

EMBODIED TRANSCENDENCE?  
AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF YOGA IN DUNEDIN

Hannah Bailly

ABSTRACT

*Using participant observation, qualitative interviews and autoethnographic methods, I inquire into the perceptions and experience of six contemporary yoga practitioners, as well as my own, to explore some of the embodied meanings of yoga practiced in Dunedin. Suggesting that yoga's surge of popularity in the West may have more to do with aspirations for health and body maintenance than spiritual aspirations, I ask whether engaging with the age old postures and techniques of hatha yoga might bring about unanticipated and sometimes transformational outcomes for its practitioners. To explore the strong appeal of yoga to its Western – and more specifically, Dunedin – practitioners, I invoke Foucault's (1983) sociopolitical theories of embodiment, and address how the subjective self is constituted through alignment with dominant ideologies of health and fitness. To explore whether an embodied practice of hatha yoga might subvert ideologies which reinforce an obsession with body-image, I draw on phenomenological theories of embodiment and practice – especially the insights of Marcel Mauss ([1935]1973) and Pierre Bourdieu (1990) who elucidate how culturally shared techniques of the body are stored as bodily memory and accessed through schemas of movement. I am interested in whether the enactment of asana (yogic posture) and pranayama (yogic breathing) predisposes the modern practitioner to the spiritual quality of 'transcendence', which is embedded in classical yoga's original design.*

*Keywords:* Autoethnography; Yoga; Embodiment; Healthism; Transcendence

INTRODUCTION

Yoga, which originates from the Indian subcontinent, was once a foreign and exotic tradition to the Western imagination; yet since 'the beginning of the twenty-first century it has become a global phenomenon' (De Michelis 2004,

4). Many New Zealanders today have some degree of familiarity with yoga, even if that is simply knowledge of the word itself. For some – like myself – yoga holds personal and embodied meaning through firsthand experience of our own practice. Currently, a variety of yoga classes are available throughout New Zealand, and the emergence of clothing brands and retail outlets dedicated strictly to yoga gear attest to its rising popularity. Yoga appears on gym program schedules, denoting messages of health and fitness. It appears on popular television shows, depicting a certain kind of new-age personality. It appears in magazines, representing an ideal pastime which promises spiritual depth and a healthy mind and body.

Although yoga as a philosophic and religious system has been the focus of much academic analysis, there has yet been little ethnographic research into yoga ‘as a system of bodily practices within a sociocultural context’ (Strauss 2004, 30). Joseph Alter’s (2004) ethnological research looks at the meaning of yoga in the context of modern India, especially how yoga has been reconfigured in scientific terms as part of an Indian nationalist project. In common with the work of De Michelis (2004) and Strauss (2005), Alter negotiates the slippery distinction between classical yogic philosophy and modern postural yoga. These authors point out that yoga, as a transnational practice has been redefined in India through its Western applications, while Langoien (2012) and Maddox (2014) document the experience of Western practitioners who seek an authentic yoga experience in India. Strauss (2005) further defines the cosmopolitan nature of modern yoga through her multi-sited ethnographic research centred on practitioners of *Sivananda* yoga from Rishikesh, India to Switzerland, Germany, and the United States. Other studies published on yoga in a Western ethnographic context hail from the United Kingdom (Hasselle-Newcombe 2005; Lea 2009; Singleton 2005; Vertinsky 2012) and Australia (Persson 2010; Smith 2007). These studies are diverse in focus, yet have in common an underlying emphasis on modern yoga’s association with the concepts of health, discipline, freedom, and spirituality. They centre mainly on popular schools of *hatha* yoga – or what De Michelis (2004) refers to as modern postural yoga.

My research contributes to this conversation by offering insights from a New Zealand locale. Although numerous empirical studies investigate potential health outcomes of yoga, the single ethnographic reflection I have found on yoga in New Zealand dates back to 1997 and focuses mainly on how the quiet politics of *Iyengar* yoga promotion reflects the introverted nature of the practice itself (Lloyd 1997). Like Lloyd (1997, 20), I do not frame my research as full-fledged ethnography due to my greater reliance on interviews over participant

observation for collecting data. Yet by positioning myself, the author, unambiguously in the text, I contribute to an endeavour which has a growing voice in the social sciences. The genre of autoethnography has emerged through a deep questioning of an assumed binary split between self and society (Reed-Danahay 1997). As an autoethnographic researcher, I acknowledge myself as a cultural subject, emphasising that 'my subjectivity is filled with the voices of other people' (Church 1995, cited in Sparks 2002, 216). Autoethnographic research is, however, criticised for the very fact of its subjectivity. Relying on personal narrative without enough analysis and interpretation in relation to the social world can fall short of good qualitative research (Chan 2008). Yet the following autobiographical interlude is relevant both to contextualise my presence within the research and to show how my experience intersects with my 'choice in area of study' (Okely 1992, 1):

When I was eight years old my mother took me to live in a yoga ashram (community) in the hills of Northern California, where spiritual scriptures were taught and yoga was a complete way of life. Although we remained only five years, I have always seen these as formative years, and have continued a practice of hatha yoga at varying levels of intensity ever since. Apart from several ashram visits in Northern India, and a month long Ashtanga Vinyasa intensive in Mysore, most of my yoga experience has been integrated into my everyday life in North America and New Zealand. I have taught and attended classes and maintained a self-practice throughout my adult years. Although most of what I do today revolves around the communities of university, motherhood, and the various activities that make up my life as a Kiwi in Dunedin, on a less tangible level, somewhere in the stillness of my practice, I consider myself connected to an imagined global yoga community.

