Technique and the Threat of Deethicalization

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ABSTRACT

Students at a yoga school in southern India learn physically demanding sequences of *āsana* (posture, pose) that they conceptualize as tools with which to cultivate inner qualities. In a wide range of contexts, teachers and master practitioners insist that these techniques of the body must be executed in particular ways and accompanied by specific mental states if they are to have their intended ethical effects. Yoga is thus understood to combine outwardly observable technique with an unobservable yet essential, inner component. One consequence of this to which students and teachers are pervasively oriented is that the techniques become vulnerable to a kind of deethicalization by which they are "bleached" of their spiritual content and reduced to mere physical exercise. The paper begins by comparing concerns about deethicalization among yoga practitioners with similar ideas about folklorization among participants in a women's mosque movement described by Mahmood (2012). I then turn to consider three semiotic processes relevant to the specific case: circumscription, performed demonstration and photographically enhanced entextualization.

In 1995, Pattabhi Jois, the founder of the Ashtanga yoga method and at the time also the director of the Ashtanga Yoga Research Institute in Mysore, India, wrote a strongly worded letter to *Yoga Journal* which he concluded with the following: "The Ashtanga yoga system should never be confused with 'power yoga' or any whimsical creation which goes against the tradition of the many types of yoga *shastras* (scriptures). It would be a shame to lose the precious jewel

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of liberation in the mud of ignorant body building."[1] In this passage specifically and in the letter as a whole more generally, Jois expressed a pervasive and, I will suggest, continuing concern that his teachings had been appropriated and mischaracterized by, mostly Western, practitioners and that, as a result, something essential was in danger of being lost. As can be seen from the passage cited, the rhetorical force of Jois' letter derives from a contrast between what he sees as the profound ethical significance of Ashtanga yoga on the one hand, and the superficial vanity of what some people have made of it on the other.

Today, students at the yoga school in Mysore, India that Jois founded receive training in a set of techniques (*āsana*, *prāṇāyāma*) which, when performed as part of a project of ethical reform, are understood to cultivate inner qualities (e.g., to "still the fluctuations of the mind" in one particularly influential formulation derived from Patanjali). These techniques are rigorously specified down to a very precise level of detail and are strictly regulated within the community of practitioners. While this focus on technical mastery has likely contributed to the global popularity of yoga, in what follows I will suggest that it also makes yoga vulnerable to just the kind of deethicalization that Jois was so concerned about. This is a process by which techniques that are metapragmatically framed as a means of spiritual self-cultivation within one community, are recast as mere physical exercises to be used in the pursuit of good health or body sculpting in another.

In response to these developments, practitioners of the method variously understood as "purists" or "traditionalists" complain that techniques of the self have been delinked from their ethical contexts of use, bleached of their "spiritual content," and repurposed as "mere" exercise. As I discuss in the next section, this process, which I call deethicalization, is similar, though not quite identical to what Mahmood (2012) describes as "the folklorization of worship" in her ethnography of an Egyptian piety movement.

In subsequent sections I first describe the ethnographic context and provide a sketch of the techniques of *āsana* that are taught at the school. I then turn to identify three semiotic operations involved in the process of de-ethicalization – circumscription, performed demonstration and photographically enhanced entextualization.

1. See *Yoga Journal*, December 1995, page 6 (available through google books). The letter was written in response to an earlier issue of the journal (February 1995) which had focused specifically on "power yoga" and in which this phrase was used more or less interchangeably with "Jois yoga" and "Ashtanga yoga." It's not entirely clear who wrote Jois's letter (or at least wrote it with him). The writing is clearly not that of Jois alone whose competence in English was famously quite limited.

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Deethicalization and Folklorization

In her remarkable ethnography of a women's mosque movement in Egypt, Saba Mahmood (2012) describes the various practices that participants in this movement use in their attempts to cultivate a truly pious self and to live their everyday lives in accordance with God's will. These include prayer, veiling and forms of avoidance behaviour indicative of feminine modesty. According to Mahmood, the women she studied see themselves as combatting increasing secularization and a resulting "folklorization of worship" within the larger Egyptian Islamic community. On their view, many Muslims have come to treat acts of worship as mere signs or customs that index (i.e., signify) membership in the community of Islam. In contrast, mosque movement participants aim to bring their religion to bear on the organization of daily life and ordinary conduct. One participant remarks (Mahmood 2012, 49):

> The state and society want to reduce Islam to folklore, as if Islam is just a collection of ceremonies and customs, such as hanging lanterns from doorways or baking cookies during Ramadan, or eating meat on *al-īd al-kabīr* [feast that celebrates the end of Ramadan]. Mere ceremonies *[mujarrad al-manāsik]* without any bearing on the rest of life.

Fatma, Mahmood's informant here, goes on to explain that many people fail to appreciate the significance of Ramadan and simply abstain from food during the day, but eat a lot at night and go out to the market. According to Fatma, an understanding of the "real meaning and spirit of Ramadan" (2012, 49) requires that a Muslim conduct herself in a particular way and engage in behaviors that convey "the fuller meaning of the fast, such as abstaining from anger and lying, avoiding looking at things that stir one's appetite (sexual or culinary), and being extra diligent in one's prayers" (2012, 49). Key to Fatma's view is the idea that fasting during Ramadan is not merely or primarily a custom, performance or sign but rather a disciplinary technique, a practice of self by which one cultivates piety. Commenting on her discussion with Fatma, Mahmood (2012, 50) writes:

> What gets lost in these popular festivities, she argued, is the understanding that the act of fasting is a necessary means to a virtuous life . . . "Fasting is not simply abstaining from food," she explained to me, "but it is a condition through which a Muslim comes to train herself in the virtues of patience, trust in God, asceticism from worldly pleasures, etc." In Fatma's view, therefore, an act of fasting that does not enable one to acquire these virtues transforms fasting from a religious act to a folkloric custom.

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Fasting during Ramadan can thus be understood in at least two ways. On the one hand, it can be understood as a custom or tradition and thus any act of fasting can be seen as sign or performance in accordance with that tradition. On the other hand, it can be understood as a practice by which one performs operations on the self, establishes a relation with oneself. On this latter understanding, the particular occasion of fasting is not self-sufficient but rather involves a range of associated behaviors. Together, these various strands of ethical conduct serve to effect a transformation of the self, to constitute the pious subject, to bring about a subject who behaves in pious ways.

Parallel considerations emerge in discussions of veiling. Thus, Mahmood (2012, 50–51) reports Hajja Nur as saying:

> When you (. . .) look at Egyptian society right now and see all these women wearing the *hijab* you must remember that a lot of them wear it as a custom, rather than a religious duty that also entails other responsibilities. (. . .) So what we have to do is to educate Muslim women that it is not enough to wear the veil, but that the veil must also lead us to behave in a truly modest manner in our daily lives, a challenge that far exceeds the simple act of donning the veil.

