

Sparks of Yoga: Reconsidering the Aesthetic in Modern Postural Yoga

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Abstract: *In this article, I consider aesthetic experiences in Ashtanga Yoga practice. Yoga has become extremely popular, a part of everyday life. Yet, aesthetics and yoga are rarely considered together. Using somaesthetics and everyday aesthetics, I argue, that the aesthetic is essential in practicing yoga because of the performing body, environment-like uniting of postures, and the experiences of liminality, sacredness, liberation, and asceticism. Furthermore, I show that recognizing the aesthetic dimension in yoga doesn't require approaching yoga as an art form, and that balance and beauty can be considered parallel.*

Keywords: *yoga, aesthetic experience, everyday aesthetics, beauty, aesthetics.*

1. Introduction

Yoga is popular. There's hardly another as popular method for cultivating both body and mind. Due to its popularization, this ancient esoteric practice is prominent in our contemporary, globalized, virtually shared, and aesthetically tuned culture. In fact, the way one encounters yoga in different medias, public spaces, and everyday discussions, is often aestheticized. Modern yoga researcher Mark Singleton describes the situation aptly, though provocatively, in the following.

Today the yoga body has become the centerpiece of a transnational tableau of personalized well-being and quotidian redemption, relentlessly embellished on the pages of glossy publications like Yoga Journal. The locus of yoga is no longer at the center of an invisible ground of being, hidden from the gaze of all but the elite initiate or the mystic; instead, the lucent skin of the yoga model becomes the ubiquitous signifier of spiritual possibility, the specular projection screen of characteristically modern and democratic religious aspirations. In the yoga body—sold back to a million consumer-practitioners as an irresistible commodity of the holistic, perfectible self—surface and anatomical structure promise ineffable depth and the dream of incarnate transcendence. (Singleton, 2010, p. 174, emphasis in the original.)

This situation exactly motivates me to scrutinize the aesthetics of modern yoga. To expand on Singleton's notion, yoga practitioners produce numerous representations of their own practices as photos, videos, and texts with a seemingly important aesthetic tone; and social media provides an engaging platform for the circulation of these representations. It is, however, misleading to form a conception of the aesthetics of yoga approaching solely representations of yoga, although they are either intentionally emphasizing some aesthetic qualities or are easily interpreted as underlining the aesthetic dimension. I wish to show that an experienced yoga practice can be considered aesthetic, too.

Yoga is an old word: it's mentioned already in the circa fifteenth century BCE text *Rg Veda*. The so-called "classical yoga" practice has been described already in the circa third century text *Yoga Sūtra* by Patañjali. Regarding the long history, the meaning of the term "yoga" has been exhaustive (White 2012, pp. 1–6). In the contemporary situation where yoga is, besides popularized, also institutionalized by independent yoga research centers and recently also by universities, the definition of yoga is compelling. However, modern yoga researcher Suzanne Newcombe argues that yoga's nature can't be fixed with "overarching essentialist definitions" (Newcombe 2018, pp. 549–574). Having this in mind, I discuss, in this paper, yoga as a practice done by a yoga practitioner. I follow Indologist David Gordon White's understanding of yoga practice as a kind of program and a practical application of theory (White, 2012, p. 11).¹ A yogi, whose experience about existence arguably differs from a normal human being, and his practice, remain thus outside my scope.

Modern postural yoga is a late "invention" dating back to the beginning of the twentieth century. Modern yoga researcher Elizabeth de Michelis describes modern yoga as syncretic, cross-cultural, and secularized "practice and a living tradition" to which Ashtanga yoga, one of the most popular postural modern yoga practices, is also foundational (de Michelis 2008, pp. 17–35). Postures, as such, are not a modern phenomenon in yoga practice; instead, it seems to be the wide use of uniting postures in series that characterizes modernity in yoga practice (Mallinson, 2011, p. 3). Thus, although I find several aspects in yoga intriguing from the aesthetics' point of view, I focus here on Ashtanga yoga's serial posturality to reveal the essentiality of the aesthetic dimension in modern postural yoga.

Yoga and aesthetics are rarely considered together. Besides, if the concept "aesthetic" is used, it usually emphasizes some kind of incorrectness in yoga practice. For example, Benjamin Smith refers with the aesthetic to the pose being "imposed on their [practitioners'] body rather than drawn out from it" (Smith 2007, pp. 36–37, endnote 19). However, philosopher Richard Shusterman holds that yoga carries within its practices "somaesthetic knowledge" (Shusterman, 2000, p. 261; Shusterman 2012, pp. 11, 34, 43–44, 87, 337). This suggests that yoga practitioners deal with the aesthetic somehow. Through reconsidering aesthetic experiences in yoga practice, I argue that the aesthetic dimension is not only possible, but essential, in modern postural yoga.

I begin with outlining the Ashtanga yoga practice and its relation with the body and performance to form an initial understanding of yoga as a somaesthetic program. Doing so, I do not wish to negate yoga's religious or spiritual relations—and I glance at spirituality, too—but in general, I leave the discussion about spirituality in yoga outside the scope of this paper, just as I do with the discussions about yoga's health effects and political aspects. The discussion on these aspects exceed the limits of this paper.

