INTRODUCTION

The main aim of this chapter is to advance a particular methodological approach to the study of yoga and meditation. While the major part of yoga-related scholarship has been philological and historical, with ventures into ethnography, sociology and psychology, I would like to discuss the possibilities of studying yoga practice – as well as ‘yoga philosophy’ – from the perspective of movement.

At the outset, a clarification is in order. While the experience of movement is central to being human, the concept of movement is not at all self-explanatory and may be defined from different vantage points. We may talk of movement from the physical perspective, in terms of Newtonian mechanics. When describing the movement of living organisms, we may refer to biomechanics, but we may also discuss it from the perspective of biology as such – describing its physiological causes, effects and correlates. In this regard, we may discuss the movement of the skeleto-muscular system (let us call it ‘movement of the body’), the movement of single cells, tissues, organs, and fluids or solids of external origin (‘movement within the body’), as well as the relation between the two. Because a moving being is immersed in an environment, we can talk about movement, or displacement, in relation to this environment (as in running in circles, climbing up mountains, or running down a road), or about movement without displacement, involving changes in the relative positioning of different body parts (as in performing āsana).

Moreover, we can interpret human movement as a cultural or social phenomenon, as sociologist Marcel Mauss did in 1931 when he talked about techniques of the body (see below). Finally, we could approach movement – within the body, of the body, featuring displacement in the environment, transmitted culturally or not – from the perspective of phenomenology, as a first-person experience of a particular moving subject. It is this last approach that is the main theme of this chapter.

PHENOMENOLOGY AS A RESEARCH METHOD

Although we may take it for granted as socialised, well-behaved and thoughtful adults, movement is our primary – and primal – experience. As philosopher and dance scholar Maxine Sheets-Johnstone put it, ‘we come straightaway moving into the world’ (Sheets-Johnstone 2011: 117). We are born ‘wiggling, stretching, opening our mouths, swallowing, kicking, crying, and so on’
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It is through the increasing variety of movements that enter our repertoire in infancy that we establish our concept of space, of our presence and identity in that space, of effort, cause and effect, and even of time. However, our kinetic activity is largely spontaneous. In most cases, it does not undergo analytical scrutiny. Unless we are faced with unusual kinetic tasks as adults – regaining our basic motor capacities after a serious injury, learning how to dance or play a new sport – we are more or less oblivious of the complexities of our own bodies in motion.

In order to study movement, however, we need to experience it in a phenomenological sense – not only to be aware of it, but also to be able to deconstruct it. Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology – as a proposal of an infallible philosophical method – assumes a subject’s ability to not only clearly discern the object of intentional focus, but also to tell apart the object as ‘a thing itself’, as it appears in direct experience, from any pre-judgements and preconceptions the subject might have about it. It is this ‘thing itself’ that is the phenomenon to be examined. Husserl’s method also assumes the ability to abstract the singular instances of those ‘things themselves’ – with their incidental features – from their non- incidental, eidetic aspect. Finally, it assumes the subject’s ability to tell themselves apart from themselves – to distinguish the naive ‘I’ immersed in the world from the unbiased phenomenological subject, as well as from the transcendental subject, capable of attributing meaning to the observed phenomena.

Phenomenology as a method is ‘a disciplined approach to human experience’ (Varela 1996: 330). Therefore, engaging in phenomenology of movement requires the researcher to adopt and to rigorously retain a three-fold stance: of the actual mover immersed in their own kinaesthesia, of an unbiased observer witnessing this kinaesthesia as ‘a thing itself’ – a sheer feeling of movement, uninfluenced by any preconceptions or expectations – and, finally, of the critical analyst of these observations, capable of interpreting them. As researchers of movement we should be ‘practicing phenomenologists’ who, ‘having kinaesthetic experiences, can examine them, paying rigorous attention to what is actually there, sensuously present in our experience, and in turn validating or disarming what a phenomenological account discloses’ (Sheets-Johnstone 2011 [1999]: 121).

Naturally, yoga is not simply about movement. Yoga is a historical and cultural phenomenon encompassing a variety of practices, including those involving movement and the cessation thereof. Such conventionalised methods of moving and rendering oneself motionless are what Mauss calls techniques of the body, ‘the ways in which from society to society men know how to use their bodies’ (1973 [1931]). Some techniques of the body – like gaits, birthing positions or ways to dance at weddings – may be shared across entire societies and acquired with relative spontaneity through typical socialisation. Other techniques – like yogic practices – are specific to more exclusive groups and require special training.