Informed by personal experience, my research extends to the wider Dunedin community, and I further examine the sociopolitical context in which the popularity of yoga has grown. Yoga's appeal to the Western consumer can be attributed in part to a romantic attraction to Eastern mysticism, yet conversations I have had in the *Bikram* yoga changing rooms challenge the assumption that modern practitioners necessarily have a spiritual association with their practice, or understand yoga in terms of its Indian origin. The benefits emphasised by many practitioners of modern yoga are generally physical in nature, such as enhanced flexibility, strength, or weight loss. Relaxation and stress reduction are also common themes (Smith 2007).

Still there remains ‘a suggestion of something spiritual affixed to *asana* practice, even in its most secular Western context’ (Smith 2007, 28). Contemporary yoga practitioners engage bodily postures and gestures that – belonging to classical yoga – ostensibly date as far back as 200 BC. The word ‘yoga’ comes from the Sanskrit *yuj*, meaning, ‘to yoke or join together’ and is most commonly translated into English as ‘union’ (Strauss 2004, 3). Although for many this signifies a union between body and mind, the esoteric teachings of yoga refer to a ‘union of the individual self with the Absolute or Universal Self’ (Strauss 2004, 3). Rooted in the religious teachings of Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism, yoga practices were designed to achieve ‘restraint of the mental processes’ in an effort to reach spiritual liberation (Tola and Dragonetti 1987, 1). Although the ancient yogic scriptures are multiple and varied, Alter asserts that in general ‘yoga is concerned with transcendence’ (2012, 411). The concept of *jivanmukti* (liberation while living) implies that the body is opposed to knowledge, and that a bodily practice of yoga can ‘transform the body-of-ignorance into a powerful vehicle for liberation’ (Forth 1998, cited in Alter 2012, 412). A spiritual goal of the classical yogi is ‘to transform his or her human body and break his or her attachments to people, things and ultimately the world’ (Alter 2012, 412). Even where the term spirituality may not be used, contemporary yoga practitioners often speak of a sort of liberation or transcendence (manifest as clarity of mind or emotional balance), which can be achieved through an attentive awareness to the body. The interplay between discipline (of practice) and freedom (from health problems or mental fixations) recurs throughout the classical and modern discourses on yoga.

Alter (2012, 411) cautions that yoga should not be viewed as ‘a seamless, timeless, ancient tradition’. Multiple forms of yoga are practiced across the globe, with varying emphasis on spirituality and philosophy. A limitation of my exploratory study of yoga in Dunedin is that I focus on a small number of people who practice diverse forms of yoga, and the comparison I engage between these forms is minimal. Although I acknowledge that the meaning ascribed to yoga differs not only amongst practitioners but collectively within any given historic or cultural context, my intent is to investigate a common thread which links the practice of yoga throughout time and place. For this reason, my focus is not on the distinction between differing yoga practices, but rather on the commonality experienced – on a phenomenological level – through engaging yoga techniques.

My analysis centres not only on theories of embodiment which address the phenomenological practice of *asana* and *pranayama*, but also on sociopolitical theories which suggest that embodied discourses of health and fitness may,

in some contexts, inspire a yoga practice. Like the philosophy of yoga itself, embodiment theory challenges the Cartesian duality between body and mind, assuming instead a fundamental – albeit culturally mediated – interconnection between the two. Embodiment theory suggests that cultural and social meaning can be located within the experience of the body (Csordas 1990). Drawing on Mauss' ([1935] 1973) seminal techniques of the body, I question whether embodying techniques that stem from classical yoga can serve to re-activate the states of mind, body, and spirit these practices had been designed to access. Mauss ([1935] 1973) proposes that engaging bodily techniques which are encoded with cultural meaning in turn affects our states of being. According to Bourdieu (1990, 69; 73), the practice of bodily techniques 'can instil a whole cosmology' which is shared as a memetic process, 'taking place below the level of consciousness'. From this perspective, the embodied practice of the ancient yogic techniques of *asana* (posture) and *pranayama* (control of the breath)—which constitute most forms of modern yoga – would expose the contemporary practitioner to the systems of meaning from which these techniques arise, regardless of conscious intent.

#### BRIEF HISTORY OF YOGA AS A TRANSNATIONAL PRACTICE

Although much of the literature suggests that modern postural yoga is currently practiced in the West mainly for health and fitness outcomes, it was a spiritual exoticism which originally appealed to yoga's early Western audience. Before I introduce my research centred in modern-day Dunedin, I briefly describe how yoga made its transnational passage from the religious traditions of the 'Orient' to the popular physical culture of the Euro-American middle classes towards the turn of the nineteenth century. According to Edward Said (1978, 115), European Romanticism imagined 'Indian culture and religion ... could defeat the materialism and mechanism ... of Occidental culture'. With this romantic sentiment growing amongst Western esotericists, Swami Vivekananda from Calcutta arrived at the Chicago Parliament of Religions in 1893 to represent yogic spiritualism. His representation of yoga as a means to achieve universal brotherhood resonated with the American and European middle and upper classes 'for whom the shortcomings of industrial society were becoming all too apparent' (Strauss 2002, 239).