¹ White states that "yogi practice" denotes the behavior of a yogi who has gained ability to transmit the supernatural powers into acting. "Yogi" begun to mean something else than a Tantric practitioner only during the twentieth century. (White 2012, pp. 11–15.) Indologist Georg Feuerstein's conception of yoga as a psychotechnology is in line with White's conception (Feuerstein 1990, pp. xx–xxi).

Somaesthetics focuses on our somatic being in the world as “body–minds,” underlining thus the contradiction between a living and a dead body instead of that between body and mind. Yoga practice builds up, in general, on experimenting the mind-body inclusion (e.g. White, 2012, p. 7). This conception of the body, and its use, is the base for understanding yoga as a somaesthetic program, a conception, which aids in approaching yoga practice without focusing neither on yoga’s religious relations nor its possible art-like nature.² This is especially due to the somaesthetics’ appreciation of popular phenomena and the fact that somaesthetics, as a field of studies within the aesthetics tradition, is less bound with the discussions about the Arts. Furthermore, somaesthetics’ demand for practical approach in making philosophy enables appreciating yoga as a practice empowering thus the aesthetics of yoga, which is in first place based on subjective experiences.

After pointing out that the aesthetic dimension affects yoga practices through the performing body, I continue, in the third chapter, to discuss the “everydayness” in practicing yoga. With the help of everyday aesthetics, I wish to show that the aesthetic in yoga practice has to do with experiencing environment. I assist this reading with philosopher Arnold Berleant’s concept “aesthetic field” (Berleant, 1991) to show, in the third and fourth chapter, that due to the unavoidable presence of body, the aesthetic experiences in yoga have to do with liminality, sacredness, liberation, and asceticism. This analysis pours in the significance of balance in Ashtanga yoga practice. I propose, in the fourth chapter, that in yoga practice balance parallels beauty which proves to be, in fact, no less than one key function in modern yoga practice.

My viewpoint is formed through practicing Ashtanga yoga together with reflective and analytical approaches. I do not attempt to give necessary and sufficient conditions for aesthetic experiences in practicing modern postural yoga nor in yoga as such. Instead, I wish to enlarge the almost neglected discussion about the aesthetics of yoga and bring a view outside the scope of religious studies, which holds the dominance in discussing about experiencing yoga.

2. Live Performance in Ashtanga

Ashtanga Vinyāsa Yoga is a yoga method developed by the yoga teacher Śrī K. Pattabhi Jois (1915–2009) whose teacher was the former yoga guru Śrī T. Krishnamacharya (1888–1989).³ Ashtanga appears as a notably designed practice with its six series of postures and the style to perform them in a fairly rigid order (*mala*). It’s, however, based on the ancient yoga traditions, namely the eight limbs (*aṣṭa aṅga*) of yoga, presented in *Yoga Sūtra*, and the tradition of *Haṭha Yoga*, a yoga method known for the use of physical practices. Ashtanga thus forms up of physical practices (*āsana*, *prāṇāyāma*, *pratyāhāra*) and mental practices (*dhāraṇa*, *dhyāna*, *samādhi*) together with moral and ethical guidelines (*yama*, *niyama*) (e.g. Jois, 2002). While the other parts are stressed all the time in the Ashtanga teachings, the physical side of yoga practice dominates not only in the media representation but oftentimes also in the practice situations (see e.g. Freeman et al., 2017; Smith, 2008, p. 147). Indeed, postures like *dvipāda sīrsāsana*, in which both legs are put behind the head while sitting and holding hands together, are aesthetically pleasing when done by an advanced practitioner.

2 The aesthetics of yoga parallels easily yoga with either the Arts in general or with some art form. This happens e.g. in Newcombe’s analysis of yoga studios and in Singleton’s analysis of modern postural yoga’s history. (Newcombe, 2018; Singleton, 2010.)

3 I refer with “Ashtanga” only to Jois’s method. For a detailed description of Ashtanga from a practitioner’s point of view, see e.g. Benjamin Richard Smith’s sociocultural articles (Smith, 2004, 2007, and 2008).

Ashtanga is often described as physical, dynamic, and performance centered. When one starts the practice for the first time, it's evident to focus on the physical side, that is, in practicing posture (*āsana*) and breathing (*prāṇāyāma*). Ashtanga teachings also notice the value of physicality with the use of bodily techniques such as the special kind of audible breathing (*ujjayi*), muscle locks (*bandhas*), gazing points (*driṣṭi*), focusing attention, and the method for linking breathing to movement (*vinyāsa*). These techniques are believed to help in regulating the life force (*prāna*) enabling thus the hoped purification. For example, the capacity to control one's breathing is believed to imply the practitioner's capacity to control their mind (e.g. Jois, 2002, p. 50; Feuerstein, 1990, p. 135). Ergo, the physically bounded technique of vinyāsa is in the core of Ashtanga practice. I will come back to it later. However, despite of the physical bias, Ashtanga is a holistically engaging practice in which a practitioner must deal with their whole being, whether when practicing posture, concentration (*dhāraṇa*), meditation (*dhyaṇa*), or when working to follow the guidelines, like non-violence (*ahiṃsā*), and purity (*śauca*) (e.g. Smith, 2008; Neverin, 2008).

