four to teach yoga (Kathy, Sarah, Blaire, and Tori). Only two students, Sally and Tammy, deny any significant alteration in their self-understanding resulting from yoga practice³⁹. The rest make some comment, whether general or specific, regarding some significant shift in self-understanding that they attribute directly to the practice of yoga.

³⁹ The reasons for their difference are addressed in the conclusion, pages 100-101.

I would describe this effect as follows: that practicing yoga does this either through direct experience (e.g., Eliade's hierophany) or by priming students for other experiences through an increasingly quieted mind and awareness trained more consistently inward. If one begins to accept new data, such as inward observations in lieu of external stimuli, and the new information challenges previously existing philosophy (how well or poorly thought out), one must choose either to redefine the data in terms of the preceding philosophy or to adapt the terms of the philosophy itself, to explore again (or for the first time) one's personal ontology and epistemology.

The second hypothesis accepts yoga as a psychology, but not metaphysical philosophy. Proficiency in *citta vrtti nirodha* leads not to direct encounter of with the Self, but to an awareness of the unencumbered self. This position leads to the conclusion that students vary in their capacity to reach a state of mindfulness, of control over the content of short-term memory, but that this state is explainable only in neurological and psychological terms. In this view, the explanation for the changing understanding of self, and of the understanding of mind in the new light, requires no knowledge of Yoga philosophy to understand. Most of the students in this class would not accept such a view as fully explanatory of their views or experiences⁴⁰.

I must also consider the possibility that previous experiences have influenced the students, who, as a result, find in *savasana* what they expect to find, what they believe to be at the core of their self/Self. Even if something were there below these layers of awareness, as Iyengar suggests, then previous understandings may influence an individual's perception or description of it. The difficulty students have in

⁴⁰ While I did not ask them this question, directly, many heard it implicitly in one of the last questions of my interview: "Have you had any experiences during yoga practice that could be described as mystical or unexplainable by western science?"

communicating this experience in apparently ill-suited language makes more likely students' use of understandings or explanations external to the matter at hand. Additionally, both the development of yoga philosophy and the experiences of current students are culturally embedded: understandings not explicit in the practice of yoga inform both its underlying philosophy and the experience of these students. As a result, students don't have the necessary conceptual tools – the implicit, culturally informed understandings, to make sense of yoga in the terms on which it was founded. This distinction between the origins and current practice should lead to some confusion.

To discern between the two possibilities requires knowing the truth of ontology and gauging the validity of the students' representations of their experiences. Invalidation of the former requires no discussion. The latter reflects the basic limitation of phenomenological and social research: the restriction to first-person access of all experiences. So the mystery at the foundation of this research project defines the conclusion: I do not know what really happened when my awareness drifted through my body during *savasana* one evening in the fall of 1996.

That this mystery remains does not disappoint me. I have learned much about yoga, both its classical origins and how others understand their own experiences of the practice. As with most endeavors one could pursue with devotion and effort, yoga has changed us all by becoming part of who we understand ourselves to be and how we view our place in the world. Moreover, as an intensely introspective endeavor, the practice of yoga has brought each of our gazes deeply within each of our selves, bringing to our conscious awareness much that had remained implicit and indistinct. As to that first

mystery that so affected me, I have come to enjoy its company and expect to do so for many years to come.

CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

CONCLUSION OF FINDINGS

This research project addressed the question: How does prolonged study of yoga⁴¹ affect individual understanding of self, with particular interest to the nature of the mind? It proved necessary to develop a distinct research strategy in order to approach the question. The methodology, particularly the interviews, provided a unique avenue to access this difficult question.

A brief answer to the central question seems to be: “More or less, depending”. Some students experience profound shifts in self-understanding, which led to life-altering decisions (such as quitting or retiring from jobs at the peak of careers). Some experience shifts that they incorporate into their lives with less disruption. A few find in yoga evidence to support and clarification of self-conceptions that they’d held previously with less detail. Four students, Sally, Tammy, Amy, and Jerry, had views of yoga that require further description.

Only two, Sally and Tammy, denied any significant change in self-perception. These two stand out from the remainder in that yoga plays a circumscribed role in their lives. While both practice *asana* regularly and are, to my eyes, advanced students of the postures, neither come to the class with much question about self. Tammy came seeking physical training akin to dance. She described herself as a very physical person who had found self-understanding through other physical activity (e.g., dance) consistently through her life. Yoga, for her, offered more refined access to her body and mind, but

⁴¹ Here, I reemphasize that this study is primarily a study of the *asana* limb of yoga.

didn't change how she looked or what she found. Sally, a devout Christian, used yoga as an opportunity to clear her mind for worship of God and love of Jesus: "if you clear your mind, you have an empty space and then God can come in. I just have to make it's my God". She did not participate in chants and the sounding of *Om*. When the class says, at the conclusion "Namaste," she whispers "In Jesus" and then, with the class, "name I pray," a clever subversion.