Yoga was not, however, simply taken up as mimicry of foreign esotericism. Its introduction into the Western context required a repackaging of premodern Indian practices to make yoga 'relevant to modern lives' (Strauss 2002, 245). This involved a move away from the philosophic and religious domains towards the rhetoric of 'happiness, health, harmony and higher efficiency'

(Strauss 2002, 245). Although yoga has always stood for health and freedom, the esoteric references to health have more to do with a moral and spiritual health than notions of physical or mental efficiency, and freedom was understood in terms of spiritual liberation (see Eliade 1958). Motivated by what Strauss (2002, 246) refers to as Vivekananda's 'Indian nationalist project', his message of yoga fused *moksha* – which pertains to liberation through spiritual enlightenment – with the widely accessible notion of a democratic freedom of self-determination.

Thus, the ideas of health and freedom, which were highly attractive to the modern Euro-American sensibility, necessarily became reworked to align with prior understandings of their meaning. Health and freedom were essential 'feature[s] of late modernity' (Strauss 2004, 33). The ideal of 'the healthy body' as free from illness without reference to any specific illness was a unique perspective. Illness has always been a marked category defined by suffering, but the healthy body itself had not until recent times been distinguishable from the day-to-day flow of living devoid of disease. Entering a sociopolitical context in which it was understood that health itself can be preserved, monitored, and augmented, and that a healthy lifestyle supports a healthy body, yoga was represented as a practice which was key to both. Furthermore, the correlation between modernity and low rates of morbidity and mortality which characterise the developed Western world makes this healthy ideal not only a feature of, but a 'marker for modernity' (Strauss 2005, 6). Yoga was thus easily received as a symbol of health which supported the status and ideals of a Euro-American lifestyle.

#### HERE AND NOW IN DUNEDIN

According to De Michelis (2008, 21), since the 1990s 'modern yoga is enthusiastically taken up by a new generation of practitioners.' There is currently a range of yoga styles taught throughout the Western world, and a variety of these are offered in Dunedin. The practitioners I interviewed for my research belong to the schools of *Bikram*, *Ashtanga Vinyasa*, and *Satyananda* yoga. While all three of these traditions focus predominantly on *asana* and *pranayama*, *Satyananda* yoga is distinct in its emphasis on yoga 'as a "complete path" that incorporates all aspects of life and has clear philosophical and spiritual underpinnings' (Persson 2010, 800–801). Adherence to a distinctive esoteric and spiritual world-view is less common for most modern schools of yoga. *Ashtanga Vinyasa* and *Bikram* yoga reinforce the values of self discipline and physical health. *Bikram* yoga – according to my teacher – is intentionally marketed to capture the 'gym' consumer. As with *Ashtanga Vinyasa*, the practice

is physically strenuous, moving from one *asana* to the next with vigour; but *Bikram* yoga is unique in that the room is heated to a smoldering 40°C, which further challenges the practitioner's physical capabilities.

With the Dunedin studio offering between three and five classes per day – and as many as forty students in each class – I am confident that *Bikram* yoga is currently the most widely practiced form of yoga in Dunedin. For this reason, and because I practice *Bikram* myself, it is no coincidence that the balance of my interviews and my observations are biased toward this distinctive form of yoga. *Bikram* arguably takes the physically challenging aspects of yoga to an extreme, above and beyond other forms. It is thus prudent to mention that although this study is not focusing specifically on *Bikram* yoga – but is rather an exploratory look into yoga in Dunedin – *Bikram* yoga's overwhelming popularity in Dunedin has influenced my analysis of yoga's appeal to fitness culture.

#### METHODS

As I am interested in the lived experience of people who currently practice yoga in Dunedin, and because I identify myself as a member of that group, my research involves both qualitative and autoethnographic methods. My inside status to the yoga community means that participant observation occurs on a casual and everyday basis as I interact with my contemporaries before and after a yoga class, or engage in conversations about yoga at any other venue. For my research, I have also conducted formal interviews with six local yoga practitioners. I recruited participants through placing posters around the main yoga studios in Dunedin and – having obtained a comprehensive database of private yoga teachers – through email contact in which I explained my project. The response was positive, and my sample, although self-selected, ranged in the type of yoga practice, years of experience, age, and gender. The interviews were semi-structured with several guiding questions. My main intent was to access subjective perceptions and experience through the narratives, so I let my contemporaries do most of the talking.

Adopting a grounded theory approach to categorise and code themes within the conversations, I transcribed relevant interview excerpts of the recordings into notes for further reference. The coding involved matching narratives to thematic schemes which have been preset through evaluating previous literature on the topic and through formulating theory about the meaning of yoga both through personal experience and observation. Intending to explore both the lived experience of yoga practice and the cultural ideology which inspires its practice, my analysis of the interviews involves a theoretical para-

digim based on phenomenological and sociopolitical understandings of embodiment. The interview method, however, is limited as it offers insight only through what people say about their practice. My analysis of data from a small number of interviews is mediated not only by my own experience of yoga, but by a textual analysis of the literature on yoga in the greater Western context, and a theoretical analysis of yogic philosophy in light of physical culture. Such methodological triangulation may support the validity of autoethnographic research in the social sciences (Chang 2008). Still, more thorough ethnographic methods could offer deeper insight into how yoga is lived in Dunedin.

## RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

### *Voices of My Contemporaries*

Interviews with my contemporaries indicate above all how discourses of healthism and body maintenance tend to inspire their yoga practice. The term healthism was coined by Robert Crawford in the 1980s not only to identify a perceived cultural trend towards adopting health-promoting activities, but to denote that the individual's responsibility to maintain and enhance one's health is driven by a sort of moral imperative (Roy 2008). Monitoring the body's health and prevention of injuries is a theme which surfaces consistently throughout my interviews. Sofia, a 40 year old teacher of *Ashtanga Vinyasa*, recalls that in the early days she 'never had money to go to yoga classes.' After injuring her back while doing a back bend, '... it was just me in the dark in the morning and crawling onto the mat and just doing pose of the child' until she was on her feet again. Similarly, Grant (age 55, *Bikram* and *Ashtanga Vinyasa* practitioner) demonstrates how yoga can be used as a self-health practice. He took up yoga after a health scare which forced him to make lifestyle changes:

I used to be a heavy drinker ... I ended up having a couple of trips to A and E ... they did all these tests on me ... and couldn't find anything ... so they just said to stop drinking alcohol altogether ... and that's when I got heavily into the yoga ... I recon' it saved me really ... 'cause it gave me a new focus ... gave me ways of dealing with things 'cause you know ... I was coming off a drug.

Yoga not only assisted in renewing Grant's physical health but offered a way of disciplining the mind which helped him deal with change. Each of my contemporaries spoke of some mental benefits they experience from their practice, whether expressed as a relaxed feeling, clarity and presence of mind, or the ability to handle pressure. Anna, age 43, who practices and teaches *Satyananda*

yoga claims: 'I can get the physical buzz ... but I cannot get that sense of peace and connection with my body in other things I do ... I was running and cycling and doing all sorts of things and my head still running ... whereas the yoga forces you to just take your mind to the point of being present.' For Donna, who teaches *Bikram* yoga, the mental benefits of her practice have always been paramount: 'There was never really anything physically wrong with me. It was purely like the mental and emotional side ... I practice five times a week ... five for me is like exactly what I need to stay kind of focused and to stay mentally strong.' Between Anna and Donna's narrative, there is a subtle shift from conveying the experience of peace and mental presence which the yoga practice imparts, to the prescription of yoga practice in order to attain these benefits. Where Anna constructs yoga as a tool which can 'take the mind to the point of being present,' Donna stresses the imperative to make use of this tool for self-medication. These narratives indicate how discourses of healthism are mediated through contemporary understandings of yoga, and that these discourses can subtly change the way in which yoga is practiced and experienced.

While physical fitness is a theme central to most of my respondents, the narratives of two women in particular suggest that their yoga practice enables a sort of reconciliation with their bodies, enabling self-acceptance. For Angel, a 35 year old practitioner of *Bikram* yoga, facing her reflection in the studio mirrors triggered an emotional response which she speaks of as cathartic. On numerous occasions she has found herself crying during class:

It is uncomfortable looking at yourself for 90 minutes ... for me personally it's a lot of different struggles of you know ... as a female I'm considered ... technically overweight ..... but there's no doctor that says I need to lose weight ..... but going in there, then you're looking at yourself and then you start sort of criticizing yourself ... it's also that silence. If you're at the gym ... you can distract yourself with music or the television.

*Bikram* yoga is unique in that the entire length of the practice room is mirrored (see figure 1) and practitioners are discouraged from averting their eyes from their own reflection during most *asanas*. This is a strikingly different approach from other schools of yoga which encourage proprioceptive methods of relying on an internal sense of alignment. The mirrors enable a self surveillance which brings to mind Foucault's (1979) metaphor of the panopticon as a symbol for social control. The panopticon is a prison design in which the cells line the outer walls, and a guard is positioned in the centre. Because the guard has the potential to be able to see each prisoner at any given moment,

the prisoners learn to monitor their own behaviour in anticipation of being observed. While the objective in *Bikram* yoga is to focus one pointedly on the self reflected in the mirror, it is through the mirrors that the practitioners view not only their own bodies, but their bodies in relation to the myriad of bodies surrounding them, offering a means of surveying oneself in relation to the wider community (figure 1).

When asked why she continues to practice *Bikram* yoga, Angel responds:

It's a combination of noticing that, okay, my body is toning, I'm breathing better. With this recent injury [referring to a knee injury] ... seeing the healing process and noticing how strong my legs have become ... and then realizing more recently well that it's actually emotionally good for you too, even though I find it quite challenging.

The discourses of body maintenance and healthism are evident throughout Angel's narrative. These discourses empower her to persevere in front of the mirrors but simultaneously limit her freedom through offering such notions as 'technically overweight.' Angel's narrative is complex; although she indicates



Figure 1. In front of the mirrors in the Dunedin *Bikram* yoga studio 2013  
(Photo source: Declan Wong)

that the mirrors and the lack of distraction have exacerbated a profound struggle with her body image, she views the process as one of emotional healing. Her struggle and resolve neatly engage the tension between Foucault's (1979) notion of self surveillance as social control and the liberation from social control which the self-mastery of a yoga practice promises. The complexity of her experience is that these two states exist simultaneously. Linda, aged 52, also practices *Bikram* yoga and experiences a similar resolution with her body through the mirrors:

I find it really difficult and I find it challenging. I have major issues with how I perceive my body and how I judge it, yet I keep going back into a room with a full wall of mirrors (laughing). What is that? That's the most ridiculous thing ever! ..... And I don't cry inside, I have gone through stages of that but it's not a self destructive thing, it's a resolving thing.