In techniques of yoga, bodies are used in inventive, rigorously prescribed ways. They are also used for a clearly prescribed purpose: attaining, or at least facilitating, liberation. This conventional and systematic aspect of yogic techniques – their artificialness, as opposed to the spontaneity of the kinetic skills we acquire as infants – makes them more available for phenomenological scrutiny. A skilled researcher, while becoming familiar with yogic ways of moving and feeling the body, might find it easier to observe their own experience from an ex-centric, unbiased perspective. At the same time, however, they have to be capable of relating this experience and observation to the doctrinal system to which the studied techniques are related, as well as to the overall cultural and historical context in which they are embedded.

To sum up, this chapter proposes a research method in the form of a systematic survey of the experience of movement during yoga practice – movement within the body and of the body, featuring spatial displacement or not – and of the meaning-making potential of this experience. How does the yogin’s feeling of their body in motion (or stillness) relate to concepts...
of liberation? How does it relate to the broader religio-philosophical context in which particular practices develop and transform? Below, I will suggest possible ways of answering these questions.

**We move before we think**

How does the yogin’s feeling of their body in motion relate to concepts of liberation? Below, I start the discussion of yoga, meditation and movement by listing the meanings given to yoga in writing. I do so, because I endorse the view held by groups of scholars across various disciplines: that human kinaesthetic experience – or, more broadly, human sensorimotor experience – is a key substratum for concept formation and language.

In the words of Sheets-Johnstone (2010: 166), ‘language is and should be regarded as post-kinetic’. What this means is that our experience of being immersed in a world, of moving within it and interacting with it, provides us with embodied representations of this world that we may abstract concepts from. Before we formulate a general notion of a ‘near’ or ‘far’, we try to reach objects within our sight as infants, sometimes successfully, and sometimes not. Before we construe a general concept of a container and learn that it is called so, we put things in boxes or in our mouths. Before we can understand yoga as holding the mind still, we experience holding objects in our hand and realise that if a thing is held tight, it may not be displaced.

Among the foregoing examples, the last one is especially significant. ‘Yoga’ is a polysemous term, and an abstract concept – it is not an object we can touch, move or squeeze. And yet it is often construed in terms of holding. In fact, thinking of abstract concepts in terms of tangible experiences is as common as it can be. As linguist George Lakoff and philosopher Mark Johnson famously argued in 1980, formulating what is known as the *theory of conceptual metaphor*, the most salient domains of our lived experience provide the metaphors we use to represent those concepts that are difficult, or impossible, to represent directly. Because we experience our bodies as oriented in space, we can think and talk about our mood in terms of our placement in relation to the vertical axis: our spirits are *up* when we are happy, and bad news is a *downer*.

Because we deal with many different containers in our everyday life, we can think about events in terms of containers, like when we say ‘He got himself into a difficult situation’ (like we may enter *into* a crowded room) or ‘She is stuck in a loveless marriage’ (like an object may be *stuck in* a container that was too small to begin with). Because we know how it feels to hold something firm in our hand, we can call a state of yogic meditation, involving focusing attention on a single object, *dhāranā*, i.e. ‘holding’.

Below, I will attempt to connect some of the concepts related to yoga with the various kinds of kinaesthetic experience that have possibly informed them. In this way, I hope to show that phenomenology of yogic movement may get us further than just the movement itself, and into the realm of ‘yoga philosophy’.