Amy and Jerry, rather than finding significant changes do to yoga practice, found confirmation of previously existing understandings. They both came to this stage of yoga practice (participating in this class with Ruth) having already engaged in lengthy study of other Eastern philosophies (varieties of Buddhism) and related contemplation of the self. They had developed sophisticated understandings of self that agreed with the distinction between mind and self suggested above. These students found further clarification and evidence in their *asana* experiences.

The hypothesis that, after prolonged study of yoga, students will not identify the mind as the self, but as an instrument of the self, for the most part holds. At some point in the *asana* portion of the interview, usually during discussion of *savasana*, students refer to the mind in some utilitarian, third person fashion⁴². The mind is a source of contention, its sensitivity difficult to contain; its relationship with other facets of the self changes during the course of the *asana* practice. While the initial experience of the mind tends to be of an uncontrollable locus of activity, through practice the students learn to steady it, and develop a different understanding of its relationship with the self.

⁴² This observation holds for 12 of the 13 interview transcripts. A brief sample of particularly cogent and self-contained (thus safely extractable) comments is in Appendix 2.

In short, most of these students of yoga come to understand self as something more than mind, and come to understand the mind as an instrument of the self.

Potential Biases

Two forms of bias merit attention here: my personal bias (expressed through pre-conceived conclusions and the observer effect) and sample bias.

The following criticism could reasonably be made: I had a conclusion prior to the beginning of the research. As a student of yoga, I had what seemed to me to be a profound experience that strongly affected my perception of my self. As a researcher, I investigated whether other students of yoga might have had a similar experience and, perhaps not surprisingly, found that they had.

The strongest response to this criticism that I can now offer is this: the changes in perception of the self, although similar in depth, differed both in experiential context and in the nature of the shift of self-perception. I was frankly surprised that no student reported having an experience during yoga practice that echoed my own experience. While many (10 of 12) recounted experiencing unusual perceptions or physical experiences, none attributed a similarly significant meaning to those experiences. I had what seemed to me at the time an epiphany. Other students described such experiences in much more mundane terms, not attributing similar meaning to them⁴³. Tori likened such experiences to an orgasm: "It's a natural release at the end of an enjoyed activity". Further, the meaning that I attributed to my experience was that I could not identify my

⁴³ Whether this reflects a dearth of inwardly oriented curiosity on their part or an excess of the same or of narcissism on mine, I leave others to judge.

self with my body, leaving the question of self and mind unanswered. It is only during the course of my research in this project, well into the interview phase, that I began to wonder about my mind's relationship to my self⁴⁴.

A related concern is the observer effect, or the possibility that the students answered my questions with what they assumed I would want to hear rather than with their own thoughts. My use of instructions from Ruth and follow-up questions on particular points⁴⁵ raises the possibility that students who had not previously thought about the particular subject did so during the interview in light of the social context. I cannot fully deny this possibility – such is the nature of ethnographic research. While participating in research, both the interviewer and the interviewee not only exchange information but also create knowledge. The relationship between researcher and consultant is very likely to influence the nature of that knowledge. However, the form of my relationship to the students limits the potential power of the observer effect in this research. I was less experienced in yoga than all of the other students in the class; I was, in effect, studying up, or doing research among people of higher standing in this social context. In addition, having thoroughly studied the transcripts of the interviews, I found very few instances of questions that seem to presuppose an answer, and did not use the answers to such questions in the presentation of the analysis.

The second form of bias, sample bias, arises in three layers: the selection of this class as the site of the research, of the students to interview, and of the students whom I portray in the analysis.

⁴⁴ In a personal journal, I wrote the following during February of 2003: "I am not my body. I am not my brain. I am not my mind. What's left? Breath."

⁴⁵ I often found it necessary to ask follow-up questions. For example, for the instruction, "Find that deep understanding of yourself," I often asked, "What does 'deep understanding of yourself' mean to you?"

First, I selected as my research site an advanced yoga class consisting of students who studied yoga for several years (3-10 years, average 6). The potential bias here is that these students had already decided to assign a high priority to yoga in their lives. Only students sufficiently committed to maintain a home practice and attend class participate in the advanced level class. The class also consists of people with sufficient time and money to afford both forms of commitment. This is an extraordinary group of people, and I cannot generalize any conclusions that I draw from this study to a broader populations.

Second, my use of convenience sampling for conducting interviews may have led to a biased sample of data. Bernard describes this method of gathering interviews as useful for phenomenological and grounded theory research, noting that these research conditions restrict application of conclusions based on the findings to the sample alone. Again, I cannot extrapolate from these students to a larger population. However, the possibility remains that the students who agreed to participate in and with whom I could schedule interviews have self-selected as a group more willing to talk about their experiences of yoga and, perhaps, more biased in the weight that they grant to those experiences.

The third sample bias is that concerning which students appear in my narrative presentation of experiences in yoga. Have I emphasized, for example, the teachers over the students? The numbers of individual portraits indicate otherwise. In Chapter 3, I present 43 individual narratives of 13 students, with an average of 3.3 narratives per student. Of the four students who also teach, I presented 13 narratives, with an average of 3.25. The distribution of the number of interviews suggests no such bias.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE FIELD

This research project makes two contributions to the interdisciplinary domain organized around questions of mind, consciousness, and culture. The first and more significant contribution is methodological: the design and application of the interviews. The second is theoretical: the understanding of the mind in relation to the self.

