

The Phenomenology of Hatha Yoga

The context

The central concern of Yoga is to understand human *suffering* and thus to mitigate it. This question of suffering necessarily involves its complement: the questions of what human *flourishing* is and how it is to be facilitated, if indeed it is possible.

Historically, there has not been one single set of yogic answer to these questions. Rather, the traditions have painted a variety of pictures of our human situation and no doubt the future will see more pictures emerge. What *has* remained consistent however is the view that individual human beings have to investigate these questions for themselves, and on the terrain of their own lived experience: received dogmas will not do.

When it comes to the matter of *how* the investigation is to be conducted, we again find that the traditions offer a vast diversity of practices, and a vast ranges of approaches, even to what might superficially seem to be identical practices. This is particularly apparent in our own time in which hundreds of styles and approaches to the practice of Hatha Yoga *asanas* vie for our attention. This is a quite confusing situation for those we loosely call 'seekers' and often even for experienced practitioners. Investigating both the ancient traditions and the offerings in the contemporary market-place for signposts faces the novice with an array of choices but supplies no criteria by which to choose. However wonderful any guidance we might receive, (and how are we to judge this?), we are ultimately thrown back onto our own 'finding out.'

So, is there anything in our modern Yoga practice, obsessed as it generally is with the practice of Hatha Yoga *asanas*, that can offer practical purchase on the great questions of suffering and flourishing? Here I want to answer with a very qualified 'yes'.

How so? It is my conviction, based on experience, that the beatitude that the sages from a wide variety of traditions have spoken of is woven intimately into existence itself and is the very ground of human experience. This means that it is already, everywhere and always present and is in no need of cultivation. This in turn means that any human experience whatsoever is an opportunity for the beatitude which ensures our flourishing and mitigates our suffering.

Now this is a bold claim for which I offer no justification because it cannot actually be justified *a priori*. Nor do I offer complete descriptions of the state of beatitude to which I allude because it cannot be adequately described. The ineffable cannot, after all, be 'effed'. However, it is possible to *point* towards this beatitude so that you can find for yourself that you already have what you need, that peace is yours, that energy is yours, that wisdom is yours, that love is yours, that ecstasy is yours.

If the intrinsic beatitude of life is present in *all* experience, though, what's the use of our *asana* practice? One is tempted to say that it is no more or less use than anything else. Strictly this is the case, but *practically* Yoga *asana* practice has a few fertile qualities: *if it is approached in a certain way*.

The Phenomenology

Adopting and maintaining a Yoga *asana* potentially throws us into our own finding out. It does this by creating fairly strong sensations in the body which then tend to draw our attention to what is actually happening with us, immediately, in the present moment. As a corollary of this movement of awareness to the immediate, a movement *away from* dwelling on the past and fantasising or worrying about the future potentially occurs. However, we can take advantage of this opportunity to reconnect with our unfolding existence *or not* and this depends on how we orient ourselves within the practice. This latter claim, it seems to me, *can* be verified experientially.

It is for instance, easy to distinguish *experientially* between, on the one hand, a prescriptive approach to practice based on some theory or another about the nature of the human being, and, on the other hand, an approach based on a commitment to *finding out* what is going on within this strange phenomenon of being alive. Thus, (and you can try this very easily), you can co-ordinate movements of the body in and out of familiar Yoga *asanas* with a willed artificial pattern of breathing and the vocalisation of various sounds and the imagined projection of 'energy' here and there within the body. The lived experience of this kind of practice, and indeed any practice in which *doing* figures prominently, is one of feeling busy, somewhat noisy and not completely without tension in the field of awareness. I should also mention that such approaches can be used to manufacture some spectacular psychic fireworks which clamour to be endowed with significance.

By contrast, you can practice *asana* with very little doing, without presupposing very much, without expecting this or that effect, with an attitude of receptivity, openness and patience. What might this be like? At least initially, there is doing, technique and busyness. That is, one adopts the *asana*, and by focussing awareness here and there in the body, places the various body parts in the necessary orientation for the *asana* to be maintained. As soon as the the technical aspect of adopting and maintaining the posture has been executed, it is possible however for the subtle clench in the field of awareness of doing and focussing to be unclenched in a letting-be movement from doing to non-doing. Immediately a responsiveness and openness to the unfolding of the experience of the *asana* arises and the field of awareness becomes spacious and easeful.

At this point a couple of possibilities open up: being aware of one's unfolding experience can easily become a hyper-vigilance, rather like that of a cat at a mouse-hole. It's easy to verify that this state of being is rather tense and not a little cold. (Try it!) Alternatively, awareness of one's unfolding experience can be rather akin to the listening of delightful music (in the manner of a hippy!) In this mode of being, there is subtle mergence of 'you' and 'your experience'. You are then no longer internally split, as you would be as a tourist in your own psyche, or a spectator in your own inner theatre. Instead, the unfolding moment-to-moment of your life *is you*, not something happening *to you*. There is complete ease and freshness in this state of being into your life-music. But don't take my word for it! This approach offers only pointers: your experience is sovereign in this matter.

It should be obvious that I recommend the second of the two approaches outlined above. But more than that, I recommend that you find out for yourself. What I am vainly attempting to point towards here is not in any way difficult, but it is elusive. Very small differences in the orientation you bring to practice make vast differences to the possibilities it opens up for you.

It is possible to practice Hatha Yoga *asana* in a way which actively mitigates *against* inner

quietness. It is also possible to practice *asanas* with an orientation that allows the peace and flourishing that we are to come into the foreground of consciousness. But again, don't take my word for it! Finding out for yourself is the only real option.