**Yoga: journeying towards stillness**

The verbal root √yuj, from which the noun *yoga* stems, was first applied in writing in the *Ṛg Veda* to refer to the yoking of the horses to a chariot (Mallinson and Singleton 2017: xiii). Although yoking implies constraining the movement of a previously autonomous creature, it is in fact more than that. It is just an initial stage of a longer process, during which the creature’s movement is controlled and directed, so that the creature, the vehicle it is yoked to and the driver arrive at a chosen destination. In other words, the yoking is just the beginning of a journey, and it is not until the journey is over that movement can actually cease. As Vedic scholar
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Joanna Jurewicz (2018) explains, in the Rg Veda, the term yóga refers to a period of journey in the nomadic Aryans’ life, as opposed to the period of peaceful settling (kṣema). The experience of a journey involved yoking horses to a chariot, controlling the movement of those horses with the reins, moving across different territories on even or bumpy roads, encountering various obstacles and possibly enemies to fight, and, finally, arriving at a point of destination. The noun yóga, ‘yoke’, denoting an object put on a horse’s neck at the outset of a journey, came to metaphorically refer to the experience of a journey in its entirety (Jurewicz 2018: 26–27). Later, when yoga came to be understood as a soteriological pursuit, the experience of journeying – with its varieties of movement including holding the reins, controlling the movement of the horses, being displaced in space along a linear trajectory and stopping at a point of arrival – came to represent metaphorically various aspects of yogic practice.

In the Kaṭha Upaniṣad, yoga is defined as sthīrāṁindriya dhāraṇā, holding the senses steady (KU 6.11). An earlier part of the text provides a context for the definition, when mental control is likened to driving a chariot. The horses are the senses (indriya), the reins are the mind (manas), and the charioteer is the intellect (buddhi). It becomes clear that the notion of dhāraṇā (from ‘dhṛ’ – ‘to hold’, ‘to maintain’, ‘to keep’; Monier-Williams 1899: 519) has its origins in the experience of constraining the movement of the horses with the reins.

The concept of dhāraṇā recurs in the Pāññājalyogaśāstra as one of the last three auxiliaries of aṣṭāṅgayoga. These three auxiliaries, best understood as gradually limiting one’s cognitive activity, are called jointly samyama (PYŚ 3.4) – a term also suggesting holding or keeping together (with yam meaning ‘to hold up’, ‘to support’, or ‘to wield’; Monier-Williams 1899: 845).

While the first stage of samyama – dhāraṇā – involves the binding (bandhana) of consciousness (citta) to a particular object (PYŚ 3.1), dhyāna (lit. ‘thought’, ‘reflection’, ‘meditation’; Monier-Williams 1899: 521) implies unidirectionality (ekatānātā) of attentiveness (PYŚ 3.2). Once citta is bound and constrained (similarly to a horse), it can be steered in a preferable direction (linear movement ensues). During the following stages of samādhi (lit. ‘putting together’, ‘combining with’ or ‘joining with’; Monier-Williams 1899: 1159), this goal is gradually attained, as the object of meditative focus is deconstructed and the cognising subject itself – the passive, i.e. motionless puruṣa – is experienced. Ultimately, motion ceases when the last available reference point for movement – the object of meditation – is removed. The point of arrival, the point of ultimate stillness, is the one and only puruṣa – deprived of the power to move and, hence, deprived of notions of spatiality.

As the foregoing terminology suggests, the stilling of citta in samyama is construed in terms of applying force through holding, tying or placing – as if to control and stop the movement of consciousness, a counter-movement needed to be applied. This construal is questioned in some later interpretations of yogic meditation. The medieval nājavyoga tradition, first attested in writing in the twelfth-century CE Amanaska, explains the meditative cessation of cognitive processes as effortless. According to the Amanaska, samādhi is a ‘natural state’ (sahajāvatā) attained when a yogin’s mind simply stops wandering, like an elephant freed from its goad (see Birch 2013). Here, the notion of restraining the movement of an animal to steer it towards a goal is discarded and a different metaphor is applied, derived from an observation of another animal that, when simply let loose, stops at a preferred spot.

What this short discussion has hopefully shown is that the notion of movement is present at the very outset of the conceptualisation of yoga. Although the goal of yoga is stillness, the means to achieve this goal is displacement attained by forceful constraint. In this case, the experience of movement used to construe this process is not related to yogic practice as such. However, certain techniques of the body already in use in the Upanishadic period could have been conducive to a similar experience.
The inward journey: yoga and movement within the body

It seems that techniques of breath control and retention have a long history in India, with a classification of different breaths present already in the Atharva Veda (AV 15.16–18; see Mallinson and Singleton 2017: 137). In the Pāñcatattvāyurvedaśāstra, the practice of praṇāyāma is defined as the cutting (vicheda) of the movement (gati) of the inhalation and exhalation (PYŚ 2.49). The breath may be stopped after exhalation or after inhalation, or both the inbreath and the outbreath may be stopped. The yogin may observe the displacement of the locus where the breath occurs, the length of the breath and the number of breaths (PYŚ 2.50).