The Interviews

The interviews present an interesting and creative way of engaging in research into questions of the public philosophy of mind as well as questions regarding the meaning of spiritual or religious experience. Similar to many modern studies of the neurophysiology or psychology of meditation (e.g., Austin, 1998, Travis & Wallace, 1999, and Newberg, d'Aquili, and Rause, 2002), the interviews observe participants during the course of practicing their discipline. Unlike those studies, however, these interviews allow the researcher access to specific, phenomenological information during the course of the practice. Studies of meditation necessarily create distinct times, one during which one observes the practitioner in meditation, and another during which one asks questions about the experience of the practice or analyzes the neurophysiology. My interviews emphasize the experience of doing the practice, thus providing data for the comparison between those experiences and the meta-awareness that practitioners can recall later.

Ethically, this method of interviewing respects the practitioners' beliefs and practices. Rather than asking individuals to practice in a clinical setting, these interviews can be conducted in a location appropriate to the practice, as I did by doing many interviews at the yoga center. Rather than imposing alien conditions (other than an interviewer and a recording device) on the practitioner, the previously established patterns of practice could be followed. These interviews accepted the given setting as appropriate and worked within them, as should be the case for ethical and methodologically sound ethnographic research.

The structure and method of the interviews suggests an important theoretical alignment relevant to anthropology, religious studies, psychology, and the burgeoning field called the science of consciousness. Some have argued for the necessity of an interdisciplinary approach to many difficult questions concerning religion and spirituality, as well as thorny questions concerning the role of phenomenology in our understanding of consciousness. Two such suggestions are those of Owen Flanagan (1996) and of Jeanine Andresen and K.C. Forman (1999). Flanagan argued that the complexity of consciousness demanded an inter-disciplinary approach that combined cognitive and psychological approaches, neuroscientific findings, and phenomenological accounts of "how things seem". Andresen and Forman expanded the body of disciplines to apply to the study of religious or spiritual experience to include subjective experience, scientific research, doctrinal analysis, and social expression. This method of gathering subjective and inter-subjective information offers a promising suggestion for further, inter-disciplinary approaches to these and other complex issues that combine deeply internal individual experience with ritualized social phenomena. Further development of

such research could benefit the study of other introspective practices and other forms of religious or spiritual practice, such as meditation, individual or group prayer, and study of religious texts.

The Mind and the Self

The most intriguing result of this research is the distinction students have come to make between mind and self, or, as Sarah said, “well, if we aren’t our thoughts, then what the hell are we?” Students previously held an implicit understanding of identity of the self and mind, and through their experiences in yoga, come to a different conclusion.

Yoga philosophy and the experiences of these students suggest a very different conception of mind in relation to self – that of an instrument in relation to she who wields it. This shift offers some clarification and some complication to the developing field of the science of consciousness. Of particular interest, I believe, is the acceptance that classical yoga philosophy presents an ontology and epistemology, although far removed from those that underlie western psychology and neuroscience, that merits significant consideration. The early yogis may have known something about the nature of the mind in relationship to the self that could significantly and positively inform ongoing research, although we rely on a vastly different set of assumptions and use significantly different methods.

FURTHER STUDY

This project suggests exciting possibilities for further study, particular an extension of this research into a broader project. The appropriate follow up to this project would be a larger scale study of a group of non-practitioners who engage in a lengthy program of yoga study. This project would be a longitudinal study of a diverse sample of people not currently engaged in the study of yoga. The sample should vary across sub-cultural, ethnic, economic, age, and as many experiential strata as can be managed. Baseline data should be established by assessment of physical health; study of implicit (or explicit) understanding of mind, their sense of self and how they relate to their body (e.g., they are their body; they are their soul, which animates the body; etc.); and a standard battery of cognitive-assessment tests to assess various cognitive processes (e.g., visual and auditory perception, memory, attention, etc).

The participants should begin with one yoga class each week, following a pattern that starts with *asana* practice for several months. During this time, researchers would monitor the group with regular (perhaps monthly) interviews to observe the general experiences as well as specific views of the self and feelings regarding yoga practice. In addition, periodical cognitive re-evaluations should be conducted. Of particular interest would be all instances of metaphysical experience with particular attention to how the individual makes sense of them. Ideally, this longitudinal study should last several years.

At a more immediate level, this research suggests that psychological and neuroscientific research into the nature of the mind should consider broadening

epistemological consideration to consider non-scientific⁴⁶ conceptions of mind as helpful guides. The methodological contribution suggests an avenue for such research to expand its study beyond the laboratory and the library, to bring questions of mind to those who pursue them seriously, whether as a vocation or avocation, in entirely different domains.

⁴⁶ This is an interesting, perhaps false, characterization; during an interview, a student asked: "Do you mean western scientific?"