Again, rather than treat donning the veil as a self-sufficient sign, mosque movement participants understand it as one of a set of interrelated practices that together allow for the cultivation of virtuous modesty. The veil on this view, "entails other responsibilities" and has real consequences for the conduct of everyday life. In short, donning the veil is a technique of the self that derives its significance and efficacy from the larger set of practices of which is a part.[2]

2. The central problem of the mosque movement can be understood in terms of the work that religion/ritual does and, as Mahmood (2012, 126–131) notes, this problem parallels one in anthropological studies of ritual (see also Laidlaw and Humphrey 2006, 265–283). The participants criticize a model of Islam as a set of customs, empty conventions that merely signify. Against this, they propose that Islamic ritual practice—acts of worship but also daily practices such as donning the veil and so on—are not mere signifiers but rather tools, the means to achieve an end which is the constitution of a virtuous self. Mahmood further reports that, for some practices at least, participants experience a shift in their understanding and experience. While, initially, a practice may have merely performative significance over time participants come to understand it as a disciplinary technique. Thus, in recounting her own experience in wearing the hijab, Nama reports that, "in the beginning when you wear it, you're embarrassed [*maksufa*] and don't want to wear it because people say that you look older and unattractive, that you won't get married, and will never find a husband" (Mahmood 2012, 157). That is, the initial experience is largely framed in terms of the impressions that others glean from the practice —it is a performance to be judged and evaluated by others. However, Nama goes on to explain that over time, "your inside learns to feel shy without the veil, and if you take it off, your entire being feels uncomfortable [*mish radi*] about it" (Mahmood 2012, 157). Mahmood's argument then is that mosque participants adopt an Aristotelian or Foucauldian view that reverses the usually assumed relation between inner experience and outer expression. Specifically, on this account the outer behavior is not the sign of an inner truth (a desire, an intention, a feeling) but rather the means by which it can be realized or, as Mahmood (2012,

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On Mahmood's account then mosque participants reject what they see as a pervasive folklorization of Islam in which disciplinary techniques of the self are recast as signs of group membership or as customs. Under the influence of such a folklorization, the practices (of, e.g., veiling, prayer) are seen to have lost their capacity to produce pious subjects. In the case of deethicalization that I discuss below, yoga practitioners express concern that the techniques of asana are in danger of losing their specifically ethical significance while remaining effective as tools for cultivating good health and for body sculpting. Despite this difference, however, both folklorization and deethicalization point to the fact that any understanding of technique is dependent upon the encompassing set of ideas within which it is seen to operate, what Keane (2018) describes as "semiotic ideology." Moreover, in both cases the reductive process is seen to involve isolating particular practices, recasting them as somehow self-sufficient and in this way decontextualizing them.

A Yoga School in Southern India

Located in the southern Indian city of Mysore, the school (or *shala*) where I conducted 12 months of research intermittently between 2013 and 2018, is dedicated to the teaching of Ashtanga yoga.[3] It was founded by Sri K Pattabhi Jois in 1948 and he taught there continuously until his death in 2009 at the age of 93. Today the *shala*, which was relocated in 2002 to a much larger space in a relatively affluent Mysore suburb, can accommodate mats for about 60 to 70 students at a time. During the busiest season, there are approximately 300 students studying at the school. The current director is Pattabhi Jois's grandson, Sharath Jois.[4]

When students register at the school, they are given "timings" for regular classes (held Tuesday to Friday), as well as for led classes (held Saturday and

126) herself puts it, for the mosque participants, "desire (to, e.g., pray) is not antecedent to, and the cause of, moral action, but its product."

3. For useful discussion of this tradition see Byrne 2014, Smith 2008. For more general discussion of contemporary yoga (what is often referred to as "modern postural yoga") and the historical context in which it developed see, e.g., Alter 2004, De Michelis 2008, Newcombe 2009, Singleton 2010, van der Veer 2007. Much recent scholarship has focused on the commercialization and commoditization of yoga (e.g., Jain 2015) and the ways in which yogic practices have been incorporated into neo-liberal forms of governmentality and self-responsibilization (see especially Godrej 2016).

4. The Ashtanga tradition is understood in terms of *parampara*, a Sanskrit work that denotes a succession of teachers and disciples and which means a 'an uninterrupted row or series.' This is a lineage system headed by a *paramaguru*, a word that students take to mean 'lineage holder.' Succession is never a straightforward matter. When Pattabhi Jois died it was his grandson, Sharath Jois, rather than his son or daughter who took on the role of director of the institute and *paramaguru*. Many of Pattabhi Jois's older students refused to recognize Sharath Jois as the new lineage holder and broke from the tradition.

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Monday). Sunday is a rest day. Regular class start times begin at 4.30 am "*shala* time" (which is 10 minutes ahead) but students are expected to arrive 20 to 30 minutes early so about 70 students begin their *āsana* practice at 4 am. For most students, the *āsana* practice lasts between one and two hours. Instruction is quite minimal and then one-on-one. Often, and ideally, a student will receive help only with a few specific *āsanas* that require it (e.g., the so called "catching" or *chakra bandhāsana* which involves the student bending backwards and grabbing their own heels, knees or thighs with the assistance of the teacher). The teacher sits on an elevated platform watching the room or moves between the mats to reach a student in need of assistance.

Students are permitted to study at the school for no less than one month and no more than three (in the past, before the introduction of this rule, some students stayed for as long as a year or more). During this time, they are required not to study with any other yoga teacher in Mysore – and there are many. The school is not an ashram and the students live independently during the time that they are studying. As such, much of the time in Mysore is free time. Indeed, those who start their practice in the earliest shift are more or less free by 6 am unless they are tasked with the job of assisting the guru in the *shala*. As they are not permitted to attend *āsana* classes with other teachers, students spend their days resting, socializing, keeping house and so on. There are occasional day trips to sites in and around the city (e.g. Chamundi Hill). Many students take classes in Sanskrit and/or some aspects of Indian philosophy (e.g., close readings of the Bhagavad Gita, Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, the works of Shankaracharya are all popular). Some students also study ayurvedic medicine, traditional drawing, anatomy and so on.

