

THE ART OF BALANCING EFFORT
WITH RELEASE IN YOGA: A 'FIRST-PERSON'
EXPERIENTIAL APPROACH

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Mieke Matthysen

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RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Preparatory year Iyengar Yoga Teacher's Training

- initial plan: 6 months personal diary (logbook) => difficult
- result: purposive sampling: 14 yoga teachers with a sustained practice
 - age: 34-58
 - yoga experience: 7-27 years
 - teaching experience: 2-25 years
 - all Iyengar yoga, sometimes combined with other styles
 - first encounter + interview of average 90'
- 12 interviews; 1 interview + notes; 1 logbook
- Additional data: 7 students of IYTT ; own logbook

Interpretative (phenomenological) analysis:

Yoga is a science, but it is not such a rigid science; it is a fluid science, because it is subjective. It involves a subjective judgement. [...] It depends on the particular state of mind that you are in, at that point of time. (Prashant Iyengar, 2001)

⇒ no ready answers, not one experience is the same

but: subjective, embodied experiences

⇒ 'first person' phenomenological inquiry

Still: inevitability of accepting a third-person view of a 'first-person' account of embodied experiences (Svenaeus 2011; 2013)

IYENGAR YOGA

- Iyengar's methodology (didactics):
 - from **grossest (body) to the subtlest** (mind; ethical and spiritual consciousness)
 - **self-observation**: what is looking at all this? intelligence
=> from physical to mental, intellectual, and spiritual level (philosophy; pranayama)

In my experience, this makes sense. It is only when you are physically and emotionally or mentally a little stable, that you can do the effort to grow on further levels. Otherwise, you basically don't have the energy for it, mental and physical worries disturb you too much, keep you busy. Obviously, the aim is to integrate the spiritual level even on the level of each asana.

- BUT: **everything is integrated** => start with focus on subtle **actions** in body: interrelation of muscles- joints-tendons-fibres-cells....
- Geeta Iyengar: "the dynamics in the static posture"

IY = intensive personal study of actions that require intelligence, body awareness, concentration, focus, ... => effort !

EFFORT ?

1. Effort / tension :

- direct and very precise bodily instructions => strong mental focus on precision, alignment and technique
- (myth of the) perfect posture => ambition to reach goal => stress
- (physical and mental) stamina for longer period in *asanas*

⇒ physical and mental effort

⇒ hardening of body and mind ! < frustration, disappointment, perfectionism...

Esp. (relative) beginners: lack knowledge of 'connections', combining technique and stamina

EFFORT ?

2. Effort: inner transformation

process of self-transformation: going inside, confronting the self,
constant self-observation, discipline

(e.g. Joel Kramer: *Yoga as self-transformation*)

SO:

Yoga = personal physical, emotional and mental effort

RELEASE ?

- restorative poses (e.g. *savanasa*)
 - during or after *asana*/sequence:
 - soft face, muscles, letting go of strain in body and mind, emotions (e.g. crying...)
 - ‘space’ in body
 - clarity and openness of mind and senses
 - feeling light in body and mind
 - the place between your ears as ‘the tilt of the sword’ (the vertebra), with which you can pull the sword from the sheath (the body), in such a way that it’s is released from gravity (Dona Holleman quoted by teacher)*
 - feeling like “if things, energy start to circulate again”
 - This circulation can be attention that is released, but also it can mean tiredness flowing through, this tama quality, the passivity, to get it circulating again.*
- => renewed energy (cf. yawning effect)

RELEASE ?

- centering down, going inside, getting connected with self/body
cf. *daoyin* exercises from Daoist alchemy

The concentration on the body more or less forces you to go inside, to get in touch with your body. It brings me in my body, centered. Not necessarily happy, but more aware of things, more alert and open.

- releasing emotions, make peace with daily life tensions...
=> more even-tempered

Release for me also means that you are aware that your mood and state of mind and body, and also yoga practice, are all subject to processes like your own sleeping pattern, eating habits, conditioned reactions... And what I like is that in my own yoga practice, I can tune in to that, that I can really start to feel what my body and mind needs and to tune your sequence into this to create more balance.

RELEASE ?

- stable, intimate relation with the self in the body => mildness, softness, tolerance towards the self

When you die, whether you can put your feet behind your ear, how perfect your postures are, you won't take that with you. But you will take with you how you have lived your life.

- extends to outside world: more calm, compassionate, even-tempered relation with students, partner, children, friends:

You re-collect yourself, there is a kind of peace and silence. And from this peace you can return to the outside world. But you look at it in an introvert manner.

=> less dependency on external approval, stress, pressure

So: peaceful, softness inside - actively but mildly go into the world!

BALANCE?

A. In practice, asana's, sequence....

- = NOT just physical effort followed by relaxation BUT total balance of body alignment, mental effort, and emotional state
- = spreading of concentration and awareness: all over the body
- = **alert calmness or calm alertness**

It is not just hanging in our sofa with a glass of wine. That is the tama state, not a real balanced relaxation. That is definitely not what we strive for in asana. But we strive for a kind of awareness, and alertness, and openness, that is also spatial. And that in a relaxed body.

- = **“Effortless effort”** instead of duality action-passivity, static-dynamic
- Quoting from yoga philosophy and sutra's: *Abhyasa Vairagyabham Tannirodhah (1.12)*: “sustained practice and non-attachment”

BALANCE ?

B. In own growth process

= balance of effort and release

more advanced teachers: growth process is not linear, but circular; = dynamic of constant balancing of (re)newed effort and devotion, and the release and letting go of yoga ambitions and sustained effort

e.g. unexpected Aha-erlebnis

BALANCE ?