Arguably, these two narratives are unique to the *Bikram* experience because other yoga studios do not provide mirrors in this way. Practitioners of other forms of yoga similarly allude to the release of mental fixations, if not through the device of mirrors, through a radical engagement with the postures and breath. Both Angel and Linda's narratives suggest the kind of transcendence, or liberation from worldly concerns (namely, internalised discourses) which Alter (2012) alludes to as the principal 'spiritual' aim of classical yoga. While neither of these respondents use the word 'spiritual' to describe their practice, Linda talks about how yoga has put her in touch with the immediacy of her relationship with death. She discusses how her yoga practice helps to build the strength that she needs to deal with the fears and challenges which arise in her life. The recent death of Linda's father has brought her in touch with her fears of 'exiting this state':

The more I do yoga, the more I believe that I will be able to deal with that (pause) whatever it is. And anything else that happens to me, I think I will be able to deal with because I deal with the wobbling in standing bow, I deal with not being able to wrap my leg properly in eagle.

Linda expresses that the discipline of her practice facilitates liberation from fear. A similar interaction between discipline and freedom surfaces when Sophia explicitly talks about yoga as a spiritual practice which tamed for her what she describes as unmanageable internal forces:

*Sophia*: 'I had an intense wayward spirituality that I couldn't control ... and then a flatmate took me into a yoga class. It was what I'd been looking for for so long ... a training, a real lineage that trains your body, this rigorous discipline of the mind as well ...'

## DISCUSSION

### *Yoga and 'Healthism' in Consumer Culture*

The relationship between discipline and freedom found in the discourses of classical yoga and echoed throughout the above narratives can also be found within the ideologies of consumer culture. Foucault's theory of biopower posits that social control is largely enacted in modern times through internalised self-surveillance (Barcan 2008). While the mirrors in the *Bikram* yoga studios exemplify the immediacy of how yoga practitioners might enact self-surveillance, more subtle and pervasive are the mechanisms by which dominant social ideologies may both constitute and discipline notions of the self. Featherstone (1982, 18) focuses on modern consumer culture's obsession with beauty, health and fitness, and the techniques of self-improvement people undergo to produce a 'more marketable self'. While the ideology of consumer culture promotes the value of freedom, we are simultaneously bombarded with images of the ideal body, and messages to assume self-responsibility for both our appearance and our health. In a neoliberal economy, where health and fitness are offered as products of consumption, biopower renders us 'not so much "free" as obligated to be free' to make the right lifestyle choices (Barcan 2008, 16).

Body maintenance is not limited to physical fitness regimes, but includes the work done to maintain physical, mental, and emotional health. Barcan (2008) refers to the instruments used to do this work as 'surveillance medicine'. A vast range of alternative remedies, immune boosting concoctions, dieting plans, massage therapies, meditation classes, and – as indicated by the narratives of my contemporaries – yoga classes, exist today; all accommodating the 'injunction to manage one's own health' (Barcan 2008, 17). In New Zealand and the United Kingdom, strategies are devised at a governmental level for increasing individual responsibility for public health matters. Health promoting behaviours are not only encouraged, but are now rewarded while behaviours deemed unhealthy are penalised (Hodgetts, Bolam, and Stephens 2005). The media reinforces discourses of healthism by promoting activities and products which purportedly enhance health and fitness, and by depicting healthy bodies as 'virtuous members of society' (Hodgetts, Bolam, and Stephens 2005, 134).

*Hatha* yoga, promoted as an alternative therapy, offers the perfect ‘fix’ for the neoliberal health consumer, because not only does it promise optimal health performance in an increasingly medicalised everyday life (Barcan 2008), but the practice involves self-responsibility at every level: from the disciplinary motivation of making it to class, to the financial commitment of paying for the class:

The instrumental strategies which body maintenance demands of the individual resonate with deep-seated features of consumer culture which encourage individuals to negotiate their social relationships and approach their free time activities with a calculating frame of mind. Self preservation depends upon the preservation of the body within a culture in which the body is the passport to all that is good in life. Health, youth, beauty, sex, fitness are the positive attributes which body care can achieve and preserve (Featherstone 1982, 26).

Featherstone (1982) concedes that techniques of body maintenance for the purpose of self-surveillance are not unique to consumer physical culture. He refers to the ascetic practices of certain religious orders which involve similar self-regulation. Through abstaining from the excesses of bodily pleasure and through the execution of disciplined physical practices, religious ascetics seek spiritual attainment. The distinctive intent behind these techniques of body maintenance sets the neoliberal consumer apart from the spiritual ascetic; for the religious ascetic, it is spiritual – if not cultural – capital that is achieved through their efforts. Although *hatha* yoga has become (mostly) secularised, the benefits people receive are more complicated than is suggested simply through an association with consumer culture and healthism. The tension between discipline and liberation which emerges through my interviews suggests that a yoga practice can satisfy both approaches to body maintenance simultaneously – that of the consumer and the ascetic.

### *Beyond Physical Culture*

My embodied experience of yoga has sparked in me a sense of wonder about the commonality of human experience. When I am immersed within the liminal space of a crowded yoga class, balanced in complete stillness and concentration, I become unaware that I am surrounded by others striking the exact pose, likewise in a total state of inner focus. Our union together in the room somehow supports the journey we each make to the depths of our concentrated

awareness of self. It is at this point that I understand that the ‘culture of yoga’ in which this solitary ‘I’ finds immersion, reaches far and beyond the limited classification of ‘physical culture’ (June 2013, my yoga diary).