During the months it is open, approximately 300 hundred students are registered at the school. While detailed and comprehensive demographic information is not available, some sense of where these students come from can be had through a consideration of the list of authorized teachers. Teachers are listed according to the country in which they teach so this is not a totally reliable indication of national origins or ethnic identification. The list (as of the time of the research for this essay) includes two teachers in China, 13 in Hong Kong, 13 in South Korea, 14 in Taiwan, 12 in Thailand and 26 in Japan. Australia and New Zealand together have 40 teachers listed. Central and South America have a total of 26. There are just over 220 teachers listed for both Europe as a whole and roughly the same number for North America. Most students have made multiple trips to study at the school and many have made more than 10 such trips, several more than 20. The students, especially those who have studied for many

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years, describe these visits as an annual pilgrimage and conceptualize the school and its environs as a sacred place, deserving of respect and acts of devotion. Almost all of the students bow to the guru in an act of respectful obedience when they are leaving the shala. In sum, the students treat yoga as a practice of devotion to their guru and ethical self-reform, and many of those who speak English explicitly describe it in just this way.

Techniques of *Āsana*

Within this tradition, *āsana* is understood to serve a dual function. On the one hand, it is a tool for cultivating inner qualities (see Mauss 1973 [1931] for an early comparative approach to such body techniques).[5] On the other hand, it is a means by which to prepare for the more difficult and esoteric forms of yogic practice (e.g., so called "internal practices" of *pratyāhāra* 'sense withdrawl', *dhāraṇā* 'concentration', etc.). This is often talked about in terms of correction. Thus, Sharath Jois suggests: "one can teach, and be taught, *āsana* . . . but the research is work that you must do yourself. . . . The research *begins* with the *āsana*, this is *the first step*. We must correct the fundamentals within ourselves, in both body and mind, in order to build a strong foundation"[6] (emphasis added). Similarly, in a public talk that was later published, Pattabhi Jois (2003), citing Patanjali's Yoga Sutra 1.2, suggests that: "There is nothing better than Yoga for attaining mind control" but goes on to note that this cannot be achieved at first "because the body is too weak". As such, Jois explains, the novice must first cultivate the practice of *āsana* and *prāṇāyāma*. Only once this is established and the body is purified can the practitioner hope to "still the fluctuations of the mind."

The practice itself consists of a set series of poses that are linked by prescribed patterns of movement. The entire system is organized such that each breath (actually, each inhale and each exhale) is "counted" and associated with a place to which the gaze is directed (*drishti*) as well as a specific configuration of the body.[7] This "vinyasa count" thus provides a template in relation to which

5. Included here also are the other "external" practices of *yama* (moral restraints), *niyama* (observances), and *prāṇāyāma* (breath control). Mauss (1973 [1931]) writes, "the basic education in all these techniques consists of an adaptation of the body to their use. For example, the great tests of stoicism, etc., (. . .), have as their aim to teach composure, resistance, seriousness, presence of mind, dignity, etc." (1973 [1931], 86). And later, speaking specifically of breathing techniques, Mauss (1973 [1931], 86- 87) writes: "I have studied the Sanskrit texts of Yoga enough to know that the same things occur in India. (. . .) at the bottom of all our mystical states there are techniques of the body." See also Mauss 1901.

6. This is from a conference that took place at the school in Mysore in November 2014.

7. Within the Ashtanga system, there are nine *dristhis*: the nose, the space between the eyebrows, the navel, the thumb, the hands, the feet, "up," "right side" and "left side."

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every breath, every glance and every movement is accountable.[8] A "perfect" practice of yoga would involve an exact number of inhales and exhales, a correspondingly exact number of discrete physical movements, and a precisely fixed gaze without distraction. This, at least, is the ideal which students attempt to approximate. The motivating idea is that, at every moment within the practice of *āsana*, body movement, breath and focus of attention are externally determined such that they are not an expression of the individual practitioner but rather of an external agency however that is understood.

Along these lines, Sharath Jois once suggested that yoga is "getting rid of the I." This echoes a statement from the founder of the method, Pattabhi Jois, who wrote (1999 [1962], 19–20):

> It is difficult to please the Lord by lecturing others on spiritual matters or by attaining popularity or fame. If He is to be pleased, yoga must first be achieved through the relinquishment of the sense of "I" and "mine." . . . If one's mind is impure and overtaken by "I" and "mine," then one's true nature of bliss will be spoiled, and one will become miserable. But the one whose mind is pure will experience eternal bliss. The method for bringing the mind into focus instead and dissolving it in the Atman should be learned under the tutelage of a Guru.

In other words, the *āsana* practice (which includes the patterned breathing and gazing described above) is understood to provide a strict template that regiments each individual body such that individual agency is subordinated to a pre-established pattern (one that is conceptualized as timeless and largely anonymous). By, in this way, dissolving the self and stripping away all aspects of personal identity, the practice of *āsana* provides a technique for "getting rid of the I".

Further evidence for this understanding comes from the testimony of one of the first American students of Pattabhi Jois (Brad Ramsay) who described practicing *prāṇāyāma* with the master as "a pretty wild experience, because when he holds his breath, a lot of times he just goes out, you know, *he's not there anymore*, he forgets to count" (Donahaye and Stern 2010, 46, emphasis added). This same practitioner describes his own experience of practicing *āsana* in a

8. This is one of the distinctive features of this type of yoga. Proper technique involves coordinating breath, gaze and movement in a very precise and strictly regulated way. As such individual creativity, freedom of expression is severely limited. The *vinyasa* count for the practice of the first three series of *āsana* is described in various books and instructional videos and teachers who have studied at the school in Mysore are expected to know it for at least the first series. Led classes, which are held on Saturdays and Mondays, involve the teacher calling out the *vinyasa* count and students following along in unison.

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somewhat more modest way saying, "I got lost in it. *I would lose myself in it*" (Donahaye and Stern 2010, 46, emphasis added). The idea is then that in the course of the practice of *āsana* one experiences a form of ego-dissolution or self-effacement. At the same time, the failure of yoga is often explained in terms of the continuing influence of ego. The techniques of Ashtanga yoga can in this way be seen as a bounded, or, better circumscribed (see below), form of renunciation similar to other kinds of ascetic practice in India – the method involves, as Eliade (1963, 128) put it, "dying to this world" (i.e., renouncing all ties to the world), but only within a narrowly defined, temporally circumscribed context (see also Dumont 1980 [1960]).[9]

Yoga Beyond Technique

The techniques of yoga *āsana* are thus specified at a very fine level of detail. Body configuration, movement, breath pattern, gaze direction – according both to authorities and students, all must be correctly executed if the techniques are to have their intended effects.[10] At the same time, the constitutive physical movements of *āsana*—including gaze direction and breath pattern—are strictly regulated and there is a broadly shared standard of correct procedure (codified in

9. Eliade (1963, 128) writes, "What characterizes Yoga is not only its practical side, but also its initiatory structure. One does not learn Yoga by oneself; the guidance of a master (guru) is necessary. The yogin begins by forsaking the profane world (family, society), and, guided by his guru, dreams of 'dying to this world.' We witness a death followed by a rebirth to another mode of being—that represented by freedom, by the access to a nonprofane mode of being, to which the Indian schools give various names: *moksa*, *nirvana*, *mukti*, *asamskrta*, etc."