Having previously adopted a seated āsana, the yogin practicing praṇāyāma experiences solely the movement of the breath. They may control this movement, slowing it down or stopping it at will. Just like riding a chariot, controlled breathing is the source of an experience of using force to constrain, direct and stop motion. And this experience is also used to construe the notion of mental constraint. As breathing and thinking occur simultaneously, there is a metonymic association of the breath with the mind, like in the Chāndogya Upaniṣad (ChU 6.8.2), where it is said that the mind is tied to the breath and therefore it cannot fly off.

The medieval haṭha techniques are a true exploration of the movement within the body, with a set of techniques able to produce intense proprioceptive and interoceptive experience, and a theoretical model of the body corresponding to this experience. In haṭha literature, varieties of breath-retention practices, called kumbhaka, are presented next to bandhas (‘ties’, ‘bonds’; Monier-Williams 1899: 720) and mudrās (‘seals’, ‘stamps’; ibid.: 822). The latter two involve mostly selective contraction of the pelvic and abdominal muscles to produce a feeling of vacuum inside the abdominal cavity and of ensuing upward movement (see Mallinson 2011; 2018). Some of these techniques (like mahāmudrā) involve intense pressing of the heel against the contracted perineum – a practice that, as Thomas McEvilley has argued, may produce ‘a flow of nerve sensation upward from the base of the spine’ (McEvilley 1981: 60). When this experience is taken into consideration, it is not surprising that the haṭha practices were believed to result in the lifting of bindu, the essence of life, along the central duct of the body (ṣūsumā nāḍī) back into its receptacle in the head. In this process, control of the vital breaths (mainly prāṇa and apāṇa) was considered instrumental, as they were the medium in which bindu was believed to move.

Hatha practices were not aimed at attaining the ultimate yogic stillness of consciousness directly. They were a preparation for meditative practices (now subsumed as rājyoga), and their goal was to inure the yogin’s body against death and disease. Nonetheless, they involved a notion of controlled, directed movement culminating in more or less abrupt ‘arrival’ (to a point located in the head). Importantly, this notion seems to correspond to the experience of the movement within the body during actual haṭha practices.

Posturing for liberation: movement and motionlessness in asana

The remaining part of this chapter focuses mainly on modern postural yoga (MPY). Arguably the most visible and accessible category of yoga practices nowadays, MPY – called so by Elizabeth De Michelis – encompasses ‘styles of yoga practice that put a lot of emphasis on āsanas or yoga postures; in other words the more “physical” or gymnastic-like type of yoga’ (De Michelis 2004: 4). Of all the yogic practices, āsana, or at least the MPY variety of asana, is mostly about movement. The practitioner puts their body through a sequence of complex postures, doing so more or less dynamically and more or less in synchrony with the breath. Nonetheless, many practitioners put a lot of effort in arguing that the ‘gymnastic-like’ quality of their pursuits is only apparent. Modern asana practice is expected not only to be meditative in character, but
also to lead to a deep transformation of one’s identity – a modern version of liberation. As I will argue, notions of this transformation are very much inspired by the kinds of movement and stillness experienced during asana practice.

The understanding of posture practice in MPY reflects an attempt to reconcile the transformation of the concept of āsana across centuries with its definition provided by Patañjali a millennium-and-a-half ago. Late hatha literature attests to growing complexity of āsana practice, with an increasing number and variety of prescribed postures (see Birch 2018). The āsanas of late hathayoga – including balancing and inverted poses as well as dynamic repetitions of strenuous movements – required significant physical prowess. In twentieth-century India, āsana practice was influenced by forms of physical culture, both indigenous and European (Sjoman 1996; Singleton 2010; Armstrong 2018). This influence turned postural yoga into a demanding physical drill and a kind of spiritualised gymnastics that it remains until today.

At the same time, however, the key reference point for construing asana in MPY has been a passage from Patañjala-yogaśāstra defining it as ‘a steady and comfortable posture … [that arises] either from the slackening of effort or from merging meditatively into infinity’ (Maas 2018: 56). As a result, the challenging posture sequences of acrobatic nature are expected to be performed with the same comfort and effortlessness that Patañjali attributed to the seated postures recommended for praṇāyāma.