The immediate experience of practicing Ashtanga is somatic. According to Shusterman, in neuroscience, somatic describes especially “feelings of skin, proprioception, kinaesthesia, bodily temperature, balance, and pain” (Shusterman, 2012, p. 6). Doing the practice heats the body up until dripping sweat on a yoga mat and touch is notable when trying to push one's hands through the crossed legs in *garbhapindasāna*. Although pain is generally avoided in yoga practice, sometimes bending forward hurts the hamstrings. In the somaesthetics' point of view, somatic has, however, much wider reference emphasizing a living body in interdependence with pretty much everything. It describes all that affects the being and functioning of a body-mind, either inside or outside it, all the senses, emotions, cognition, habits, movement patterns, and ways to experience the body-mind, as well as all naturally or culturally shaped knowledge (e.g. Shusterman 2012, p. 16). It goes without saying, that the aesthetic dimension affects a yoga practitioner, too.

In yoga contexts, the aesthetic relates often only to beauty. For example, in the 46th *sūtra* of *Vibhūtipāda*,⁴ beauty belongs to the perfections of body acquired through yoga (Broo, 2010, p. 197). Beauty seems to be promised in yoga practice. When beauty is commonly understood as a quality in objects we observe, it's easy to relate aesthetics in yoga to a yoga practitioner's changed appearance or to their exquisite practice performance. Practicing Ashtanga changes the body as I've pointed out in the introduction. Moreover, the dynamic way to perform Ashtanga suggests that a refined postural performance would be even the purpose of the practice. Visually focused understanding of the aesthetics of yoga is, however, not comprehensive when considering somatically experienced modern yoga.

Aesthetic, as a concept, derives from the ancient Greek word *aisthesis* meaning roughly perception. The somaesthetic view emphasizes perception as a phenomenon dealing with the whole body-mind. To Shusterman perception is “embodied” and the aesthetic refers then to feeling, consciousness, and sensory appreciation, as well; the aesthetic is an unavoidable feature of normal human existence and a part of everyday life (Shusterman 2012, pp. 3, 103, 111, 140–141, 182–183, 188, 288–314). In yoga practice, however, the nature of our everyday perception is generally considered dysfunctional, forming a source to our suffering which a practitioner seeks to overcome with yoga (White 2012, pp. 6–8). Yoga practice is ought to make one feel better. Shusterman points out that in somaesthetics this “feel better” refers both to cultivating the

4 Yoga Sūtra 3.46.: rūpa-lāvanya-bala-vajra-saṃhanantvāni kāya-sampat.

present experience and to the consciousness about the cultivation (Shusterman, 2012, p. 111). Practicing yoga develops perception and enhances skills to experience. I leave to be pondered, if the inner experience of a somatic practice like yoga, in fact, cultivates the aesthetic.

Performances have always had their place at least in modern postural yoga. Already Krisnamacarya arranged spectacle-like yoga demonstrations (Singleton 2010, pp. 190–196). In a typical practice situation, it would be, however, odd to speak about performance because the practice is not aimed at the audience's enjoyment. Audience, in the literal meaning, is rarely present when Ashtanga is practiced, but, practitioners pause sometimes to contemplate fellow practitioners' performing. It can be an aesthetic experience to watch bodies performing movement sometimes simultaneously and with a concentrate manner while listening to the steady sound of breathing and the occasional thumps on a wooden floor in a sweaty yoga studio, which even without practitioners often praises many senses with colorful yoga mats, candles, incense, borduna-like silence, and images from mythology (like *Gaṇeśa* and *Oṃ*) and recent history (like teachers' photos). One's own practice performance may also provide aesthetic experiences. While observing their "inner body" during the practice, a yoga practitioner may experience ecstatic sensations like, for example, bright light seen with eyes shut (Bernard 1960, pp. 90, 94–95).

The performance is a part of Ashtanga, but, it is better to understand live with which Shusterman means unavoidable, conscious and developed, controlled and pleasurable everyday being (Shusterman, 2000, p. ix; Shusterman 2012, pp. 17, 27, 288–314). In fact, many Ashtanga practitioners attempt "to make the practice a part of everyday life" and "transform their quotidian selves" with the help of the practice (Smith, 2004, note 4).

In a general Ashtanga experience, novelties and exciting exotic experiences play a small role. More often a practitioner is occupied with repetition, familiarity, and perseverance. This is highlighted with Ashtanga teachings, which prefers regularity and values the most the daily practice done early in the morning. The practice is usually modified little according to each practitioner and even the individual practice program stays basically the same, sometimes for years. Every time the practice starts with opening a yoga mat, taking a straight standing pose (*samastitiḥ*) and chanting a mantra. Each practice consists of sun salutations (*sūryanamaskāra*), fundamental poses, poses of the series under practice, and the finishing sequence. The practice ends with a mantra, relaxation, and rolling up the mat. Experientially each practice is still different.