APPENDIX 1: TABLES

Table 1: Overview of Evolution

Core	<i>Brahman</i>	Unchanging, not localized, universal source
Split	<i>Purusa & Prakrti</i>	Basic dichotomy/dualism, providing the potential for all further developments of Nature.
Stages of <i>Prakrti</i>	<i>Alinga</i> "unmarked"	<i>Mula-prakrti</i> : pure, formless root nature; apprehended only by intuition (neither reason nor senses); formation of the <i>gunas</i> : three constituents of Nature, here existing in undistinguishable equilibrium
	<i>Linga</i> "marked"	Development of disequilibrium in the <i>gunas</i> , which leads to fluctuations in <i>prakrti</i> ; <i>origin of Mahat</i> - the great principle, non-individual intelligence
	<i>Avisesa</i> "universal" or "non specific"	Subtle characteristics of the five senses; apprehended by the intellect; origin of Citta (consciousness) and its three constituents in equilibrium: <i>ahamkara</i> (ego), <i>manas</i> (mind), and <i>buddhi</i> (individual intelligence), as well as of the five senses
	<i>Visesa</i> "particular" or "specific"	Here, "nature is specific and obviously manifest"; the fully complex phenomenal cosmos, perceived by the senses; development of disequilibrium in the constituents of <i>citta</i> , and hence of fluctuations therein (<i>citta vrtti</i>); normal awareness is limited to this stage

Table 2: Overview of Development

Channels of Measuring of the Individual Sadhaka						
<i>Kosas</i>	Integration	<i>Jnana - knowledge</i>	<i>Astanga</i>	Awareness	Level of <i>Sadhaka</i>	Evolution
<i>Annamaya</i>	Body	Body	<i>Yamas & Niyamas</i>	<i>Vitarka prajna</i> - intellectual analysis at external level	<i>Mrdu (Yatamana)</i>	<i>Arambhavastha</i>
			<i>Asana</i>	<i>Vicara prajna</i> - subtle differentiating knowledge		
<i>Pranamaya</i>	Senses	Energy	<i>Pranayama</i>	<i>Ananda prajna</i> - knowledge of bliss	<i>Madhya (Vyatireka)</i>	<i>Ghatavastha</i>
			<i>Pratyahara</i>	<i>Asmita prajna</i> - knowledge of self		
<i>Manomaya</i>	Energy	Control of Mind	<i>Dharana</i>	<i>Vasikara prajna</i> - subjugation of desire		
<i>Vijnanamaya</i>	Mind	Stability of Intelligence		<i>Virama</i> - cessation of brain functions	<i>Adhimatra (Ekendriya)</i>	<i>Paricayavastha</i>
				<i>Bhava pratyaya</i> - mental quietness		
<i>Anandamaya</i>	Intellect	Knowledge of Experience		<i>Upaya pratyaya</i> - skillful means		
<i>Citta</i>	<i>Citta</i>	Flavors of life	<i>Dhyana</i>	<i>Paravairagya</i>	<i>Adhimatraman (Vasikara)</i>	<i>Nispattyavastha</i>
<i>Atman</i>	Soul	Self	<i>Samadhi</i>			<i>Avisesa</i>

APPENDIX 2: METHODS

1: SURVEY

Remember that all questions are optional – you may leave any question blank. Feel free to use the back or additional sheets of paper, but please identify the appropriate question.

(A) Name:

(B) Address:

(C) Phone number:

(D) E-mail address:

(E) Profession/Employer:

(F) Length of time at current job:

(G) Religious or spiritual affiliation/faith/community:

(H) Marital status (if married, how long):

(I) Children (if yes, how many and what are their ages):

(J) How long have you participated in this Level IV Iyengar Yoga class (*years, months*)?

(K) How long (total) have you practiced yoga (*years, months*)?

(L) Why did you begin to study yoga (e.g., for a specific injury, to cope with stress)?

(M) Do you participate in any other activities for your physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual health? If so, what are they and how much do you participate (e.g., hours per week)?

Thank you very much for your time. Please return this form to the envelop labeled "Chris Jentoft" in the bottom right drawer of the desk (where the phone books are) in the front hallway. If you have any questions, please contact me by phone (333-9392) or email (jentoft@msu.edu)

2: INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

I. General questions

A. *How did you come to start practicing yoga and to participate in the Level IV Iyengar yoga class with Ruth?*

B. *What is Ruth like, as a yoga teacher? Tell me about your relationship with her.*

C. *Tell me about what it's like to come into the center and to get ready for class.*
[Follow-up for clarity: *Do you drive? Do you come to the center from work? Do you usually need to change clothes?*]

D. *Do you put your mat in the same place for every class? Why (or why not)?*

E. *What do you do to get ready for class, before Ruth starts the centering? Do you do the same thing before every class? Why do you do what you do?*

II. Practice

Now we're going to begin the practice portion of the interview. I'm going to guide us through the practice using some of the same instructions that Ruth uses during class. I'd like you to tell me what each pose feels like. During some postures, I'm going to read you things Ruth has said during class. I am more interested in how you understand her instructions, and what it feels like to follow them, than in what you think she means. Okay? If, at any point, you feel or think of something that you think is important or interesting, please speak it. You don't have to speak only when I ask questions.