This attempt to enact Patañjali’s definition of āsana determines the kinds of kinaesthetic experience sought during MPY practice. Different systems seek different ways of attaining the feeling of effortlessness, stillness and meditative constraint of activity. In Iyengar Yoga, for example, meditative stillness is attained through great focus on detail and gradual increase of proprioceptive awareness. Each posture, maintained for a prolonged time, is broken down into multiple units – relative positioning of small body parts. The practitioner controls these units first sequentially, and then simultaneously, ideally becoming aware of the relative alignment of countless parts of the body at once. B. K. S. Iyengar construed this process of ongoing observation and alignment in terms of an inward journey ‘from the skin to the core and back again’ (Iyengar 2002: 103). This journey is aimed not only at feeling one’s body throughout, but also at experiencing one’s own psyche and spirit. The point of arrival is believed to be the merging of consciousness with the Universal Self (puruṣa/ātman), encountered not only in the ‘core’ of one’s being, but in fact in each and every bodily cell. Although maintaining the asana requires a lot of isometric effort (of ‘holding’ the muscles in a state of prolonged contraction), the ultimate experience is expected to be that of effortlessness, attained through a kind of cellular samādhi.

On the other hand, asana practice in the tradition of K. Pattabhi Jois is very dynamic, with smooth transitions between postures in the form of so-called vinyāsa, and very little time given to maintain each particular pose. However, the permanent isometric contraction of abdominal muscles (through the hatha techniques of mūla and uḍḍīyāna bandha), combined with rhythmical audible breathing and the fixing of gaze, are conducive to a trance-like state that one of Jois’ former students calls ‘movement meditation’ (Maehle 2006: 4). A sense of decreased agency is also to be experienced, when the body seems to be moving effortlessly on its own, observed from the vantage point of its robust, motionless core.

As these two brief examples show, despite the athletic character of modern postural yoga, the kind of movement engaged in during MPY asana practice is interpreted in terms of yogic cessation of motion. In case of Iyengar Yoga, the performance of asanas is in fact believed to enable the attainment of samādhi. This latter case indicates that kinaesthetic experience may indeed be applied to represent in embodied terms certain abstract concepts. Understanding this experience may hence be a gateway to explaining why particular ‘yoga philosophies’ receive the kind of interpretative treatment they do.
Yoga scholars in action: scholarship on yogic movement so far

Engaging in phenomenology of movement requires a reconsideration of the researcher’s position. A phenomenologist is not just a distanced observer describing and evaluating the object of their enquiry from an external perspective. They have to engage fully in the practices they are investigating. A particular challenge of such an approach lies in the fact that the researcher’s body needs to become a research tool, which requires the kind of sensitivity that may not be available just by virtue of being human. Unless we cultivate them deliberately, our kinetic capacities are not the subject of our special attention. This is all the more true for academics, who are trained specifically to suppress their urge to move and pay attention to their bodies’ basic needs, for the benefit of focused intellectual work (see Carp 2001: 99). Being an academic is a particular technique of the body, involving dissociation from one’s sensorimotor presence in the world.

Such academically disciplined bodies may not only be incapable of immediate engagement in complex movement practices. They may also be oblivious to the significance of kinaesthesia in human life. Even Husserl himself did not grasp this significance, reducing the body to ‘a freely moving organ (or system of such organs) by means of which the subject experiences the external world’ (Husserl 1989: 168). It was not until a few decades later that Maurice Merleau-Ponty acknowledged the body as an actual centre of a lived experience. Similarly to Husserl, who distinguished between the phenomenological and the naïve subject, Merleau-Ponty (1962) identified the objective physical body as distinct from the subjective lived body. Both of these aspects of the body, he claimed, are a part of the human experience, and they both have to be acknowledged in a phenomenological pursuit. This means that a phenomenologist has to not only acknowledge the importance of movement as an external fact, they also have to develop the skill of becoming consciously engrossed in their own kinaesthesia. They need to simultaneously objectify their movement and make their moving, feeling bodies the centre of their experience. I also believe that they have to develop a ‘transcendental body’ (a counterpart of Husserl’s transcendental self) that would enable them to attribute meaning to their own kinaesthesia.