Likewise, Dumont (1980[1960], 273–274) writes: "(. . .) it is well known that classically whoever seeks liberation must leave the world and adopt an entirely different mode of life. This is an institution, *samnyāsa*, renunciation, in fact a social state apart from society proper. (. . .) The renouncer leaves the world behind in order to devote himself to his own liberation. He submits himself to his chosen master, or he may even enter a monastic community, but essentially he depends upon no one but himself, he is alone."

10. The techniques of Ashtanga yoga can be usefully compared with those of other ethical traditions. For instance, Jain ascetics in the Shvetambar tradition perform rituals which are meant to remove karma from the soul. *Samayik*, for instance, consists of quiet meditation and prayer through which one learns to "control and rein in the mind" (Laidlaw 1995, 199) and which uses "religious text to blot out specific thought completely." *Pratikraman* is a more tightly scripted rite in which participants follow a printed text, an experienced renouncer or an especially learned lay person. In comparison with *samayik*, it also involves much more emphasis on bodily control. Thus, according to Laidlaw (1995, 204), "the body is used in *pratikraman* as an instrument for controlling the mind and so bringing about the purification of the soul." This is accomplished through the execution of quickly repeated physical movements coordinated with the recitation of a Prakrit text. Laidlaw argues that there is nothing symbolic or communicative about either *pratikraman* or *samayik*. Rather, these are techniques used to train the body and the mind: ". . . it is work—work on the self—requiring for accomplished performance the mastery of skills which include bodily control, memorization, and accurate recitation. It is these, and not familiarity with any more or less esoteric meaning, that is acquired through performance" (Laidlaw 1995, 208). In comparison with yoga *āsana*, the Jain techniques described by Laidlaw seem less strictly regulated, and less subject to normative evaluation and assessment. Moreover, Jain techniques are conceptualized in relation to clearly defined ends—*ahimsa*, reduction of *karma* and, ultimately, purification of the soul.

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books etc.) against which any given application of the method can be evaluated. However, these techniques of the body, breath and focused attention are not considered to be self-sufficient. Rather, according to the authorities, they must be accompanied by the appropriate mental states in order to be effective. Specifically, without devotion, the practice of *āsana* devolves into mere "circus" or "gymnastics."

In one of the weekly conferences held at the school Sharath Jois suggested that the *yamas* and *niyamas* (a set of ten observances including *ahimsa* 'non-harming', *satya* 'truthfulness', and *saucha* 'cleanliness' etc.) purify the mind and so prepare the practitioner for *āsana* by allowing the requisite mental state to be established.

> So, *yamas*, *niyamas*, you should put more thought on this and try to apply in your daily life. Then there is a meaning in your practice. Otherwise, you can practice for 30 or 40 years, it will only be physical. There will be no spirituality. *It's like going to the gym and lifting weights. There is no spirituality in that.* (emphasis added)

And in another of the weekly conferences, Sharath Jois suggested that without "devotion" *āsana* "doesn't become spirituality, it becomes only circus, bending body, going in the beach doing handstand, building the body, it becomes like that."[11] These remarks already point to the possibility of deethicalization which I will discuss in the next section. Specifically, Jois here suggests that in the absence of the necessary mental state, the techniques of yoga lose their efficacy as spiritual, self-forming practices.

The physical and observable character of the techniques of Ashtanga yoga give the project as a whole its distinctive character. Students strive to master the techniques of *āsana* and their efforts are monitored, scrutinized and, when found lacking, corrected by the teacher. While the founders and current guru of the method note the criterial importance of a largely unobservable spiritual, devotional, and inner accompaniment to the practice of *āsana*, the emphasis is squarely on physical technique. This is seen, for instance, in methods of assessment. It is on the basis of their ability to execute these techniques that students are evaluated by the teacher. Indeed, there are several poses that both students and teachers see as particularly challenging and that must be mastered to a high degree of proficiency before the student is permitted to go further in the series. Students describe being "stopped" by the teacher at such a point or as being

11. Conference at the school in Mysore, January 24th, 2015.

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"stuck" at a particular asana, sometimes for several years. Such experiences encourage students, most of whom are, for various reasons, deeply motivated to "progress", to focus their attention on the physical techniques. Some spend afternoons stretching to open up parts of the body seen as particularly tight. Others seek the advice of physical therapists, ayurvedic doctors or other students in their attempts to master the body techniques of *āsana*.

At the same time, both students and teachers emphasize the importance of "practical experience," over and above "theory" and "book knowledge." Many long-term students do, in fact study Sanskrit and various aspects of yoga philosophy quite seriously and of course Pattabhi Jois was himself a professor at the Sanskrit college in Mysore, renowned for his deep knowledge of, and ability to quote at length from, the shastras. Nevertheless, the emphasis on technique is clear and is reflected in a set of expressions which are emblematic of the school and its teachings: "practice, and all is coming," "one percent theory, ninety-nine percent practice" and so on. Although this emphasis on practice does not necessarily preclude more mental and esoteric techniques of, for instance, *pratyahara* (translated as 'sense withdrawal') it is generally interpreted in this way. Thus, students speak of their "practice" to mean their practice of yoga *āsana*. They ask one another, "what do you practice?", by this meaning what series of *āsana* do you practice, or, "where do you practice?", by this meaning at what school in your home country do you practice *āsana*. Furthermore, students at the school in Mysore often compare Ashtanga yoga with other methods, suggesting that what distinguishes it from these other forms of yoga is the physically demanding character of the body techniques.

Expressions such as "practice, and all is coming" convey, then, the baseline assumptions and guiding principles of the method. Thus, while practitioners (and masters within the tradition) insist that the bodily practices must be executed with the appropriate mental state in order to be effective, they simultaneously deny that extensive theoretical knowledge is required.[12] Somewhat ironically, textual authorities are sometimes cited in defense of this view. For instance, section I:68–69 of the *Hatha Yoga Pradikipa* states that, "Success comes to him who is engaged in the practice. How can one get success without practice; for by merely reading books on Yoga, one can never get success. Success cannot be attained by adopting a particular dress. It cannot be gained by telling tales. Practice alone is the means to success. This is true, there is no doubt."

12. This emphasis on technique has deep roots in ancient Indian traditions. See, *inter alia*, Mallinson and Singleton 2017 for discussion.