Ashtanga's live performance denotes the skillful and enjoyable practice performance and points to the transformed existence. Following Shusterman, performing Ashtanga is then living in a "waking state," the "Art of Living," which to Shusterman is a potential source for aesthetic enrichment and "spiritual enlightenment" (Shusterman 2012, pp. 26, 288–314). Within yoga discourse, the ideal purpose of the yoga practice is commonly to renounce the attachment to the world. When the aesthetic is understood as deepening our attachment through perception, senses, and emotions, thus enriching and complexifying our experience, it follows that the aesthetic challenges a yoga practitioner. In Ashtanga practice this challenge appears as the dramatization of the everyday.

Shusterman grounds his understanding of dramatization in "the act of framing" which functions as a maintaining mechanism for the dialectics between the immediately perceived surface of the experience and its deeper cultural frame (Shusterman 2002, pp. 10, 226–238).⁵ In

⁵ The reading in this paragraph bases strongly on the Shusterman's explanation found in the same place.

Ashtanga, a practitioner observes everyday mundane actions, like breathing, moving the body, and being present through participating attentively into the practice, that is, into the frame. “The act of framing” describes the twofold function in which continuous directing of attention both intensifies the experience of everyday being during the practice and helps to experience better the everyday in general. A practitioner becomes thus always more powerfully engaged to the immediately perceived surface of the experience during the practice. At the same time “the act of framing” instills Ashtanga’s cultural value.

3. Pleasure in (The) Practice

Ashtanga is practiced in various environments, though yoga studios, with their often ascetic (and in my experience also kitschy) style, provide the ideal surroundings for the practice. The built-in practice space is a yoga mat, a portable space separator providing a secure chassis for the bodily movement and privacy to the practice experience. As Newcombe says, the limits of a personal yoga mat, “a ritual space,” “are often experienced as a deeply personal location,” and practitioners guard its sacredness (Newcombe 2018, pp. 566–567). However, for a frequent practitioner, the practice itself remains a place, a somatically engaging significant set-up, through which one wonders—as one would in an environment like nearby woods or a home town—participating somatically in encountering at times something new but most of the time “the same old thing.”

A yoga practice, as the body-mind, can be understood as a place for experiment and experience through the already discussed “act of framing.”⁶ In Ashtanga practice, framing means directing somatic attention, in general. Concentrating in breathing and proprioception directs the attention to the experiences of the “inner body” withdrawing attention from the surroundings. Framing heightens the significance of the “inner body” giving a familiar sense of the situation due to previous practice experiences. A yoga practice is thus a place in a way philosopher Arto Haapala understands place.

It is interpretation in the hermeneutic sense of living in an environment and making sense of it by acting there, by doing various things in the environment, by creating different kinds of connections between matters seen and encountered. In this sense interpretation is very much a matter of action [. . .] it is something that we are engaged in all the time while engaged in our daily practices. (Haapala 2005, 46–47.)

An Ashtanga practitioner refines the posture into the body-mind and observes the effects dwelling somatically within nested frames; the quotidian life, a yoga studio, a yoga mat, mantras, *vinyāsa*, a posture, the body-mind, and the body-mind’s functions and directions.

According to philosopher Ossi Naukkarinen, popular phenomena should be approached as environments, that is, instead of objects, as ever-changing event-like situations and processes in time and space demanding multi-sensory engagement (Naukkarinen, 2017). I find this view appropriate also in the case of popular Ashtanga practice. Instead of art works or forms, the practice parallels everyday environments and belongs thus to the same category with places where we brush our teeth, commute, and shop grocery, for example. One may ask, how does the aesthetic relate to these environments? *Yoga Sūtra*, which Ashtanga practitioners tend to read, might give one answer with its underlying metaphysical duality.

⁶ Richard Shusterman discusses also about a scene (skene) in understanding the body-mind as a place (Shusterman 2002, pp. 233–235).

The metaphysics of yoga philosophy holds that the two entities, Nature (*prakṛti*) and “the seer” (*puruṣa*), connect and thus form up the existence. All perceivable belongs to essentially creative *prakṛti* and its entangling three qualities (*guṇa*); *sattva* (e.g. bliss), *rajas* (e.g. activity), and *tamas* (e.g. dense). A yoga practitioner is a result of this entanglement and therefore unable to perceive the reality as it is. Only *puruṣa*, existing behind all, sees the truth. (Broo 2010, pp. 19, 183–184, 207–208; Ruzsa, 2019.) In my reading, with *aesthesis* in mind, the existence itself seems an aesthetic experience, only that a yoga practitioner may not receive it so. Yoga, like any everyday environment, belongs to the aesthetic dimension when perceived. Of course, this reading simplifies the presented metaphysics, but my point is to illustrate with it the necessity to base the aesthetics of yoga on engagement instead of distance.