Each of my contemporaries talk about unanticipated and sometimes transformational outcomes of their practice. Although Donna was drawn to *Bikram* yoga for fitness and flexibility, her practice has come to regulate her moods and alleviate depression. Both Angel and Linda experience cathartic moments which resolve some discomfort with bodily self-image. Linda also claims that her practice helps her face life challenges, including the fear of death. Through a phenomenological look at yoga I am able to address such unintentional outcomes, which my *Bikram* teacher refers to as the ‘side effects’ of coming to class.

Although the phenomenological embodiment of *asana* and *pranayama* can provide a remedy to the stresses and tensions of daily life, yoga itself often involves great discomfort. One of my instructors famously (and frequently) announced, ‘If you are not suffering, you are not doing yoga!’ Leder’s (1990, 83–84) formulation of ‘dys-appearance’ considers that the body becomes apparent to consciousness only when its function breaks down: ‘At moments of breakdown I experience *to* my body, not simply *from* it’. Complete attention demanded by the difficulty of yoga practice causes the practitioner to turn inward, while the experiential world subsides into the background. Alter (2012) describes the practice of yoga as a ‘sacrifice’ in the anthropological sense. He claims that ‘on a purely mechanistic level ... *asana* and *pranayama* are contrary to “human nature”’ (Alter 2012, 430). The practice of *hatha* yoga can thus be understood as ‘a radical form of engagement with the body which can prove deeply influential on the practitioner’s understanding of their embodied self’ (Smith 2007, 37).

The practitioner’s understanding of their embodied self is highly subjective, but because it may be arrived at through engaging the same schema of bodily techniques common to other yoga practitioners, it can also – to some extent – be shared. To exemplify how subjective experience can be shared, I compare two autobiographical accounts of the embodiment of Tree Pose (*Vrikshasana*): one from my diary, and the other sent to me by Anna, who practices and teaches in Dunedin (figure 2).

These subjective accounts are strikingly similar; particularly considering the former came through a *Bikram* practice and the latter through a *Satyananda* yoga practice. Because of the clearly physical emphasis of *Bikram* yoga over

*Moving into Tree Pose, balanced on leg standing with right heel tucked into the hollow of my left hip joint. Pelvis tilting, a continuous gentle pushing forward from somewhere deep within the solar plexus. Stillness. I feel my chest opening, my ribcage expanding, the top of my head reaching up up up toward the ceiling. Suddenly a glimpse, a visceral memory which connects me instantaneously and for always to a sense of my Self that is constant and continuous through time and space. (April 2013, my yoga diary)*



*I retain my stability, feel the calmness and peace throughout the mind, all I have is body and breathe and the now. Peace, calm and stillness [...] Even in such a static posture I am active, I am holding, I am extending, I am conscious, I am engaged and present. [...] the breath also is the mechanism to keep me in my asana it shuts out thought, distractions, emotions, and allows me to 'just be here' no expectations or demands, just a space to inhabit with my breath body and mind finally feeling in unison. (Excerpt from Anna's self-reflection)*

Figure 2. Tree Pose (Photo source: Declan Wong)

many other forms of yoga, I had expected to find in general a more clear-cut distinction between the narratives of those who practice *Bikram* and practitioners of more esoteric forms of yoga. I was looking for where the *Bikram* practitioners were more likely to corroborate discourses of body maintenance, and where the *Satyananda* practitioner would speak more of a spiritual liberation, or union between body, mind and spirit. My own synthesised approach to yoga, however, renders this stereotyped expectation unreasonable. Why should others express a dichotomy between the spiritual and the physical aspects of their practice, when these elements are clearly united in my own practice? Although I have found that *Bikram* practitioners appear less likely to describe their experience as 'spiritual', the narratives prove more complex than to suggest a categorical split between approaches to yoga practice.

The esoteric teachings of classical yoga make a distinction between the ego self and the *Absolute Self*, where the self with a small 's' refers to the individual caught in worldly affairs, and the Self with a capital 'S' is liberated from attachment to worldly affairs and connected with a universal consciousness (see De Michelis 2004). Similarly, Foucault makes a distinction between two

forms of self-mastery. His formula for one kind of self-mastery is restrictive; it involves self-surveillance and produces a subjective identity in alignment with dominant ideologies (Foucault 1983). His second form of self-mastery conversely serves as resistance to the former; it involves a constant struggle against embodying social norms, and – to ensure care of the self – is centred in reflexivity and critical analysis (Foucault 1986). The phenomenological embodiment of yogic discipline may serve as Foucault's agentic form of self mastery and, as Vertinsky (2012) suggests, offer some resistance to cultural conformity. Micro adjustments within the postures work to release built up tensions accumulated through habitual patterns such as sitting at a desk all day. Attention to the breath helps 'develop an awareness of the action of the mind' (Lea 2009, 78). This awareness perhaps enables the release of mental fixations, or thoughts which govern action. My teacher Donna told me that the gauge of a good yoga practice is not how well you do the postures, but how still you become during *sivasana* (the corpse pose). This stillness, which is guided by the breath, indicates cessation of mind chatter.