Feel free to stay in or come out of the pose while you answer the questions, however you feel more comfortable.

A. Centering

Okay, come forward to sitting. Sit straight and tall. Exhaling, close your eyes from top to bottom. [Sigh.] Feel your sit-bones, spread your weight evenly over them. Inhaling, lift your spine from the top of your head. Exhaling, lift your spine from the base. Look within.

[Pause.]

Okay, now I'm going to read you some things Ruth has said during centering, and I'd like to know what they mean to you and how it feels to try to follow them.

1. *"Find that deep understanding of yourself."*

2. *"Remember, the frontal brain is soft and receding."*

3. *"This is your sacred time for practicing yoga."*

[If still in virasana:] Okay, inhaling, gently open the eyes. Inhaling, stretch the arms overhead. Exhaling, release. Inhale. Exhale and turn to the right. Inhale. And,

exhaling, come all the way around to the left.

B. Upavista

Okay, come off the block and sit in upavista. Plant the heels on the ground, press the thighs into the floor, and stretch open the backs of the legs. Inhaling, lift the pit of the abdomen out of the pelvis.

Okay, here's another instruction from Ruth:

1. "Allow the energy to flow up and down." What does that mean to you? Do you feel the energy flowing? How does it feel? [If they say no, then ask: Have you felt it? How did it feel?]

C. Boddhikonasana

1. "Find that place of stillness, deep inside. Let the stillness seep into your cells." Do you feel a place of stillness? How does it feel to let it seep into your cells?

D. Downward Dog

Here are some more quotes from Ruth.

1. "Find that stillness... check the mechanical part, then sink into the stillness."

2. "Dump the contents of your brain onto the floor."

3. When a student commented that she hadn't felt that good in down dog for a long time, Ruth told her that "Yes, but your cells remember now." What does that mean to you? Have you experienced that "cellular memory"?

E. Tadasana

1. "Use your breath to draw your attention inward." [Follow up: what is the role of breath in your practice?]

F. Trikonasana

G. Parsvokonasana – side-angle pose

1. "Find your stamina by using your breath. It's not usually an adversary." [Follow-up: For you, what does it mean for breath to be an adversary?]

H. Prasarita Padottanasana – legs spread, forward bend

I. Salamba Sirsasana I – Headstand

1. "Before going into the posture, organize your mind." [Follow up: For you, what does it mean to organize your mind? How do you do that? Do you feel different after you've done it?]

J. Sarvangasana – shoulder stand

Now we're going into sarvangasana, shoulder stand. I don't have any questions. Feel

free to offer any comments you have.

K. Savasana

1. *Now we'll end the practice with savasana. First, I'd like to know how you arrange your position? Why do you do it that way?*

2. *Do you vary the way you prepare for this posture? Why or why not?*

3. *"Allow yourself to feel the physical, emotional, and psychological release in the body. Consciously surrender the mind into the body and the body into the breath. Find that place of openness deep inside... and go within." [Long pause. Sound bell three times to come out of savasana.] Roll to one side and come up to sitting. What does "going within" mean to you? Do you feel that you go within? What is it like for you to go within? What goes? Where does it go? How does it relate to you? How do you come back?*

L. Om and Namasté

1. *What does it feel like to om?*

III. Final questions

A. *What is it like to leave the studio and the center after the class has ended?*

B. *Does the mixing of classes coming and going affect you?*

C. *What is the rest of your night like? Does Monday night differ from other nights of the week?*

D. *Have you had any experiences during yoga practice that could be described as mystical or unexplainable by western science? More than one? When did it/do they occur? Did that/those experience(s) affect your yoga practice? What did the experience(s) mean to you?*

E. *What do you think about the relationship between body and mind?*

F. *How important is the metaphysical philosophy of yoga (e.g., the relationship among body, breath, mind, personality, and spirit) to you or your practice? Has it influenced your view of yourself? How?*

G. *How has my presence affected your experience of the class?*

H. *[Follow-up questions]*

I. *Do you have any questions or comments about this interview or my research?*

3: EARLY CODING SCHEME

A	Body	1	Awareness
		2	Control
		3	Distinction between anatomy and physiology
		4	Distinction between Motion & Action
		5	Not the self
		6	Yoga as physical health care
B	Mind	1	Awareness
		2	Control a General b Discrimination
		3	Distinction between emotional and intellectual
		4	<i>Vrttis</i> (fluctuations)
		5	Brain & CNS
		6	Not the self
		7	Yoga as mental health care
C	Breath	1	Awareness
		2	Control
		3	Cessation
D	Self	1	General - theoretical/philosophical understanding
		2	General - practical experience thereof
		3	Distinctions a General
			b Ego (<i>ahamkara</i>)
			c Consciousness (<i>citta</i>)
			d Self (I-conscious or <i>asmita</i>)
			e Soul (<i>jivatman</i> - <i>purusa</i> , not <i>prakrti</i>)
E	Journey within	1	Decreased external
		2	Increased internal
		3	Reabsorbtion specific to non-specific
		4	Stillness
		5	Other internal experience (e.g., increased subtlety)