When trying to understand the aesthetic dimension of an everyday environment like a yoga practice, Berleant’s concept “aesthetic field” is enlightening. It emphasizes an unavoidable engagement in the field, which consists of inseparable though recognizable material, appreciative, creative, and performative dimensions, forces, and phenomena instead of objects (Berleant, 1991). I discussed the performative dimension already in the preceding chapter and I revisit it in the next chapter together with discussing the creative dimension. Here the examples of practicing posture and the way to unite postures illustrate Ashtanga’s material and appreciative dimensions.

In practicing posture, the pervasiveness of materiality, brought up with yoga’s metaphysics, becomes experiential. A practitioner experiences not only “flesh and bones” but also emotions, thoughts, sensations, and energy flows as something to be directed and modified. An example of materiality in Ashtanga practice is e.g. *Utthitahastapādaāṅgusthāsana* (UHP), a posture practiced in the beginning of the first series (*Yoga Chikitsa*). It is a typical balancing posture in which one stretches a leg up in front of the body supporting the posture with a strong leg, holding big toe with fingers and waist with another hand. It takes time to learn to stand without shaking in it and the balance vanishes easily. A practitioner supports, strengthens, lengthens, realigns, releases, and opens the body in relation to a set fulcrum while working to receive, accept, and let go of the thoughts and emotions like fear, judgement, anxiety, or problem solving. A practitioner modifies the breath and nervous system and directs the sensations of focus along the body. When practicing in a group of other practitioners, a practitioner also directs the somatic attention in haptic communication with others (Smith, 2007, p. 35). A practitioner participates this way in directing other’s “energy flows” as well. In UHP the balancing of *prakṛti*’s qualities is palpable. When *tamas* prevails, laziness, pain, or anxiety obstruct a posture. When *rajas* dominates, a practitioner overemphasizes the performance. But, when a practitioner experiences the place with no need to move and no need to stay still either, the pose happens.

Every posture done for the first time is a “foreign land” with unknown places and borders opening a new “window” to the reality. The postures bring up the body-mind’s essence with new somatic experiences enabling a practitioner to realize and scrutinize their limitedness. The appreciative participation to the postures’ and the body-mind’s transformation may mean new ways to think and experience. Besides postures change the physical point of view due to body’s position and gazing points, the point of view to the body-mind, gravity, and the environment changes after practicing a posture some time. Indeed, a posture is a “living metaphor.” As Berleant says, a “living metaphor’s” force “does not lie principally in what it means but what it does” (Berleant 1991, pp. 125–126). At one point, the posture manifests familiar, comprehensible, own, easy, and pleasant.

Pleasure is mainly discussed, in the traditions that relate to Ashtanga, either in relation to

the understanding of yoga body as a “sealed hydraulic system” or in relation to experiencing emptiness. The former discussion deals with the esoteric practice of transforming the essential fluids to the “ambrosia of life” with the help of “the feminine principle” (*kundalinī*) and “the heat of asceticism” (White, 2012, p. 16; Jois, 2002, p. 31).⁷ In some forms of this practice, pleasure (*bhukti*) values even higher than liberation (*mukti*) (Dehejia, 1986, p. 185). The discussion about emptiness, instead, relates enjoyment to developing consciousness, one of the core principles of yoga practice, in general. It is understood that an advanced yoga practitioner’s “one-pointed awareness” (*samādhi*) develops through “empirical, rational, sensorial, and subjective” levels including both object-bound and objectless awareness; “Bliss (*ānanda*) and joy (*hlāda*)” are related to the sensorial or aesthetic level of awareness in which the focus of a practitioner is the aesthetic cognizing itself, either in the “blissful apprehension” or in “the indescribable intentional flow of awareness” (White 2012, pp. 6–12; Larson 2012, pp. 84–88). In my opinion postural practice provides the third, and more relevant, way to grasp pleasure in popular Ashtanga practice.

Modern yoga manuals discuss in detail about the correct way to perform postures. Ashtanga practitioners, however, often refer to Patañjali’s only words about posture: “steady and pleasant” (Broo 2010, pp. 134–136).⁸ I find these words echoing Haapala’s understanding of the everydayness. According to him, familiarity characterizes our everyday experience, instead of distance and strangeness, and this he relates especially to the experience of place. Everyday environment gives a homey background for our everyday experiences disappearing itself at the same time into its functionality, into just being present. It is our attachment to the environment that characterizes the everydayness. (Haapala, 2005, p. 41.) Following Haapala, the everydayness of Ashtanga practice is in its “being there,” as a part of life and its functions. A practitioner may, however, look forward to the next time to practice as one would look forward to going home.

