

# The Art and Science of Yoga

Siegfried Bleher, PhD

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If you are called outside by a friend to see the sunset, do you immediately run out in anticipation of the awe or happiness you may feel when you see the beautiful combination of colors? Or do you half-heartedly answer “Coming...”, while staring intently at your computer screen, wondering how you’ll deal with your invincibly overflowing e-mail inbox? Do you eagerly leave what you are doing, not so much in anticipation of anything in particular, except perhaps the opportunity to be entertained for a few moments, or maybe the opportunity to share a special experience with a friend? And when you do see the sunset, with what eyes do you look? Do you look with eyes that see beauty, eyes that see structure and pattern, those that see meaning and purpose, eyes that see connection and wholeness, or eyes that see divinity? Do you see something new and unique in the moment you look, or only what you have seen so many times in the past, or maybe what you expect to see? And what would that experience mean to you? There are so many layers to our being, and so many ways we can perceive our world and interact in it. We can live our lives knowing about this richness intuitively, without inquiring into its nature, or we can reflect on its movements, maybe adding to our appreciation. If we are fortunate enough to encounter yoga, then yoga itself can become a part of the richness of our lives. And there are so many ways we can approach, interact with and experience yoga. We can come to yoga initially for help with a physical ailment, or with hope for mental tranquility. Or we may follow someone’s recommendation with mostly a sense of curiosity and trust that something good will come from our participation. But, in the same way that life is always changing, our relationship with yoga also tends to change with time. And yoga can become a multilayered and integral part of our lives. In this article I present two views of yoga, two ways to relate to our practice: yoga as art, and yoga as science.

## **Yoga as Science**

Suppose I am a practitioner, eager to implement Guruji’s three steps for exploring asana (pose, reflect, repose), and I want to know if what I am doing is ‘scientific’. All science can be said to follow three steps:

1. Perform an experiment to test an hypothesis
2. Gather the data, in accordance to the principles underlying the domain of study
3. Compare this data with others who have completed the same experiment. This gives consensual validation or rejection by a community of qualified individuals, which in turn allows us to confirm, refine or replace our initial hypothesis.

I can be confident I have followed these steps if 1) my ‘experiments’ are validated by a community of qualified individuals (certified teachers), and 2) I perform my ‘experiments’ according to the principles of the method. If I meet both requirements, then I generate scientifically valid information about my own body and its interaction with my mind (really about all five kosas and their interactions), and I

experience over time the changes that are intended by the method. What are the principles of Iyengar yoga? There are two aspects to this question: there is the technique, or the method of practice, and there is the underlying theory. The method of practice of Iyengar yoga includes at least the following elements: linking, sequencing, timing, alignment, and the iterative nature of refining a pose, as mentioned above. All of these elements are well-developed and defined within the method, as is the philosophical foundation of the method within Patanjali's Yoga Sutra (see, for example, "The Hidden Importance of Linking," *Yoga Rahasya*, Vol. 16 No. 2, 2009).

Information I generate as a practitioner, which is mostly subjective, may or may not satisfy the needs of an empirical study of the benefits of yoga. And, although empirical studies generate valid and reproducible information about the benefits of yoga for various conditions (for example, anxiety and depression, lower back pain, carpal tunnel syndrome), they do not address the interactive role that *kosas* play in the outcome of such studies (for example, the role that *manomayakosa*—layer of the perceptual mind—plays in lower back pain) nor, at an even deeper level, the role that particular *samskaras* (subliminal impulses) play. Such studies *can* be designed, given a proper understanding of *kosas*, *samskaras* and *klesas*. The notion of *kosas* leads to a subtle aspect of sequencing: proper sequencing of actions within poses, and from pose to pose progressively takes the awareness deeper into the layers of the being called 'kosas'. And this leads to a discussion of the art of yoga. But first consider art as 'depth.'

### **Art as Depth**

The world of art has evolved through many views of just what *is* art. Although we normally may think of art as what the artist creates, we also have heard that 'beauty is in the eye of the beholder.' Through the last several hundred years or so, the answer to "Where is art?" has varied immensely. That is, when we experience or interpret art, do we consider the intention of the artist, or do we just go by what feelings the art inspires in us? Do we consider the elements in the artwork that are unconsciously included by the artist, some of which represent his or her cultural roots, some of them developmental? Do we consider our own cultural or developmental influences as the viewer? Or do we look only at the structural elements of the art alone? The answer to each of these questions can lead to a greater understanding of art. Now, the same steps described above for scientific studies can be followed for studying art. But there is a fundamental difference between art and science that I propose to describe as follows: good art *inspires*, whereas good science *illuminates*.