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To summarize, among teachers and students at the school in Mysore, yogic techniques of the body including *āsana* and *prāṇāyāma* are conceptualized as tools for the cultivation of inner qualities and for more esoteric ends however those might be imagined. But despite this there is, at the same time, a widespread worry about the potential for a deethicalization of yoga and of yoga *āsana* in particular. In response to the development, in the 1990s, of Ashtanga derivatives termed "power" or "rocket" yoga by their advocates, Pattabhi Jois wrote the letter to the periodical *Yoga Journal* with which I began. In this he writes that he "was disappointed to find that so many novice students have taken Ashtanga yoga and have turned it into a circus." He goes on to suggest:

> The title "Power Yoga" itself degrades the depth, purpose and method of the yoga system that I received from my guru, Sri. T. Krishnamacharya. Power is the property of God. It is not something to be collected for one's ego. Partial yoga methods out of line with their internal purpose can build up the "six enemies" (desire, anger, greed, illusion, infatuation and envy) around the heart. The full Ashtanga system practiced with devotion leads to freedom within one's heart.

As already noted, Jois concludes the letter by contrasting "the precious jewel of liberation" with the "mud of ignorant body building." In fact, Jois had long been aware that the emphasis on technique made Ashtanga vulnerable to being recast (or misunderstood) as a form of exercise. In his discussion of Sūrya Namaskāra in *Yoga Mala* which was written between 1958 and 1961 and first published in Kannada in 1962, he suggests, "performing the sun salutations without following the rules mentioned above is *little more than exercise*, and not true Sūrya Namaskāra" (1999 [1962], 40 emphasis added).[13]

And, as noted, this is also a common theme of the conferences held at the school in Mysore. On one such occasion, Sharath Jois suggested that practicing yoga brings mental clarity and eventually some measure of spiritual knowledge. But, he went on, this does not come easily. One must practice diligently in order to change oneself and this will involve putting effort towards all eight limbs of yoga (including the *yamas* and *niyamas*). And here Sharath Jois invoked the possibility of deethicalization suggesting that without such effort "yoga becomes only exercise, the same as going to the gym."

13. Jois wrote this before André Van Lysebeth, the first European to study with him, came to Mysore in 1964. In his introduction to *Sūryanamaskār*, written in 2004, Jois (2005, 11) makes the same point more explicit, writing, "no āsana practice is complete without sun worship. Without its focusing of mental energies, yoga practice amounts to little more than gymnastics and, as such, loses meaning and proves fruitless. Indeed, the Sūrya Namaskāra should never be mistaken for mere physical exercise."

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Semiotics of Deethicalization

I want to suggest that the processes which have led to deethicalization have their origins in early twentieth century efforts to entextualize yoga in ways that would allow for increased circulation and dissemination. And these built upon still earlier moves to circumscribe yoga as a definite set of yoga "practices". We can identity three key semiotic operations here: circumscription, performance of staged demonstration and photographically enhanced entextualization.

The founders of the Ashtanga method, Tirumalai Krishnamacharya and Pattabhi Jois, rejected the idea that liberation through the techniques of yoga required total renunciation of the profane world of ordinary social relations and even suggested that yoga was particularly suitable for householders (see Eliade 1963; also Alter 2004). More importantly, by emphasizing the primacy of *āsana*, these pioneers of the modern approach allowed for a conception of yoga in terms of a circumscribed "practice" that could be done by ordinary persons otherwise engaged in a range of occupations.[14]

In both Krischnamacharya's *Yoga Makaranda* and Jois's *Yoga Mala*, after setting out the reasons for practicing yoga, the authors go on to discuss practical details such as where it should be practised and which *āsana* should be performed. A clear implication of this is that yoga *āsana*, combined with pranayama, comprises a circumscribed practice or set of techniques. For instance, Krishnamacharya (2006[1938], 33–34) advises:

> The following places are superior: a place with plenty of water, a fertile place, a place where there is a bank of a holy river, where there are no crowds, a clean solitary place — such places are superior. In such a place, yoga can be practised. (. . .) In the *yogabhyasa sala* (. . .), spread a seat of grass on the ground in a clean space not facing the front door. Over that spread a tiger skin or deer skin and over that put a white blanket or a clean white cloth. (. . .) After completing their yoga practice consisting of *āsana* and pranayama, the yoga practitioner must rest for fifteen minutes keeping the body on the floor before coming outside. If you come outdoors soon after completing *yogabhyasa*, the breeze will enter the body through the minute pores on the skin and cause many kinds of disease. Therefore, one should stay inside until the sweat subsides, rub the body nicely and sit contentedly and rest for a short period.

14. Although, to be sure, Jois emphasized that yoga is not limited to *āsana* and also that it should be "practiced" 24 hours a day, meaning that one should not just perform *āsana* but also live a yogic life.

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Similarly, Jois (1999 [1962], 25–26), writes:

> Yoga should neither be practiced in the open air, in a place that is unclean or malodorous, in a basement, nor on a roof. Instead, the place of its practice should be spotlessly clean and level, have windows, and be suitable for smearing with cow dung (. . .) The body should not be exposed to the open air for a period of one half hour after practicing. After half an hour, it is good to bathe in hot water.

Through their focus on *āsana* and associated techniques the founders of this tradition were thus able to identify a "practice" of yoga as a circumscribed, temporally bounded activity. While they insisted that yoga *could not be reduced* to the performance of *āsana*, and much less bodily technique, and while they included quite lengthy discussions of the other "limbs" of yoga in their various writings, the method they developed nevertheless had the effect of isolating *āsana* from the rest. The net result was to reconstruct yoga as a circumscribed practice of *āsana* (and associated practices of *pranayama*).

Such a circumscribed practice of yoga *āsana* was recontextualized in various ways. In his foreword to the English language translation of *Yoga Mala*, Eddie Stern (in Jois 1999 [1962], xv) writes that Pattabhi Jois was fond of quoting a passage from the Bhagavad Gita in which Krishna "proclaims that one comes to yoga in his life only by having practiced it in a previous life, and is pulled toward it against one's will, as toward a magnet". Stern (Jois 1999 [1962], xv) then gives an account of how Jois came to study with Sri T Krishnamacharya:

> It is this type of pull that must have led Guruji to attend a lecture-demonstration a friend told him was being given at the Jubilee Hall of Hassan's middle school in the Indian month of October-November 1927. Jois was amazed by the *āsanas*, and by the strong, graceful yogi jumping from pose to pose. Although he didn't understand the lecture, and it was quite some time before he understood the method and philosophy, he liked the yoga and decided to learn it himself. The next day he rose early and went to the house where the yogi was staying. Bravely for a boy of only twelve, he requested to be instructed in yoga.

Stern goes on to write that Jois "quickly learned all of the *āsanas*" and that Krishnamacharya was so pleased with his progress that he soon had Jois perform demonstrations himself. Some 45 years later, in 1972, Americans David Williams and Norman Allen were present at a demonstration given by Manju Jois (Patttabhi Jois's son) at the Ananda Ashram in Pondicherry. It was this that

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led them to travel to Mysore to seek out Patttabhi Jois. In the 1990s Pattabhi Jois toured Europe, Australia and the US. These visits abroad often included demonstrations in which he would call out instructions and Sharath Jois would execute *āsana* for the audience. (Several such performances were filmed.)