The everydayness manifests in Ashtanga practice especially due to *vinyāsa*-technique.⁹ *Vinyāsa* frames each pose (*sthiti*) of a posture and unites specially arranged postures together. Thus, *vinyāsa* heightens the experience of settling down to a posture and makes the practice a continuous wholeness. In the immediate experience, *vinyāsa*, however, means matching one’s inner rhythm to the movement guided by the breathing. As such, *vinyāsa* backs postures, gives an environment for happenings, and helps to immerse in experiencing the practice. *Vinyāsa* is thus both a tool to experience present situation and a manifestation of being present. It helps a practitioner to realize the presence altogether.

Due to *vinyāsa*, Ashtanga is also characterized by alternation, structured by stillness and movement. The body-mind’s inner movement manifests while a practitioner is settled in a stillness of a pose, and the experiential stillness, instead, manifests while a practitioner is moved by *vinyāsa*. One might experience an alternating “landscape” where momentariness mingles with continuity alternating endlessly like the movements of waves approaching the shore. In my understanding, *vinyāsa* is a somatically experienced representation of the attempt to still the fluctuation of the mind, the famous Patañjali’s description of yoga (Broo, 2010, p. 32).¹⁰

7 In Ashtanga practice this is especially related to practicing inverted poses.

8 *Yoga Sūtra* 2.46.: “sthira-sukham āsanam |”. Philipp A. Maas argues, that sūtras 2.46. and 2.47. are to read together, when the meaning of *āsana* underlines two types of practices in classical Yoga: “slackening of effort” and “merging meditatively into infinity” (Maas, 2018, pp. 49–100).

9 Ashtanga community often states that the destroyed book *Yoga Korunta* by Rishi Vamana is the source for the method. For sure Krishnamacharya taught it during his years in Mysore palace yoga school. Singleton argues that the western bodily traditions influenced the method (Singleton, 2010, pp. 175–210).

10 *Yoga Sūtra* 1.2.: “yogaś citta-vṛitti nirodhah |”.

When a practitioner experiences consciously a pause between thoughts, between the happenings, between moving and settling down, the place may become experienced liminal by which I mean meaningful being in between. A practitioner drills stretching this experienced pause. Encountering the background environment from this position helps the practitioner to redefine the body-mind's construction. This may mean experiencing the body more as a blissful "non-place" as Shusterman describes his own Zen-experience (Shusterman 2012, p. 314). According to Neverin, even novice yoga practitioners may describe their practice experience as merging into "a whole different world," and with a long-lasting practice the liberating experience can provide a long-lasting continuous flow-experience (Neverin 2008, pp. 125, 123–128). The experience of flow is close to Berleant's conception of sacredness which he describes as a sensation of strong, participative, significant, and personal connection enabled with a holistic engagement. It is "a magical moment" in which the experience of reciprocity intensifies, concentration strengthens, and one is more perceptive. One may feel as merging together with the surroundings; the place becomes an environment. (Berleant 1997, pp. 171–172.)¹¹ In these moments, the whole sequence of postures may suddenly "open" through a posture-in-hand giving a feeling of beginning the practice from the middle. One might realize what it is all about.

In practicing Ashtanga, the experiences of sacredness may mean everyday openings of connection with the environment while the everydayness characterizes the aesthetics of Ashtanga practice. The aesthetics of yoga can therefore be understood without approaching yoga as an art form.

4. Balance and Beauty

Asceticism has characterized yoga practice for centuries. Contemporary yoga practitioners are, however, hardly ascetics with their "super cool" yoga pants trying to combine hectic modern lifestyle, career, and family life together. For many, Ashtanga means something like exercising at gym. The purpose of the practice is rarely to renounce the worldly life in search for final liberation. It may be that only a frequent practitioner experiences the everydayness as discussed in the previous chapter, since familiarizing oneself with the environment takes time. There are, however, other views to the everydayness. The everyday experiences may differ depending on person's character, habits, and skills to deal with the environment (Puolakka 2018). I believe that aesthetic experiences in modern postural yoga practice are available for each practitioner, and that this may be through the parallel character of balance and beauty.

In Ashtanga practice, asceticism relates to self-discipline (*tapas*), the Yoga Sūtra's moral guideline, which promises perfection of the body and senses (Broo, 2010, p. 132).¹² Indeed, maintaining the daily practice calls for self-discipline, but sometimes appearance beats practicing also in the case of a frequent practitioner. This is well illustrated by JP Sears, the internet comedian who ironizes the life around yoga practice in his project *AwakenWithJP*. His video "How to take yoga photos for Instagram" (*AwakenWithJP*, 2016), is a felicitous show of the tendency to link the visuality of a yoga practice representation to practitioner's status: the more beautiful, powerful, or expressive representation, the more advanced a practitioner is believed to be. This raises a question, if modern postural yoga practitioners, in fact, seek the aesthetic with their practice?

¹¹ Berleant argues, that in the experience of environment, sacred can be aesthetic without religious preferences (Berleant 1997, pp. 171–172).

¹² *Yoga Sūtra* 2.43: "kāyendriya-siddhir aśuddhi-kṣayāt tapasaḥ |". *Tapas* (to heat) has several meanings and it is practiced in various ways.