#### *From Mauss to Mudra*

Mauss ([1935] 1973, 88) suggests, 'at the bottom of all our mystical states there are techniques of the body which we have not studied but which were perfectly studied by China and India.' He asserts that the phenomenon is necessarily more widespread than within India and China alone, and that the subject deserves more academic attention. Although Mauss ([1935] 1973) refers specifically to the mystical capacity held in the breath (or *pranayama*), I extend his observation to the bodily postures (or *asanas*) which, in yoga, are directed through the breath. The most profound form of *asana* is *mudra*, which translates as 'gesture' or 'attitude' in English and involves subtle, yet accurate movements which engage only specific parts of the body, or sometimes more extreme contortions of the entire body akin to *asanas*. Common *mudras* are the positioning of the hands into distinct configurations, a steadily directed fixation of the gaze, or isolated contraction of the lower abdominal or sphincter muscle. The modern practitioner of *hatha* yoga may intentionally incorporate *mudras* into a routine *asana* practice, or *mudras* may occur spontaneously while engaged in *asana* practice.

The *mudra* acts as an energy seal which redirects the flow of *prana* (life breath) through the body rather than allowing dissipation. This disciplined internal control of *prana* is thought to strengthen the body's immune system (Alter 2004) and, according to the teachings of classical yoga, lead to spiritual liberation. The power of *mudra*, which is a sort of inner alchemy, exemplifies how

spirituality in yoga differs from religious spirituality. According to Alter (2012, 428), ‘... yoga locates in human beings the power that in religion is assigned to god.’ *Mudras* are thought to ‘alter mood, attitude, and perception, ... deepen awareness and concentration ... and ... can bestow major siddhis, psychic powers, on the advanced practitioner’ (Saraswati 1999, 423).

*Mudras* are not only an essential element of classical yoga, but are also incorporated into classical Indian dance. The *mudra* is a prime example of Mauss’ ([1935] 1973) ‘technique of the body’ in that it is a culturally distinct, yet transferable, idiosyncratic gesture, the performance of which reflects and generates a world of meaning. Each *mudra* has attached to it particular symbols, invocations of energetic states or states of consciousness, and health benefits (see Saraswati 1999). Although Mauss famously refers to his body techniques as variants on producing everyday tasks, he also includes techniques of dancing, and he alludes to ‘biological means of entering into communication with God’ ([1935] 1973, 68). I introduce *asana*, *mudra* and *pranayama* as unique examples of Mauss’ techniques of the body, not only because they are reproduced with specific intent beyond the execution of any mundane task, but because these techniques are performed by some with the very intent of transcending the mundane.

## CONCLUSION

While I suggest that the popularity of yoga in Dunedin can be attributed more to health and body maintenance than spiritual aspirations, my research expresses a deeply personal interest in whether a phenomenological engagement with *asana* and *pranayama* may inadvertently predispose the practitioner to transcendental qualities embedded in classical yoga’s original design. The narratives of my yoga contemporaries corroborate my own understanding that, through engaging techniques of *asana* and *pranayama*, something unanticipated may be gained. Many of my respondents claim that their practice effectively serves as a remedy to daily stresses and physical health issues, while often enhancing clarity of mind and emotional balance. Although yoga may be used as a form of surveillance medicine – a monitor for mental, emotional and physical health – aligning with body maintenance and healthist ideologies, for Angel and Linda in particular, engaging the postures in front of the mirrors has enabled a reconciliation with their own bodies. In my estimation this reconciliation indicates a sort of liberation from embodied social discourses around a self-image which had been emotionally destructive.

The mirrors at Bikram yoga offer a pertinent example of Foucault’s (1979) no-

tion of self surveillance, yet paradoxically Angel and Linda's experience can be understood in terms of Foucault's (1986) agentic notion of self-mastery, where care of the self centred in reflexivity and critical analysis, may serve to subvert dominant ideologies which imprison the subject. The spiritual goal of classical yoga for transcending worldly attachment is not dissimilar to this formulation of self-mastery, especially considering the precisely 'worldly' nature of social ideologies. Stress release, clarity of mind and emotional balance, which are common outcomes described by yoga practitioners, may also be understood in the terms of Foucault's care of the self, and classical yoga's notion of transcendence. While many of my contemporaries indicate that their practice enables them to conquer fears and cope with life's challenges, the few who explicitly state that yoga holds spiritual meaning tend to reject traditional religiosity in favour of a kind of spirituality which engages self awareness. Although my respondents who practice *Bikram* yoga do not speak of their practice in spiritual terms, my analysis indicates that even within this most secular style of modern yoga practice, there remains a suggestion of classical yoga's transcendental quality.

I am cognisant of the controversy surrounding an attempt to universalise the particular, especially considering the subjective nature of a phenomenological experience of *asana*, *mudra* and *pranayama*. I acknowledge that yoga holds different meaning for different people in different contexts. My negotiation of yoga as a transcendental practice comes through interpretive analysis of my observations, interviews, and personal experience. My theoretical perspective does not necessarily reflect the subjective understanding of my participants. Due to the small scale of my interview project and greater reliance on textual analysis than in-depth observation, I position my research as more an autoethnographic reflection than ethnography. A limitation of my inquiry rests in my central effort to ascertain the commonality of human experience. In this effort I have approached the various schools of modern *hatha* yoga more or less homogeneously. There are significant differences between many of these schools – whether from a business perspective or a philosophical or religious standpoint – and their different approaches may provoke varied perceptions and understandings from their respective practitioners. My inquiry, however, is not designed to negate the heterogeneity of yogic experience, but rather to facilitate a search for the common thread which links individual practitioners to a community of practice. Nonetheless, further studies would do well to approach the topic from a comparative framework.