These performed demonstrations adapted and repurposed the now circumscribed practice of yoga *āsana*, presenting this as a form of entertainment, advertisement or teaching. As Bauman and Briggs (1990, 73) note, performance such as this puts the activity performed "on display - objectifies it, lifts it to a degree from its interactional setting and opens it to scrutiny by an audience." Moreover, performance brings a heightened awareness to the activity and, as such, "licenses the audience to evaluate the skill and effectiveness of the performer's accomplishment. By its very nature, then, performance potentiates decontextualization" (1990, 73). Bauman and Briggs (1990, 73–74) go on to describe some of the "the means available to participants in performance situations to render stretches of discourse discontinuous with their discursive surround, thus making them into coherent, effective, and memorable texts", concluding that "performance as a frame intensifies entextualization."

Here of course we are considering not the spoken word per se but a complex assemblage of language (as the teacher calls out the *āsana* to be performed), bodily movement and presentational technique. But, regardless, the effect of these demonstrations was to put the circumscribed practice of *āsana* on display and to make it available for new kinds of circulation – among persons, for instance, who were not themselves practitioners, or yet practitioners. Performed demonstration then not only served to frame yoga as entertainment and advertisement, it also contributed to the decontextualization of bodily techniques of *āsana*.

As already noted, both Krishnamacharya and Pattabhi Jois attempted to describe the bodily techniques of *āsana* in writing. There was nothing unusual or novel about this. The *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, a compilation of earlier hatha yoga texts complied by Svātmārāma in the 15th century, describes fifteen *āsanas*, eight of which are not seated postures (see Mallinson and Singleton 2017, 87). For instance: "While in cock pose, take the neck tightly in both hands and lie back like an upturned turtle. This is the upturned turtle pose" (Mallinson and Singleton 2017, 108).

However, the writings of Krishnamacharya and Pattabhi Jois went much further in this direction – their descriptions are considerably more detailed, sometimes extending for several pages. They also included, along with a technical description, a discussion of the health benefits of each *āsana* along with notes on

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situations in which the *āsana* is counter indicated. More importantly, though, both Krishnamacharya and Pattabhi Jois included photographs of almost all of the *āsana* they discussed. The result was a much more effective guidebook, a nearly self-sufficient educational resource. This had profound consequences from the development of yoga in the twentieth century. As Singleton (2010, 163–165) puts it:

> The phenomenon of international posture-based yoga would not have occurred without the rapid expansion of print technology and the cheap, ready availability of photography. Furthermore, yoga's expression through such media fundamentally changed the perception of the *yoga body* and the perceived function of yoga practice. (. . .) Photography lent an unprecedented primacy to the imaged body, resulting in an overt, widespread concern for its cultivation. The body was brought to the center of public attention to a degree that had not been possible before. (. . . .) The coda to this point is that, (. . .), the new visual culture gave *popular primacy* to what could be represented through images (. . .)

In the specific case of Ashtanga yoga, photography allowed for an increasingly technical conception of yoga as a set of bodily techniques. We can track this development across some of the most influential written texts in this tradition. Thus, the photographic images that accompany the descriptions of Krishnamacharya and Pattabhi Jois have a clear artistic quality. For instance, several of the photographs in Jois's book capture his demonstration of the *āsana* against a white background, with lighting effects used to produce a shadow companion figure (figure 1).

The English edition of the book, published in 1999, includes, along with the older images of Pattabhi Jois, photos taken some forty years later of Sharath Jois demonstrating *āsana* (figure 2). The contrast is striking – in these later images there is no shadow, rather the light is dispersed to give a clear yet aesthetically unassuming image.

Here then the *āsana* is represented by a simple and aesthetically unadorned image, designed merely to supplement the written text by providing visual guidance. Each such photo is captioned with the name of the *āsana* (e.g., marichyāsana (a)).

Other works elaborated this technical approach in various ways. In a book authored by Lino Miele and published in 1996, the same photos of Sharath Jois demonstrating the *āsana* are used (see Figure 3). But in Miele's book the image has been extracted from its background, literally decontextualizing the *āsana*-performing