According to Klas Neverin, “beautism,” the extreme quest for beauty, may be empowered by neglecting language in modern yoga practice (Neverin 2008, pp. 131–135). I agree, to the extent that, since the meaning of beauty is neglected in modern yoga contexts, beauty becomes understood in the most common way our contemporary culture understands it, that is, as a sensuously biased concept. In modern yoga contexts, beauty describes almost purely a person or a deity—and most of all, a female yoga practitioner (also a theme, which JP Sears ironizes). The transcultural contemporary yoga scene is, however, an arena for the many culturally dependent beauty conceptions. One ought to recognize, for example, the typically eastern conception, which relates beauty to such phenomena as everyday life, learning processes, limitedness of human being, ideal expression, intuitiveness, metaphors, nature, and aestheticization of death (Eväsoja 2011, pp. 15–22).

In Shusterman’s understanding, ascesis has to do with beauty. For him, ascesis means “a special quality of attentive consciousness or receptive, caring mindfulness that discloses a vast domain of extraordinary beauty in the ordinary objects and events of everyday experience that are transfigured by such mindful attention” (Shusterman, 2012, p. 305). Beauty is thus found in the everyday life. Ascesis, which has an etymological root in the ancient Greek word *áskēsis* meaning exercise, relates to disciplined developing of consciousness. It is noteworthy, that the aesthetic contradicts anesthetic, not ascetic (Shusterman, 2012, p. 3). Ascesis characterizes person’s relation to the daily-life. Based on this understanding, ascetic could be valued as a style of an Ashtanga practitioner.

Style, as a concept, expresses the reflective connection between the form and the content. Style means expressing experientiality developed through somatic processes, and as Shusterman says, sometimes style manifests the whole being of a person and seems to “shine” out from them (Shusterman 2012, pp. 46, 332, 333–337).¹³ In any case, style is unavoidable. A yoga practitioner performs either consciously or unconsciously their experiential reality. In modern postural yoga practice, a practitioner’s “mindful attention,” the ascetic style, is based on balance. A practitioner balances the body-mind and its functions, a posture and postures relation to *vinyāsa*; and balancing captures also the relation between the self and the others, the teacher and the student, as well as the relation between purpose and method, liberation and renouncement of liberation. At some point, a practitioner may even need to balance yoga and non-yoga.

The style of a modern postural yoga practitioner evolves through practicing. Although, already one’s first Ashtanga practice may highlight the both meanings of “feel better”—one may both feel energized and realize enhanced perception—a first-timer and an advanced yoga practitioner undoubtedly experience their yoga practice differently. Somaesthetics, as an ameliorative framework, suggests that an advanced yoga practitioner is advanced also in experiencing aesthetically. Neverin seems to agree, when stating that experiential skills, such as perception, sensing, and interpretation, but also memory, emotions, and imagination steer modern postural yoga practitioner’s many experiences and sensitize them to perceive both the body-mind and its surroundings (Neverin 2008, pp. 125–126, 127).

Cultivating the body-mind changes experiencing. Therefore, a yoga practitioner’s task is creative. Within Ashtanga context, creativity of each practitioner follows from *prakṛti*’s essentially creative nature. Berleant illustrates creation with the idea of generation, a process of growth and development referring both to unfolding potentialities and to the reciprocity between different factors. According to him, creativity demands developed skills to be aware,

13 Klas Neverin notices that practitioners and their practices may be evaluated in relation to the volume of “shining (emotional) energy” formed by experienced empowerment and its reinforcement through gained attention with performing (Neverin 2008, pp. 128–135).

as well as skills to enter the experience and work with it. (Berleant 1991, pp. 132–150.) The continuously changing experientiality in Ashtanga is very much about unfolding skillfully expanding possibilities from one's being and about encountering with manifold factors in the manner of reciprocity. It is an effect of encountering the body-mind and discussing continuously with the body-mind, that one finds the possibility to put one's head between legs from behind and the mind behind the thoughts. But practitioner's experiential development relies also on the reciprocity with the sociocultural context. Alter and Neverin point out the relation between performing and empowerment in modern postural yoga: Others practice performances affect emotionally and motivationally practice experiences while performing empower existentially and socially, a situation, which may result in an emotionally "positive spiral" strengthened by a sense of belonging to the community (Alter, 2008, p. 46; Neverin 2008, pp. 128–135).

An experiential space that opens through creativity, be it inside the body-mind, around it, or between body-minds, may give a sense of liberation. However, Neverin argues, that yoga's power to change people has limits due to our interdependence with our material, social, and discursive environments (Neverin 2008, pp. 130–132). In my opinion, neglecting such concepts as beauty and aesthetic in modern yoga may hinder a yoga practitioner's process of cultivation.