For yoga scholars this task should be relatively easy, since many of them are actual yoga practitioners (see Singleton and Larios, Chapter 4 in this volume). Having arisen from their desks and trained themselves in various yogic techniques, they already know how to pay attention to their movement. What remains to be done is to scrutinise the subjective experience they are already more or less proficient in.

First-hand experience does implicitly inform some of the major works on modern yoga. It resonates clearly when Norman Sjoman – a former student of B. K. S. Iyengar – describes āsana as ‘movement and stillness’ that ‘begins with effort, matures into stretching to reach an ultimate position, then recedes from that to attain balance which is thus a form of transcendence or revelation’ (Sjoman 1996: 42, 45). It resounds when Elizabeth De Michelis – also experientially familiar with a variety of contemporary yoga practices – describes Swami Vivekananda’s interpretation of yoga in terms of a ‘proprioceptive journey’ (De Michelis 2004: 153). Personal experience also underlies the extensive study of hathayoga by James Mallinson, who is an initiated hatha practitioner. Nonetheless, although the listed studies draw on their authors’ experiences, they are not studies of these experiences. And the latter are not many to behold.

A few minor papers attempt to discuss the phenomenology of yogic movement. Philosopher of science Sundar Sarukkai (2002) departs from Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation of depth, dimensionality and the inner/outer body to argue that the yogic practices of āsana and prāṇāyāma are a means to gain control over the inner body. Relying mostly on the Ḩaṭhapradīpikā
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and B. K. S. Iyengar’s *Light of Yoga*, he proposes that the alleged health benefits of *āsana* and *prāṇāyāma* are a result of the inner body becoming accessible, or ‘visible’ (Sarukkai 2002: 470), to the practitioner. He suggests that the practitioner’s experience of the body fosters a sense of control over their physiology.

In a slightly earlier paper, psychologist James Morley (2001) refers to the system of yoga practice developed by T. K.V. Desikachar. He argues that the practice of pranayama and asana, by enhancing proprioception, breaks the practitioner’s alienation from their own body and allows them to recognise it as ‘inhabited, psychical space’ (ibid.: 76). In the words of Merleau-Ponty, it transports them from the objective to the lived body.

Klas Nevrin, a pianist holding a degree in the study of religions, remarks that asana practice exposes students to novel ways of moving the body, resulting in a change of kinetic patterns and heightened sensory sensitivity (Nevrin 2008). More importantly, he acknowledges the significance of the context of yoga practice, noting that students move in particular surroundings, accompanied by members of a particular social group. He argues that the combination of learning new kinetic skills and engaging with a supportive community may result in existential and social empowerment of the practitioner. Important in this account is the implicit assumption that the experience of the body in motion is meaningful and that it influences the way humans perceive the world and themselves as a part of it. However, Nevrin’s conclusions are rather general and vague and, just like those of Morley and Sarukkai, are more of an introduction to the phenomenology of yoga practice than systematic phenomenological accounts as such.

Perhaps the most in-depth analyses are those of Benjamin R. Smith. A practitioner of Ashtanga Yoga in the tradition of K. Pattabhi Jois, he provides a fairly detailed summary of the particularities of his practice. He describes the Ashtanga Yoga asana sessions step by step, as they are experienced by a student. He offers accounts of his personal experience, including his emotional evaluation of the elements of the practice. He talks about being ‘overwhelmed by anxiety or physical effort’ (Smith 2007: 26), about his attention being ‘drawn into [the] body’ in face of his teacher’s invasive manual adjustments. These small ventures into autoethnography provide information about asana practice that is nowhere to be found in yoga manuals, historic or contemporary – that it is lived, personal experience.

Smith also hints at the meaning-making potential of asana practice by briefly discussing the connection between this practice and the interpretation of the concept of *tapas* (Smith 2008). He draws a parallel between the association of the term with increased heat and the experience of heating up during Ashtanga Yoga sessions. His account of the cleansing (*śodhana*) of the body through yoga refers directly to the experience of a yogin’s body in motion as well. Smith also interprets the manual adjustments in Ashtanga Yoga practice (the pressing, pulling and lifting of the students’ body parts by the teachers in order to help them attain a difficult posture) as a form of ‘haptic communication’ (Smith 2007: 35), i.e. transmitting the tradition through touch. This point seems particularly significant, as it presents movement as a form of direct communication.