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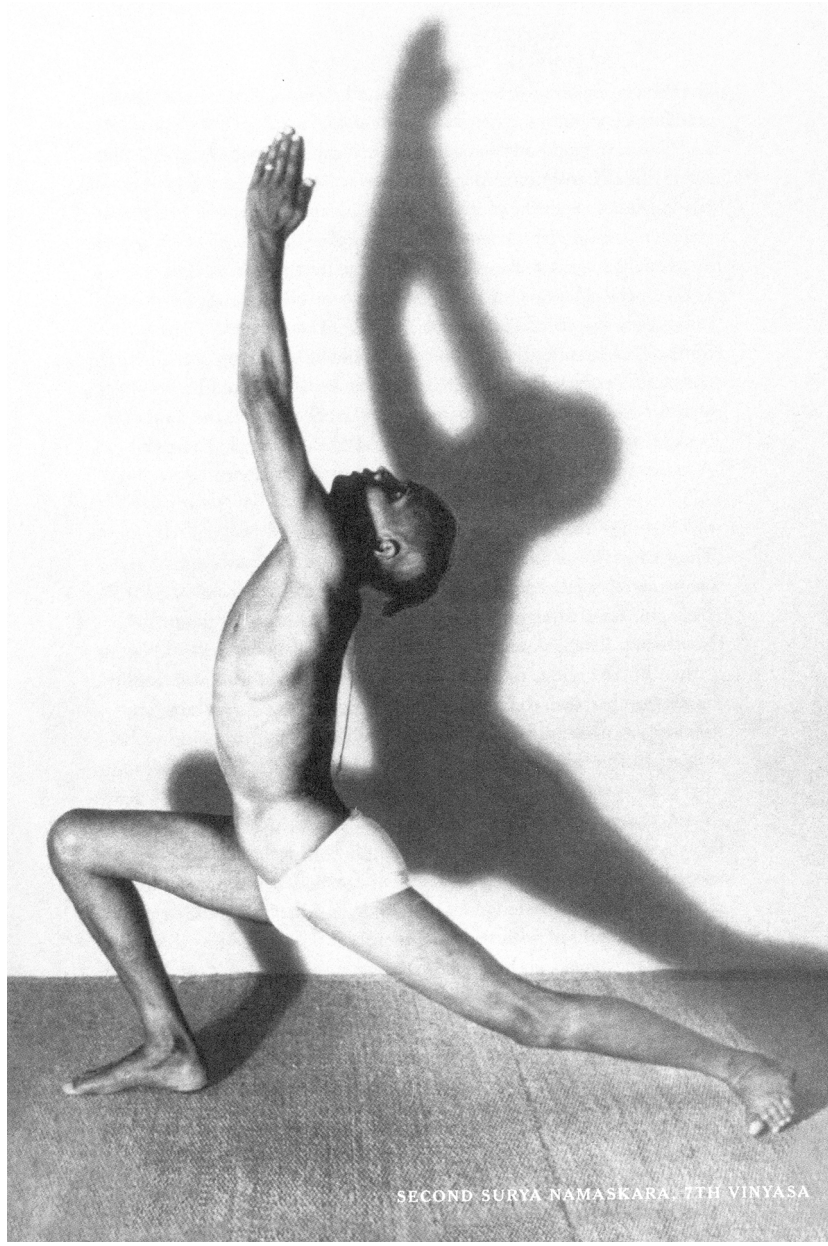
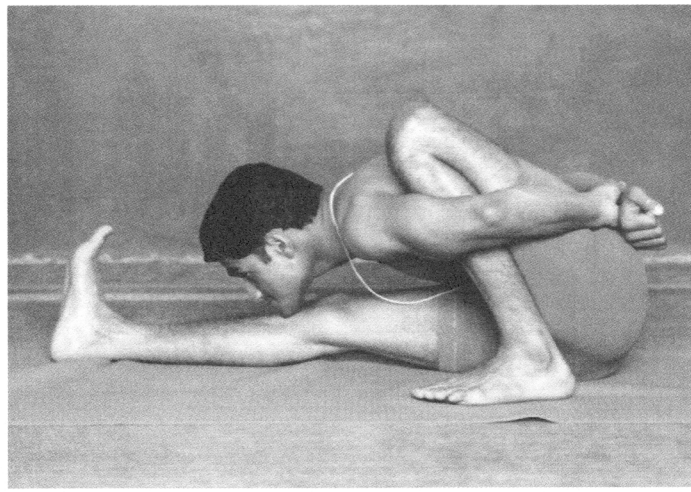
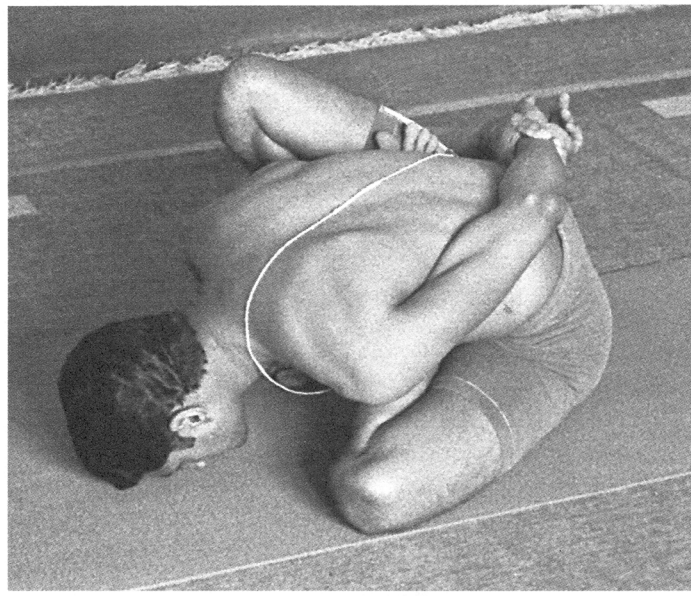


Figure 1. *Pattabhi Jois demonstrating second surya namaskara, 7th vinyasa* (Jois 1999 [1962], 45)

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MARICHYASANA (A)

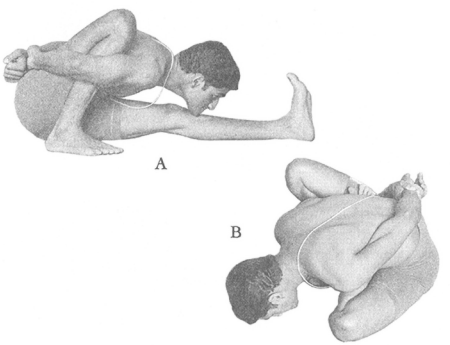


MARICHYASANA (B)

Figure 2. *Sharath Jois demonstrating marichyasana (a) & (b)* (Jois 1999 [1962], 78)

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MARĪCHYĀSANA

(Marīchyā pose)

Parinaama Shoola (Ulcers, both stomach and duodena), due to irregular eating habits and mental tension, can be relieved and prevented by these āsanas. Inadequate and inefficient digestion causing constipation (Malabaddata) and flatulence are related to a dysfunction of Samāna Vāyu and Apāna Vāyu. The digestive fire (Agni) isn't strong enough to stimulate peristalsis and the retention of waste and intestinal gases are the result. Dysmenorrhea (painful periods) accompanied by pain in the lower back and abdomen can be relieved by the practice of Marīchyāsana A, B, C and D. The uterus (Garbha Kosha), is strengthened helping to prevent problems such as miscarriage, and encouraging healthy pregnancy. These āsanas also directly benefit the kidneys. Pregnant women must stop practicing C & D after 3 months. A & B can be continued (if comfortable) for up-to six months.

MARĪCHYĀSANA A - B - 22

IN	1	EKAM	Hands up
EX	2	DVE	Uttānāsana
IN	3	TRĪṆI	Head up
EX	4	CATVĀRI	Jump - Chaturanga Daṇḍāsana
IN	5	PAÑCA	Ūrdhva Mukha Svānāsana
EX	6	ṢAṬ	Adho Mukha Svānāsana
IN	7	SAPTA	Jump into the position
EX	8	AṢṬAU	MARĪCHYĀSANA - 5 Breaths
IN	9	NAVA	Head up
EXHALE			Hands to the floor
IN	10	DAŚA	Up
EX	11	EKĀDAŚA	Jump - Chaturanga Daṇḍāsana
IN	12	DVĀDAŚA	Ūrdhva Mukha Svānāsana
EX	13	TRAYODAŚA	Adho Mukha Svānāsana
IN	14	CATURDAŚA	Jump into the position
EX	15	PAÑCADAŚA	MARĪCHYĀSANA - 5 Breaths
IN	16	ṢOḌAŚA	Head up
EXHALE			Hands to the floor
IN	17	SAPTADAŚA	Up
EX	18	AṢṬADAŚA	Jump - Chaturanga Daṇḍāsana
IN	19	EKOONAVIMŚATIH	Ūrdhva Mukha Svānāsana
EX	20	VIMŚATIH	Adho Mukha Svānāsana
IN	21	EKĀVIMŚATIH	Jump - head up
EX	22	DVĀVIMŚATIH	Uttānāsana
			SAMASTHITIH