In the word *illuminate* there is the implication of breadth, whereas in the word *inspire* there is an underlying meaning of depth. Science elicits principles and links at a given level or dimension, the breadth of a particular domain, whereas art helps us touch multiple dimensions or levels. As author Ken Wilber says, "Great art grabs you, against your will, and then suspends your will. You are ushered into a quiet clearing, free of desire, free of grasping, free of ego, free of self-contraction. And through that opening or clearing in your own awareness may come flashing higher truths, subtler revelations, profound connections. For a moment you might even touch eternity..." (Wilber, *The Eye of Spirit*, p. 135). In YS II.19 Patanjali lists the levels of the *gunas*, which implies that they have depth: *visesa avisesa linga matra alingani guna parvani* ("The levels or stages of the primary constituents are specific,

universal, differentiated, and undifferentiated”).<sup>1</sup> Through discernment, we are told we can discover that depth, until we reach the most subtle (deepest) layer of nature that covers the soul (YS II.26, II.52, III.49). Consider the following contemporary approach to an understanding of art, and how this understanding echoes ancient yogic principles.

The response we feel when we see art—the emotional response of appreciation or inspiration—is characterized by mathematician Ron Atkin as its multidimensionality in *Multidimensional Man* (Penguin Books, 1981), or its depth. Atkin develops a way to quantify the multiple levels and depth on which we exist. Each level is assigned a dimensionality, such as  $N$ , a number. The self, for example, exists at the level of the individual ego (say,  $N - 1$ ); the family-self, or the self in relationship with loved ones and friends (dimension  $N$ ); the level of the workplace-self (dimension  $N + 1$ ); the level of the region-self or specific culture-self ( $N + 2$ ); the nation-self or large-scale culture-self ( $N + 3$ ); and the multinational-self or self that identifies with humanity as a whole ( $N + 4$ ). The meaning of dimensionality is found in how Atkin interprets the limits and tensions we feel when we experience changes in dimensionality, how those changes affect us emotionally and the meaning such changes have in our lives. When we unite with another in a bond of love, our sense of self expands to form what Atkin calls a ‘super-self’. Clubs and societies, through the links between collections of ‘super-selves’, form a larger entity than that of the family-group or circle of friends. At each level in this hierarchy there is an emotional attachment and identification that either comes with joy when there is an increase in dimensionality, or pain when there is a decrease. “How much more joyful (full of laughter) is the experience of jumping upwards from being an ( $N - 1$ )-self to being an  $N$ -self? What is ‘falling in love’ if it is not that? asks Atkin. Higher than the multinational-self is the Ultimate Self, which “unites all the lower ones.” Atkin compares the ultimate level with Buddhist nirvana, and we can compare it as yoga practitioners with *nirodha*, or *samadhi*. At this level, according to Atkin, deep inspirations arise and our devotional nature emerges.

### **Yoga as Art**

Atkin develops a mathematical way of conceptualizing our multidimensional nature: artwork that has a greater dimensionality tends to appeal to more aspects of the self than artwork that has lower dimensionality. But we can see in yoga philosophy something similar to dimensionality in the notion of ‘*kosa*’, or layer. What is important about the idea of dimensionality is that what has a lower dimension is contained in what has a higher dimension. Each *kosa*, or layer of the being, has its own reality and independence, or dimensionality, but each is contained within the layer that has a greater dimensionality and subtlety. *Annamaya kosa* appears to encase *pranamaya kosa*, but is actually contained within the higher dimensional space of *pranamaya kosa*. Similarly, *pranamaya kosa* appears to physically encase *manomaya kosa*, but is actually contained within the higher dimensional space of *manomaya kosa*, and so on. It is in the higher dimensional spaces that lower dimensional conundrums get resolved. Albert Einstein has been quoted as saying that problems cannot be solved from within the mindset that the problem arose in. And the dimensionality we identify with, or the *kosa*, is also the ‘eyes’ through which we see the world. We can see through physical eyes that give significance to tangible things, we can see through intellectual eyes that see meaning in every event, and we can see through spiritual eyes that see divine purpose and presence in each living moment. Indeed, according to

Wilber, none of the eyes are of lesser value than others, but they are all complementary aspects of our makeup<sup>1</sup>.