Nevrin and Smith’s papers are side projects of academically bent practitioners rather than systematic studies. Nonetheless, they direct our attention to an important prospect: that the experience of asana performance, the experience of moving in a very specific way and in a very specific context, has a meaning-making potential. It can transform the practitioner and influence the way they think about themselves, the world, and even about fairly abstract concepts. Moreover, it is what makes a practitioner a participant in a living tradition – a tradition transmitted through movement more so than through text.

A much more systematic approach to yogic movement – though not phenomenological as such – is that of Jason Birch and Jacqueline Hargreaves. As a Sanskritologist working
on hatha and rājayoga manuscripts, Birch has direct access to original descriptions of yogic techniques of the body. Having attempted these techniques themselves, and in order to popularise their findings, he and Hargreaves began to offer experiential sessions to other yoga practitioners, e.g. by teaching them the āsanas as described and illustrated in late hatha manuals. Birch and Hargreaves’ work culminated in their decision to reconstruct on film the practice attested in the eighteenth-century Haṭhābhāyāsapaddhati. In cooperation with Mark Singleton, having enlisted seasoned yoga practitioners from India and the United Kingdom, they recorded the performance of more than 100 āsanas described in the manual. Helpful in this pursuit were the graphic representations of these postures, found in the nineteenth-century Śrītattvanidhi. The final version of the production is being edited as this chapter is being written.

The specificity of the āsanas of the Haṭhābhāyāsapaddhati is that they are often dynamic. They are not merely postures, or ways of putting the body into postures – they feature repetitive movement performed with the use of props (a wall, a rope), and sometimes even with the help of a partner. This dynamicity provides the missing hermeneutic link between the motionless āsana of the Pātañjalyogasāstra and the motion-full asana sequences of MPY. A film is one way to capture this dynamicity and to provide material for further study.

Yoga philosophy in motion

The Haṭhābhāyāsapaddhati film project is not yet a phenomenological pursuit. It is, at its current stage, an attempt to reconstruct as objectively as possible the techniques of the body as they were engaged in more than two centuries ago. However, it does open these techniques for phenomenological scrutiny. What was the kinaesthetic and proprioceptive experience of the performers of the āsanas? How did it compare to their experience of other forms of āsana practice? How did it influence their lived bodies? How did it transform their understanding of hathayoga and yoga in general? Obtaining first-person accounts of the practitioners, in the form of extensive interviews, would be an appropriate first stage of a phenomenological enquiry. Engaging in the recreated practices personally to experience their kinaesthesia – to reconstruct a late hathayoga body in motion – would be the second step. The last step would be to verify whether this experience finds its reflection in the narratives produced in the milieu in which these practices developed. In this way, by trying to mimic the bodies of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century hatha practitioners, we might be able to create a gateway into their minds.

The pursuit summarised above is essentially what I engaged in during my own research, though related to MPY (Ciolkosz 2019). Through a regular, prolonged practice of Iyengar Yoga, Ashtanga Yoga of K. Pattabhi Jois and the yoga of T. K.V. Desikachar, I became familiar with the kinaesthetic experience of these practices and I described it in detail. Then, applying the theories concerning the meaning-making significance of kinaesthesia – including those of Lakoff and Johnson summarised above – I sought to identify traces of this experience in the ‘yoga philosophies’ propagated by Iyengar, Jois and Desikachar. By analysing the three teachers’ written interpretations of the categories of Pātañjala yoga, with their specific conceptual metaphors and other tropes, I managed to prove a correspondence between how the body is felt during yoga practice and how abstract concepts such as duḥkha, samādhi or īśvara are interpreted. I believe that a similar method, combining phenomenological insight into particular techniques of the body with linguistic analysis of textual sources produced by the practitioners of these techniques, may be a means to better understand other yogic and meditative traditions, both contemporary and – provided enough material – historical.
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Conclusion

Throughout this chapter I have attempted to explain the importance of movement for the understanding of the development and transformation of the concept of yoga. I argue that yoga practices have always involved a negotiation between movement and stillness. I propose what kinds of experienced movement inspired particular interpretations of yoga as a soteriological method, and I suggest that the study of yogic movement – most particularly from the phenomenological, experiential perspective – is a relevant methodological approach that may provide a better understanding of what yoga is.