DRISTIS: A - PADHAYORAGRAI & B - NASAGRAI

Figure 3. *Images of Sharath Jois in marichyasana (a) & (b) extracted from background in Lino Miele's Astanga Yoga*, (Miele 1996, 50–51)

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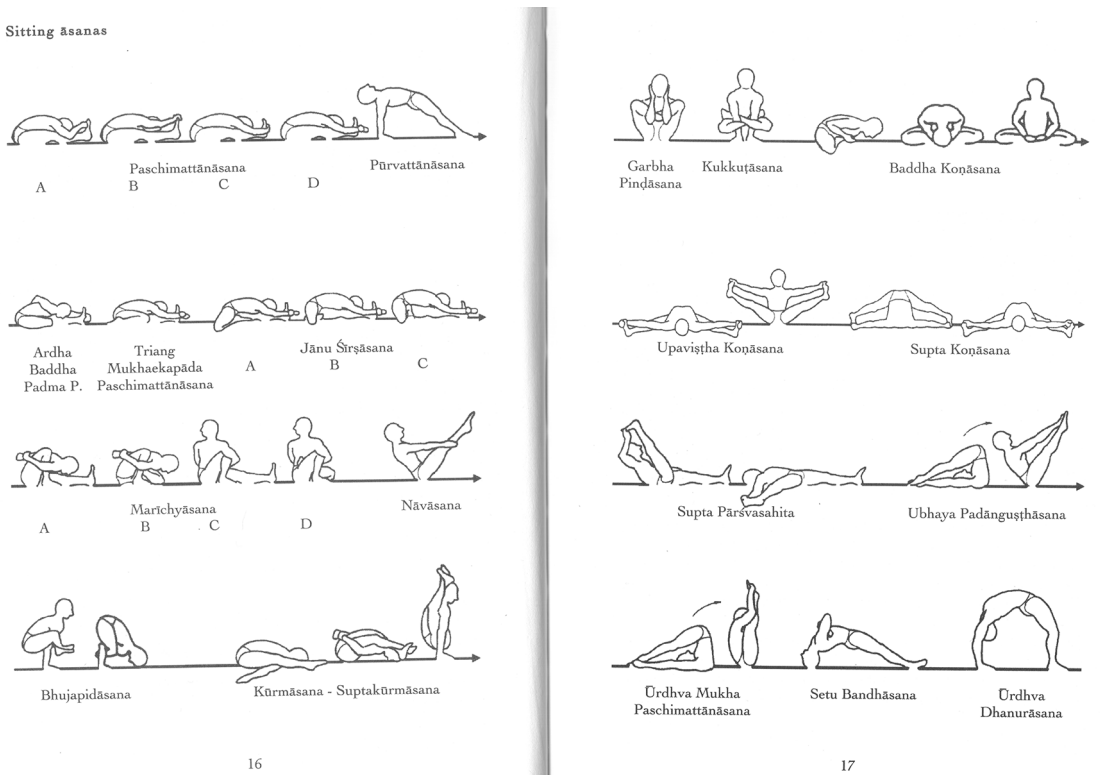


Figure 4. *John Scott's yoga "script" from Lino Miele's Astanga Yoga* (Miele 1996, 50–51)

human figure from the photographic setting. Moreover, after an introductory passage describing the benefits of the āsana for health (e.g., "This *āsana* has a powerful effect on the liver (. . .) and spleen (. . .), both organs play a part in the digestive processes of the body." (Miele 1996: 44)) the vinyasa count is presented in a chart-like form indicating "inhale" or "exhale" along with notes which appear to represent instructions that might be given by an instructor, e.g. "Hands up", "Head up", etc.

This same book also includes a remarkable set of script-like drawings created by Jois's student John Scott (see Figure 4). These are similar to comic illustrations and are presumably meant to give a sense of the continuous movement which is characteristic of this method. In these drawn representations, the spatial and temporal context of performance is reduced to a single, continuous line which simultaneously invokes the floor space upon which the *āsana* are performed and the passage of time along which the series unfolds (notice the arrowhead at the termination of each line).

All of these developments presaged the use of video technology. In 1993, a video was made featuring six American students practicing the first and second series as Jois called out the vinyasa count instructions. This was, in other words, a filmic entextualization of just the kind of performed demonstration that Jois himself had performed in the 1930s as a student of Krishnamacharya. There followed many other such videos by David Swenson, John Scott, Lino Miele, and, eventually, Sharath Jois. In these forms of entextualization the focus on *āsana* as bodily technique reaches its apogee.

Such photographically enhanced entextualization was of course part and parcel of a larger process of print commodification and mediatization – one way in which yoga poses, instruction, and knowledge were transformed into a saleable commodity. My concern here though is with the, no doubt related, process of deethicalization. These couplings of descriptive instruction and photographic image encouraged a conception of yoga as a set of techniques independent of the mental and spiritual accompaniments that Jois otherwise insisted upon. And these forms of extextualization themselves built upon and elaborated earlier semiotic processes which I have described as circumscription and performed demonstration.

Conclusion

Among yoga practitioners at the school in Mysore, there is a general sense that the techniques of *āsana* (and so on) are in danger of being delinked from the spiritual context in which they are meant to operate with the result that they lose

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their significance as practices of ethical self-reform. Indeed, in the view of many, these techniques cease to be yoga by virtue of this delinking. Thus, the popular south Indian novelist S.L Bhyrappa who was a friend and colleague of Pattabhi Jois, as well as his student, remarks, "Yoga is not merely physical exercise, it is a philosophy in the sense that the first two steps of yoga, namely *yama* and *niyama*, are moral precepts, and *without practicing these moral precepts, just to go to the physical exercises part, is not yoga*" (Bhyrappa interviewed in Donahaye and Stern 2010, 149, emphasis added). In this case then, the techniques do not totally lose their efficacy since they still function as tools for body sculpting and good health. What is lost, according to this view, is their specifically ethical character, their capacity to shape the person beyond the gross, physical body.

Deethicalization is a kind of decontextualization in which parts (i.e., techniques) are isolated and abstracted from the wholes to which they belong. Teachers and students of the Ashtanga yoga method are pervasively oriented to the problem of deethicalization and actively resist, critique, challenge that which they see as undermining the efficacy of their ethical techniques. This resistance is often formulated in terms of a contrast with "exercise," "body-building" or "circus". Such rhetorical figures appear in the first writings of the method's founders – by Tirumalai Krishnamacharya and Pattabhi Jois – in the very same works which served to circumscribe the practice of yoga *āsana* and foreground the importance of body technique with photographically enhanced entextualization. This anxiety, in other words, appears to have developed alongside the processes that potentiate deethicalization, as a manifestation of the inherently reflexive character of human semiosis.

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