F	Energy	1 External
		2 Internal
G	Ritual	1 Liminality
		2 Consistencies
		3 Changes
		4 Sacred
H	Environment	1 At Center for Yoga
		2 Elsewhere
I	Relationship	1 Student-teacher
		2 Among students
		3 Among teachers
		4 Community at large
J	Philosophy	1 Readings
		2 Knowledge - epistemology
		a General
		b <i>Yamas & Niyamas</i>
		c <i>Asana</i>
		d <i>Pranayama</i>
		e <i>Pratyahara</i>
		f <i>Dharana & Dhyana</i>
		g <i>Samadhi</i>
K	General	1 Progression
		2 Impact of Yoga
		3 Spirit/Spiritual
		a General
		b Experience
		4 On again/Off again

4: INTERVIEW DATA TABLE EXCERPT

II.A.1: “Find that deep understanding of yourself”

Source	Quote	Comment
Jerry II.A.1	<p>C: ... So, find that deep understanding of yourself. [pause] What does that mean to you?</p> <p>J: To find the peaceful center, which for me is right here [gesture].</p> <p>C: How do you know it's right there?</p> <p>J: Umm... It's a place I feel strong feelings, positive and negative. I just, I don't know, I just know it.</p> <p>C: Is it a physical sensation?</p> <p>J: It can be. When I feel, when I'm feeling relaxed, that part of my body just sort of lets go and the rest of it sort of radiates from there. And if I'm feeling fearful or angry, it's where I contract. And then I have to remind myself to breathe. And that's when – what I'm find is that's one of the most powerful parts of yoga for me, though the asana piece about relaxing and working the muscles and all of that is good, but the breathing, I think has had as much of an impact on how I live my life daily, which to me is part of yoga, is being able to take it out of the study into daily life.</p>	Phenomenology of going within - physical sensations accompanying going within; physical-mental and their impacts outside of <i>asana</i> practice
Jackie II.A.1	<p>J: Well, I think that finding a deep understanding of yourself is finding that – what does she call it? The um ... inner – what's the term?</p> <p>C: Heart center?</p> <p>J: The heart center. I think that's what it is, it's finding that heart center and we went – did you make Adhil's workshop last time you were there? ... : He wanted to remain hidden and god said no, “Someday mankind will reach the top of the highest mountain” and the lesser god said, “How about the very depths of the deepest ocean” and this god said, “No. Mankind will someday reach the deepest depths of the ocean” and it went on and on and on; suggestions from all these lesser gods. And finally, the smallest of the lesser gods said, “Why don't you hide yourself within the heart of man himself?” and this god said, “Ah. There, mankind will never find me” and that's where he decided to hide himself. And I guess that's what I think of when I think of my heart center. It's trying to find the spirit of god within myself. So that's what that means to me when she says that.</p>	Parable!! The heart center is where the deep understanding of self is!
Tori II.A.1	That's hard to find. I find myself instead diverting my attention to my breath or something that I can focus on. The deep understanding of myself may come more at the end of class.	Changes in attention over the course of the class/practice.
Anna II.A.1	It's in the category of letting the outside world go. And focusing inward rather than outward. I'm not sure that- that's always possible in a short period of time to talk about understanding your true self, but I think... what- what an instruction like that does is it- it helps... it helps me just to let go of the day and try to...try to pay attention to... to my own feelings and what they are at the moment... and it means different things at different times, because the days are always different. So sometimes... it goes very quickly that, you know when she says “go inward,” I can let go, and sometimes it takes... you know, several downward dogs, or wherever we are in	Going within – letting go of the outside/the preceding day – allows her to attend her feelings