C. In daily life:

- doing daily actions with a different mindset: being “active in a passive but alert way”
- balancing yoga practice, family life, other job.....
e.g. home practice = restorative, comfort zone
- letting go of material attachment (but enjoying it when you have it, just not become attached to it) => feeling of freedom
- letting go of physical body, no fear of dying: “yoga teaches you to die”

NO BALANCE ?

Examples:

- **personal practice:**

- no savasana after class: bad sleep, cooling down ... not everyone needs it
- *Vrksasana*: mind disturbed => no stability

- **teacher level:** types of practitioners/students :

body – relaxation – avoiding injuries:

difficult to balance effort-release, dynamic-

passive / restorative => tension between the needs /

expectations of students, and the nature of yoga (and

how yoga is presented in media)

HOW?

- Breath
 - Focus
 - Props
 - Language - humour
 - *Asana* - sequence
 - Surrender
-
- Sometimes: inspiration from examples: (guest)teachers, Iyengar himself, fellow yogi(ni), books, article, philosophy

BREATH

- inhalation - exhalation
 - brest - belly breathing
 - consciously direct breath to place in body
 - *pranayama* (focus on breath): *ujjayi, viloma*.... => restorative or energetic
 - precise instructions => naturally regulating breath

 - But also imbalance:
stress, short-breath, restlessness
- => very individual process

FOCUS

- directing attention towards pain, tension, hard parts
- directing attention away from the pain, tension
- visualization (e.g. focus on backside of body: passive, slowing down, calming down...)
- focus / concentration on the body, instructions, being in the here and now: calming effect (contradiction)

PROPS

bolsters, belt, blocks, eye bandage, yoga chair, blankets....

⇒ intensify or release

Let the props take care of the effort, so you can relax deeper, or go deeper in the pose. (e.g. badha konasana)

LANGUAGE

- how instructions are verbalised e.g. soften or relax face, belly, knee...
can trigger new insights, can move you...
- humour: “make your big toe, shoulder.... your best friend”
- metaphors: “Yoga is like learning to drive a broken car” ; toothpaste feeling
=> teacher
- reading of philosophy, *Mahabharata*, Iyengar’s writings, Yoga Sutra’s...

ASANA - SEQUENCE

- *savasana*, forward bends... ↔ standing poses, back bends....
- “the art of sequencing”: slow start, gradually concentration/effort span, “cooling down” = integrating the action(s)
- sequencing relative e.g. advanced: focus on one type of postures with different state of mind; different build-up...
- releasing in *asana* requires constant self-observation, no judgment
- playing with connections in body => subtle actions

ASANA-SEQUENCE

- Sometimes: dynamics effort-release with different effect:

You focus on the body, and this focus brings you calmness, but maybe first of all restlessness. A lot of people come to yoga to relax. But in this relaxation a lot of things come up. For instance when you start a yoga class very tired, you will feel tiredness coming up and you might get a headache. So the relaxation might open to you, show you, what is inside, and this can be tension, restlessness, tiredness, irritation, competitiveness. These are the moments that you are faced with your own reality, and for many this can be very confronting.

⇒ confrontation with another, repressed or deeper form of tension = starting point for new 'effort'

⇒ brave, devoted, nonjudgmental state of mind required "to transform tension, let it out, to finally create space in your head and your body, and release again"

So: tension/effort => release/relaxation => new tension=> increased intensity, deepening of release

SURRENDER

- Most difficult state of mind to overcome tension, especially when resulting from doubt, insecurity, fear:

I just saw a video of Geeta Iyengar practicing marichyasana, very intensively. But she also said, you can only start to twist if you give up your fears in this exertion, if you surrender to the asana. So surrender is the way to find a balance between effort and release, at least in the pose. You still open up new frontiers, not through the effort, but as a result of the surrender. So you go to places that you have never been before. This is how I experience it. Also in the yoga sutra's, in the definition of yoga, to transcend the inconstancy of the mind, or to calm these, well the medium to do this is abhyasa and vairagya. I think it's really these two aspects, intensive practice, combined with surrender, detachment, release. I think the intensity can really only come when you surrender. Otherwise you are always hardening in the effort.

- Nothing is constant (fluctuations of the mind; instability of the body):

It is also about learning to be confident, trust the body, the self and by extension, life through experiencing reactions and patterns of the physical and emotional body, and the extremes of both tension and release.

SURRENDER

- let go of control !
- requires: trust that things are fine as they are
- surrendering on different levels:
 - to the tradition, the method (style), the precision and ritual
 - to your emotions
 - to your body, to your physical constitution
 - to the teacher
 - to the posture, sequence

It is surrender that makes us humble. It is surrender that grounds us. And surrender is when control is not. In the perfect equilibrium between action and surrender, like a string tuned - neither too tight, nor too loose - in an instrument produces music, so does the mind become capable of being in a state of reflective observance for meditation to take place naturally. It is the surrender, that leads one to become open to always learn from life.

CONCLUSION

- balance effort-release, static-dynamic, hardness-softness:

= very subtle, personal process on different levels:

- physical, mental, intellectual, spiritual
- asana, sequence, personal practice, teaching, daily life

Yoga is a dance between control and surrender, between pushing and letting go, and when to push and when to let go becomes part of the creative process, part of the open-ended exploration of your being. (Joel Kramer)

- helpful for teachers and home practitioners; increasing awareness by verbalising and exchange

FOLLOW-UP:

- framing in yoga psychology < yoga sutra's: e.g. inner and outer/external mind, "warming up the butter so that I can spread" (Rajvi Mehta)
- personal diary over 2 years - teacher training?
- differences with other yoga-styles ?

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Thank you !

Questions, comments.....:

Mieke Matthyssen(Ph.D)

Huoshen Foundation Huoshen

Department of Special Needs Education (Orthopedagogie)-Ghent University

Mob.: +32 (0)474260880

Email: mieke.matthyssen@ugent.be