I heard an instruction recently in a workshop—in *Utthita Parsva Hasta Padangusthasana*, to take the outer thigh of the raised leg in towards the outer hip and the outer thigh out towards outer edge of foot, at the same time. Now, this may seem impossible to do. I may get stuck in the habitual mind that only can take the outer thigh to the hip. But if I quiet my mind, I may discover I can do both of these actions at once. If I practice in this way with alertness and persistence, then I may come to a place where I no longer identify with the dual actions of taking the thigh in and out, but instead with the single action that does both. In that moment I have moved my consciousness to a higher dimension.

Events that occur at lower dimensions find their deeper meaning in higher dimensions: it is only when I practice *Visvamitrasana* that I understand the deeper value of *Utthita Parsvakonasana*. *Utthita Parsvakonasana* is not only a pose in itself, with the opening in the hips and the extension in the ribs that we achieve from practicing this pose, but it is also preparation for deeper poses. And *Utthita Parsvakonasana* is not only a structural pose that organizes the limbs of *annamaya kosa*, but also an organic pose that touches *pranamaya kosa* and, if we practice with reflection, cultures our *manomaya kosa* and *vijnanamaya kosa*.

B.K.S. Iyengar says “The aim and culmination of yoga is the sight of the soul, but it has a lot of side effects which are health, happiness, peace and poise.” At the highest attainment on the yogic path we find side effects in each *kosa*. Patanjali might agree with Atkin, for he defines in sutra II.19 the levels of the primary constituents of nature, the *gunas*. The artistic nature and depth of yoga is then reflected in the depth of the layer from which we practice, or in the dimensionality of the space we are tapping into when we practice. A pose that is done well physically, from *annamaya kosa* is certainly beautiful to look at and to appreciate. But how much more inspiring it is to see an asana that has been practiced for decades, one that clearly aligns and consciously touches the organic body, quiets the senses, and gives tranquility to the mind of the practitioner? Often we have seen Gururji’s youthful practice compared with his practice in his seventies—the same pose in his later years embodies the same artistry that is present in his earlier years. But at the same time, it radiates a depth that speaks of a more subtle layer of the being. And there is a part of the viewer that responds to that depth as it is projected outwards for us to see, no matter how deep or nascent our own practice may be. There is a universal element in art that is also within yoga, and that we can touch no matter who we are. Of course, the deeper our practice, the more we can see and appreciate in another’s practice—the more dimensions in their practice we can touch in ourselves. But in either case, we can be inspired to reach for the same place in ourselves that we can feel projected in another’s presentation.

In a way, we can see that art and science represent, at their core, fundamental human capacities. Art represents our adaptive capacity, our ability to surrender to change and the unknown, and our devotional nature (*pranidhana*), whereas science represents our agency, our capacity to investigate, to explore and discover, to create change and to quantify or to give conceptual structure, to illuminate the unknown. Each informs the other, and cannot function by itself, in the same way that one cannot

progress in yoga without an equal amount of *abhyasa* (practice) and *vairagya* (detachment, YS I.12). *Abhyasa* makes use of our native ability to investigate the unknown (science), whereas *vairagya* asks us to surrender to the vastness of the unknown (art). It is only through the balanced interplay of these two aspects of our being that we can come to appreciate the relevance of each of the eyes with which we can gaze at the sunset. And it is only through an embracing of each of our dimensions that we can unfold our being to the vision of the soul, and to the unspeakable joy and gratitude that follows such a vision.

Footnote 1: The levels of the *gunas* can be compared with the levels in which nature organizes itself: for example, the characteristics of a particular sunset that you observe (*visesa*), the characteristics that are true of all sunsets in general (*avisesa*), the underlying cause and meaning of sunsets (*linga matra*), what is common about sunsets and all other events of nature (*alinga*). But the *gunas* themselves refer to the following three characteristics or qualities of nature—luminosity (*sattva*), movement (*rajas*) and inertia (*tamas*)—not the levels in which nature organizes itself. The luminosity of a sunset at the *visesa* stage is the light given off by the sun in that particular sunset and that reflects off all the objects around it. At the *avisesa* stage, the luminosity of the sunset is the universal redness of the light that is common to all sunsets. At the *linga matra* stage, luminosity of the sunset is the light that reverberates in my consciousness and is distinguished by the ‘mark’ of that reverberation. At the most subtle stage, the *alinga* stage, luminosity is the fine tendril of intuition that tells me with certainty that the light of the sun and the light in my consciousness are both pale reflections of their divine roots.