I hope that this brief discussion has shown that movement matters. Not only as a way to get around in the world, not only as a means to acquire particular goals of mental stillness or physical prowess, but also as a way to make sense of various facets of existence. We explain our lives, with its sources of joy and fear, with its contingencies and paradoxes, by referring to the most basic experience we have: that of moving beings in a tangible environment. The most elaborate soteriological systems in history – the ways of providing a sense of order, purpose and security in a largely unpredictable world – emerged from the kinaesthetic experience of their creators. Yoga is by all means one such system, and embracing this fact will open a way to better understanding.

Notes

1 I would like to thank Lucy May Constantini, Theodora Wildcroft, Suzanne Newcombe and Karen O-Brien-Kop for their comments on the first draft of this chapter.
2 According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), metonymy is a conceptual operation in which a part of a given domain of experience represents the entire domain. When we say that we ‘jumped on a bike to get to work as fast as possible’, we make the moment of mounting a vehicle stand metonymically for the entire journey from point A (possibly ‘home’) to point B (‘work’). In fact, even the term ‘work’ is used metonymically in this context – the action performed at the place where one realises the terms of one’s employment (‘working’) stands for the place itself.
3 The term proprioception refers to the sensing of the positioning of the body in space, of the relative position of body parts, as well as of their movement. Interoception refers to the sensing of internal organs and, generally, the internal state of the body.
4 A possibly similar sensation is referred to as udghāta in some texts (see Mallinson and Singleton 2017: 144).
5 Later texts also mention the upward movement of kundalinī from the base of the spine towards the crown of the head.
6 The issue of manual adjustments in modern postural yoga is a relevant topic in itself, especially in light of the current discussion of abuse (physical, sexual, but also verbal) on the part of Ashtanga Yoga and Iyengar Yoga instructors. Manual adjustments involve directing the movement of the practitioner by applying more or less forceful touch. This notion of constraint and control of one agent’s movement by another agent is in line with the early, Upanishadic construal of yoga. However, more relevant in this context is how touching a person and controlling their movement through force influences the social relations between the controller and the controlled, the boundaries of their identity as individuals (‘personal space’), as well as the enactment of power and social hierarchy. The issue of manual adjustments and their potentially abusive nature is strongly tied to the understanding of the authority of the teacher (guru) in Indian traditions, and the interpretation of this authority in translational systems of yoga practice. While extensive discussion of this topic exceeds the scope of this chapter, its signalling seems necessary in the context of yogic movement and its meaning. For an in-depth analysis of sexual abuse in Ashtanga Yoga and its social dynamic, see Remski 2019.
7 Such ‘transmission through touch’ may involve not only imparting the rules of āsana performance through tactile guidance, but also communicating the traditional relations between the guru (the teacher) and the sīgya (the student). The absolute, unquestioned authority of the guru and the expectation for the sīgya to faithfully submit to this authority are expressed through forceful control of the movement of the sīgya’s body (see previous endnote).
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8 For short popular summaries of Birch and Hargreaves’ work, see www.theluminescent.org/.
9 See http://hathabhyasapaddhati.org and Birch and Singleton (2019) for details.
10 Although it may not be the case with the Ṣāṁaveda project – as it is a reconstruction of a now-defunct system of practice – film may become a way for participants in an ongoing tradition to transmit it effectively. Finnian Gerety, who has done research among contemporary representatives of the Ṣāṁaveda tradition (the Nambudiri brahmins of Kerala), observed that both the teachers and their students use digital video recordings of Ṣāṁavedic hymns for reference. Although written transmission is out of bounds in the case of Vedic lineages, video materials seem to be accepted – a fact that Gerety associates with the kinaesthetic character of Vedic recitation. During performance, the practitioners not only modulate their voices, but also move their torsos and heads and use a variety of gestures for the sake of accurate memorisation. It is the use of the movement of the body as a mnemonic device that guarantees unadulterated transmission of the ancient hymns. Hence film, providing an accurate representation of the sonic and kinetic patterns of correct recitation for the purpose of mimicry, becomes an accepted medium (see Gerety 2018).

Bibliography


Yoga: between meditation and movement