	the practice until... at one point- at some point I finally realize, yeah, I've let go. It doesn't always happen during centering, for me.	
Tammy II.A.1	Oh, I don't know if it's a deep understanding of myself. That might be too much. It's not something I give a lot of thought to. I think in general yoga connects me with something in me. I don't know how I would verbalize it. I don't know what it is. I don't call it anything in particular but it helps me connect with something in myself. And so that centering, especially now as I've been doing more yoga, does help me to kind of relax and connect with myself, but it's not like disconnected the rest of my waking moments. It's just yoga is one way to connect that feels especially good and it connects my body and so, 'cause your body in a spin away expresses things that are going in your mind and in your life. And so, it seems like a healthy way to reconnect 'cause it kind of realigns you, but it's not the only way. So, I don't – I'm not sure. Yeah. Yeah, I would say certainly it helps you with, it helps you in understanding yourself but it's one component. You know, I don't know that any of this moment that I'm hear I have, when I'm doing this I have a deeper understanding of myself but rather that contributes to an overall awareness of yourself which has to do with how you lead your body, sort of well, whatever it was. And it's not – now yoga is a neat way that I've found to do that but it's not, I don't feel that I wasn't getting it before.	Rejects deep understanding of self – “something within me” – instead, here she connects body and mind – deeper vs. overall; but this is not new (dance?) What's new is more articulate physical awareness & control, which relates to tension Ends up at “awareness” – which must mean that to which she can pay attention
Amy II.A.1	... it's a deeper understanding of what's going on and what I'm doing, cause I don't think life's about a job and relationships and everything, it's about, you're here for this time, you don't know how long it is, you don't know why... you know, it's a time for learning, or not, depending on your choices...	Contrasting social to the most basic existential element
Blaire II.A.1	What does that mean to me? I think pretty much what it says. It means turn in, focus away from things outside of yourself and begin to move into a place of quiet and stillness. [Is that a physical move you're feeling or a mental feeling?] It's a uh, attentional, it's more a moving of the mind, I think more than of the attention; focus of attention away from the external to the – or the internal.	Attentional shift to stillness – not to mind or body, but awareness – moving through static layers?
Erin II.A.1	That doesn't mean a whole lot to me. I think actually what that does is kind of speaks to the third one and that is why am I doing- I mean why am I doing this, why am I here, why is this important to me. But I have a deep understanding of myself, I interpret to be kind of contextual to what am I doing there as opposed to a self that has nothing to do with that class or that is separate. I think everything that she says I contextualize within ... the project of that class.	Deep understanding of self is “contextual” in what seems to me to be a complete contrast to how others interpret it (independent of <i>all</i> context)
Sally II.A.1	I'm not – oh, golly! I think I don't understand myself. I think I understand myself, but I think ... I work more on just being calm and in the present more than anything else. I may have just been, understand myself. I don't know. If I was maybe confused about why was that yoga or something, is that, what she means by that I ask myself. But I think I almost just go within...	Confusion on the issue – lack of awareness or lack of confidence?
Liz II.A.1	Yeah, I just kind of visualize looking inside of myself and just feeling like, your true self, you know, who you are, really are on the inside um ... and you know, apart from your, all your external stuff. So I just – that's what I think about, you know, when she says something like that is just go in, just really go in; just picture, just picture going inside and then just feeling that true self, your	Some visualization – some awareness that there is a self, but not clear as to what that self is

	authentic self.	
Kathy II.A.1	Yeah, I really like it when she gives those kinds of promptings because I feel like, what I experience doing those is an immediate drawing inward, um, where you begin to lose the outside the world and begin to experience not only yourself as you think you are, but, more of a sense of true self. So I immediately start to draw inward in a, in a, in a good way, and, uh, begin to quiet. [Is there a physical sensation that goes along with that?] Um... not so much, there's just an, more of an over-all sense of unification, and overall sense of calm, more calm, and I kind of feel an imagery of, of, of drawing, like this sort of circle around me drawing inward, moving towards the center of the body, but I don't feel any physical sensation of that, more just an imagery of that.	Here it is, right off the bat: yoga for Kathy is about experiencing <i>a sense of true self</i>
Sarah II.A.1	I think when I was in that centering state, it's like this is, I think, one of the most wonderful appreciations that I have for Ruth, is her belief in the goodness of each being and I think that's been a very fragile thing with me through most all of my life and that... touches me deeply each time	Centering – moving towards self – fragile sense of self – so the movement towards that fragile but important thing is good
Sarah II.A.1	Well, I think it has come to me at different levels, in a sense, um, when I'm in class, when I'm in home practice, during meditation or <i>pranayama</i> , it just really is calmness that comes I think at the center, and, you still up with this little ja-ja, ja-ja, ja-ja, just, you know, let em go, just let em go, but it really is this sense of peace... which is wonderful because my brain has been a chatterer for a long, long time, and it's really been I think in this last year a, um, a continued practice...	Differing levels of "selfness" sensed depending on practice... improving over time – there is an equivalence drawn here: sense of self ~ calmness

5: DEVELOPMENT OF THE NARRATIVES

The following passage shows one narrative and most of the interview next that I drew from in writing this passage. Where correlations between the two are specific and clear, I underline the relevant portion of both and mark them with a foot-note style indication: ^a, ^b, ^c, ^d, and, ^e. The full context of the narrative also includes my observations and recollections, such that of Tori sitting, seemingly, quiet still, and peaceful. The main difficulty in drafting these narratives was weaving together the individual observations and the individual's broader sensibility that I learned both through the interview and through lengthy time spent in his or her company. I believe that my efforts have been largely successful.

Tori sits still on her soft block. To the observer, she seems quiet, still, peaceful. She is not. Her mind races, as it does most of the day when it is not immediately occupied with the intricate details of analytical chemistry^a. She *knows* the feeling of stillness, knows it well enough to note its absence. She wrests her attention from thoughts outside of the room, outside of yoga, by taking a deep inhalation and following it with her awareness within^b.

Seeking silence, she struggles with her brain, which races, unwilling to relinquish its normal control. She has spent nearly her whole life living in her head. She has some memory of dancing as a child, not as a mental but a physical experience. But that was a long time ago. Today, she is on the other side of decades of intellectual, analytical life experience. Her brain is primary and enjoys its place of authority, determining what will happen and when^c.