Paramaa rishhibhiH namaH  
*I honour the masters who  
have come before.*

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to my yoga contemporaries, whose contributions have made this research possible; to my supervisor, Jacqui Leckie, for her guidance in my honours dissertation; and to Ruth Fitzgerald for her assistance in turning a wordy honours dissertation into a publishable article.

#### REFERENCES

- Alter, Joseph S. 2004. *Yoga in Modern India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- . 2012. 'Sacrifice, the Body, and Yoga: Theoretical Entailments of Embodiment in Hathayoga.' *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 35(2): 408–433. doi: 10.1080/00856401.2011.628747.
- Barcan, Ruth. 2008. 'Alternative Therapies as Disciplinary Practices: The Uses and Limitations of a Foucauldian Approach.' In *Cultural Theory in Everyday Practice*, edited by N. Anderson and D. Schlunke, 14–26. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1990. *The Logic of Practice*. Translated by R. Nice. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Chang, Heewon. 2008. *Autoethnography as Method*. California: Left Coast Press, Inc.
- Csordas, Thomas J. 1990. 'Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology.' *Ethos* 18(1): 5–47.
- De Michelis, Elizabeth. 2004. *A History of Modern Yoga*. London: Continuum.
- . 2008. 'Modern Yoga: History and Forms.' In *Yoga in the Modern World: Contemporary Perspectives*, edited by M. Singleton and J. Byrne, 17–35. Abingdon, Oxfordshire: Routledge.
- Eliade, Mircea. 1958. *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*. New York: Pantheon Books.

- Featherstone, Mike. 1982. 'The Body in Consumer Culture.' *Theory, Culture and Society* 1: 18–33.
- Foucault, Michel. 1979. *Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage.
- . 1983. 'The Subject and Power.' In *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 2nd edn., edited by H.L. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow, 208–226. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 1986. *The History of Sexuality, vol.3: The Care of the Self*. London: Penguin.
- Hasselle-Newcombe, Suzanne. 2005. 'Spirituality and "Mystical Religion" in Contemporary Society: A Case Study of British Practitioners of the Iyengar Method of Yoga.' *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 20(3): 305–321.
- Hodgetts, Darrin, Bruce Bolam, and Christine Stephens. 2005. 'Mediation and the Construction of Contemporary Understandings of Health and Lifestyle.' *Journal of Health Psychology* 10(1): 123–136.
- Langoien, Lars J. 2012. 'Yoga, Change and Embodied Enlightenment.' *Approaching Religion* 2(2): 27–37.
- Lea, J. 2009. 'Liberation or Limitation? Understanding Iyengar Yoga as a Practice of the Self.' *Body and Society* 15: 71–92.
- Leder, Drew. 1990. *The Absent Body*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lloyd, Mike. 1997. 'The Quiet Politics of Yoga: Ethnographic Reflections on a Traveling Body Project.' *Sites: A Journal for South Pacific Cultural Studies* 34: 19–35.
- Maddox, Callie B. 2014. 'Studying at the Source: Ashtanga Yoga Tourism and the Search for Authenticity in Mysore, India.' *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change* ahead-of-print: 1–14. doi:10.1080/14766825.2014.972410.
- Mauss, Marcel. 1973 (1935). 'Techniques of the Body.' *Economy and Society* 2: 70–88.
- Okely, Judith. 1992. 'Anthropology and Autobiography: Participatory Experience and Embodied Knowledge.' In *Anthropology and Autobiography*, edited by J. Okley and H. Callaway, 1–28. London: Routledge.

- Persson, Asha. 2010. 'Embodied Worlds: A Semiotic Phenomenology of Satyananda Yoga.' *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (N.S.)* 16: 797–815.
- Reed-Danahay, Deborah E. 1997. 'Introduction.' In *Autoethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social*, edited by D. E. Reed-Danahay, 1–20. Oxford: Berg.
- Roy, Stephannie C. 2008. "'Taking Charge of Your Health": Discourses of Responsibility in English-Canadian Women's Magazines.' *Sociology of Health and Illness* 30(3): 463–477.
- Said, Edward W. 1978. *Orientalism*. London: Penguin Books.
- Saraswati, Swami S. 1999. *Asana Pranayama Mudra Bandha*. Bihar, India: Bihar School of Yoga.
- Singleton, Mark. 2005. 'Salvation through Relaxation: Proprioceptive Therapy and its Relationship to Yoga.' *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 20(3): 289–304.
- Smith, Benjamin R. 2007. 'Body, Mind and Spirit? Towards an Analysis of the Practice of Yoga.' *Body and Society* 13(2): 25–46.
- Sparks, Andrew C. 2002. 'Autoethnography: Self-Indulgence or Something More?' In *Ethnographically Speaking: Autoethnography, Literature and Aesthetics*, edited by A. P. Bochner and C. Ellis, 209–232. California: AltaMira Press.
- Strauss, Sarah. 2002. "'Adapt, Adjust, Accommodate": The Production of Yoga in a Transnational World.' *History and Anthropology* 13(3): 231–251.
- . 2004. 'Re-orienting Yoga.' *Expedition* 46(3): 29–34.
- . 2005. *Positioning Yoga: Balancing Acts Across Culture*. Oxford: Berg.
- Tola, Fernando and Carmen Dragonetti. 1987. *The Yogasutras of Patanjali: On Concentration of Mind*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Vertinsky, Patricia. 2012. "'Building the Body Beautiful" in the Woman's League of Health and Beauty: Yoga and Female Agency in 1930s Britain.' *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* 16(4): 517–542. doi:10.1080/13642529.2012.697280.