Yoga, as she experiences poignantly during centering, is one of the few opportunities she has to allow her brain to take a back seat to other experiences and forms of action, primarily the emotional and the physical. But the process is not easy, and success rarely immediate^d. So she sits, trying to bring her attention into her body and heart-center, by focusing her mind on her breath.

She wonders how on earth she will do it tonight^e.

Interview quotes:

C. Tell me about what it's like to come into the center and to get ready for class. ... And so, that's usually what it's like for me at the beginning of a class, is figuring out how on earth I'm going to let go of it today^e.

[Later in the interview]

1. *"Find that deep understanding of yourself."*

That's hard to find. I find myself instead diverting my attention to my breath or something that I can focus on. The deep understanding of myself may come more at the end of class.^b

2. *"Remember, the frontal brain is soft and receding."*

So much of the day is spent leading from the front of the forehead into life^a. And yoga is one of the few opportunities to actually recede that part of the brain for me, and to ask my brain not to feel like it has to be in charge, because if it doesn't have to be in control, I can consciously ask it to sit back, to soften, and let go to the experience of what will happen^d. It doesn't always like that. Some days it's easier than others, to ask to stop, to ask it to recede. Sometimes it's totally unwilling. Other days, eventually it will do as it's asked.

Later in the interview:

E. *What do you think about the relationship between body and mind?*

What do I think about it? Um, this has been one of the foremost battles of my life. [Laughs.] I would say, before yoga, B.Y., [laughs], 90%, 95% of my life was lived from the neck up^d. My body was in okay shape because I'm an active person, but that much of my attention, much of my life was centered from the neck up. But when I was a child, I

danced a lot. That was not an activity that engaged the brain. So it's kind of like the mind and the body, in my life, have been separate entities, until the practice of yoga started forming^d. But it's still the battle that continues is trying to convince my mind that it's not in control, and to convince my body that it doesn't need to be separate from the mind in order to get what it needs, I'm doing this. So the union of those two things is a precarious issue for me. Sometimes it happens, sometimes it doesn't. I can't spend too much time judging that, the mind wins, when you do that.

6. COMMENTS DEMONSTRATING MIND-SELF DISTINCTION

Amy:

The attention's the only thing you really have any control over. That's why you, that's you come to yoga. To me attention is a tiny portal that you express your choices through, you know, that you form intentions and express them through your attention. Because you can't control your emotions, you can't control experience, you can't control how your body is, you can't control your thoughts. But you can choose what you pay attention to. So it's not all of you, but it's the one part you have control over. So in some ways that's the you, your soul, or your I don't know, I don't necessarily adhere to that word, but, because I think that what we are is not, we don't possess all that we are. You know, we get this body for the time that we're alive and...

Anna:

... [Y]ou become more in tune... both with your mind and your body and your surroundings so that... eventually there's [a] better fit, there's more center, there's more spirit in everything you do... I don't even think you can do... the *asanas* if you... if you don't... at the same time engage your mind and your body.

Blaire:

...the idea would be that the mind takes its appropriate seat in the heart. I mean... in the metaphorical sense, you know... the seat of one's aspirations and one's karma and all those all those kinds of things...

Erin:

So rather than just having your mind float around to all the different parts of the body that need to be in certain positions for this to remind yourself that there is a whole stillness and a whole pose...

Jackie:

I think that when body and mind are connected in that purest form that you can possibly reach... [t]hat's when you hit the spirituality of it; when your body and mind are working together and – oh, how do I put this? It's almost like you escape both of them.

Jerry: "My mind wanders, it's like, 'Okay, we're doing yoga now'. I remind myself that."

Kathy:

I'm a very intellectual person, and I think it's easy, when you use your mind a lot and when your mind is very strong, to use it in ways that aren't

necessarily—not necessarily—towards the betterment of your personal growth.

Sally: “You know, my mind says, ‘Get into downward dog’...”

Sarah:

...when I’m in the head down postures... I really can, with the breath, be in a place where the mind stops... yakking. And there’s just this wonderful posture that I’m left in... I love headstand.

Simon:

[After death], you’re not going to have your ego, your not going to have your body... your mind is going to be going... the same way as the body is, somewhere else, but there is ... an infinite energy source, you’re consciousness, that is left, that remains.

Tammy:

I think *savasana* is the hardest pose to do and I don’t – I relax in it, but I rarely let go. My mind is still always there, active. That would be, to really be able to just abandon that which is part of you, I think that’s the idea of the pose.

Tori:

...it teaches me a way to let go of all of those things that have been racing in my mind and pulling at me from different areas, and to try to find a way to consciously let go of those in a one hour period of time...

It’s sometimes hard in *savasana* to lie still. The body will lie still. Sometimes the mind won’t want to lie still. Simply by watching the breath, it is able to quiet...

Quieting the mind down is for me the hardest part of *savasana*. Some people have said that *savasana* is the hardest pose, it certainly has been the most challenging for me. Okay, I’ve done everything now that I can think of, and to make my mind feel as if it’s safe, as if it’s totally comfortable, as if there’s nothing requiring attention.

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