When yoga is understood as a technology based on balancing the aspects of one's existence, yoga can bring forth, at least by analogy, experiences of beauty. The conception of beauty follows then the Pythagoreans' seminal "proportion-based theory," in which beauty consists of fit, right, or balanced proportions. According to philosopher Władysław Tatarkiewicz, this theory dominated the European aesthetics' conception of beauty for over two thousand years (Tatarkiewicz 1972, pp. 165–180). Also Shusterman seems to follow the theory when stating that somaesthetic programs, like yoga, aim at experiencing beauty and developing harmony in the body-mind. The many ways experiential proportions that become balanced are the different facets of one's own being. They manifest in between reflective and pre-reflective, between appearances, cognitive and affective, between internal and outer experiences, and between the experiencer and the experienced. Beauty is thus understood in the broadest sense including the ethical dimension. (Shusterman 2012, pp. 3, 5, 14, 22, 34–45, 87, 133, 305–306; Shusterman, 2000b, p. 142.)

Experiencing balance means being in the process, for balance is an active condition. It needs continuous maintenance and, at times, complete restoration. This is highlighted in *Bhagavad-Gītā*, in which Kṛṣṇa teaches the talent of equanimity to the depressed war hero Arjuna while persuading him to act instead of non-acting (Tapasyananda, 2003, p. 181).¹⁴ The dynamic character of balance manifests in the belief-system prominent in *Haṭha Yoga* tradition and discussed also in modern yoga contexts. The system's esoteric and metaphoric dualities such as sun and moon, life and death, heat and coolness, feminine and masculine are somatically experiential to a yoga practitioner (see e.g. White 2012, pp. 15–17; Mallinson 2012, pp. 258–262). Perhaps the clearest symbol of both balance and beauty can be found in the Hindu God Śiva, the lord of yogis, and his eternal dance. Śiva, whose image may be found also in a modern yoga studio, is a paragon of holding balance in whatsoever pose, and as a God the ultimate beauty. Indeed, succeeding in holding balance may feel like encountering beauty, the potential dimension of the process, face to face.

Such balance is the result of controlling the mind, or attention, which seems naturally disposed to flit hither and thither. Yoga is centering—the center being the

¹⁴ *Bhagavad-Gītā* is valued also in Ashtanga yoga community.

transcendental Being, whether it be called God or higher Self. Thus the word yoga signifies both the state of harmony and the means of realizing it. (Feuerstein, 1990, p. xx, emphasis in the original.)

Recognizing only extreme yoga experiences beautiful would imply that beauty in yoga practice is only for advanced practitioners. Balance, however, due to its dynamic character, can be experienced from the very first moment one starts to practice. In these experiences—in the sparks of yoga—a modern postural yoga practitioner may behold “extraordinary beauty.” With this analysis, it follows that without experiences of beauty, advancing in modern postural yoga practice is impossible.

5. Conclusion

The aesthetic is an unavoidable dimension of modern postural yoga, a practice for the millions. Although the aesthetic is rarely discussed within yoga contexts, modern postural yoga has elements that call for aesthetic consideration. Perception, senses, emotions, different kinds of materials, and developing consciousness, which form a part of a yoga practitioner’s project, are all critical to the aesthetic analysis and experiences. When approaching yoga practice through the material, appreciative, creative, and performative dimensions of the aesthetic field, also a yoga practitioner’s experiences of liminality, sacredness, liberation, and asceticism can be considered aesthetic.

Beauty, wellbeing, and success—the culturally trendy possible outcomes of yoga—are often favored in popular culture’s presentations of yoga. The popularization boosts the overall tendency to practice yoga, but, it often neglects yoga as a practice. I have tried to show how the aesthetics of yoga goes beyond appearance and how representations of yoga practices offer only a partial, nay fallacious, subject for analyzing the aesthetics in modern yoga. Following my argument, others practice performances in general, should be discussed rather as re-representations of yoga practice. Through explicating the experience of the Ashtanga yoga’s technique to unite postures, I have tried to show, that the live experience of performing yoga practice is already one kind of representation.

A picture of a half-naked film star-like woman in a yoga pose manifests the misleading dichotomy of the aesthetic and the ascetic, which can be, instead, considered interconnected. The fundamental practice of balancing consciously different aspects in order to maintain the yoga practice extends to balancing ascetic and aesthetic tendencies and experiences. In this process, philosophical works, such as *Yoga Sūtra*, are helpful as they equip a practitioner with the initial knowledge of the many aspects that need to be taken into account in the practice. I have tried to show that philosophical aesthetics may also support yoga practices further. Through discussing everyday experiences and experiences of beauty in yoga, it is apparent, that in yoga practice one may also have to balance consciously between different kinds of aesthetic experiences. Balancing a heart-beat-like momentary aesthetic experiences and a breath-like continuous everydayness may well be “Art of Living.” For a yoga practitioner, it is a somaesthetic beginning.

Through bringing the aesthetics into discussions about modern yoga, I wish to appreciate the contemporary situation where the ancient echoes in the aesthetically colorful present. Considering yoga practice as a somaesthetic program and as an everyday environment enable us to approach the aesthetics of yoga without understanding yoga as an art form. The aesthetic consideration thus brings a refreshed, if not a completely new, view to practicing yoga. Furthermore, the aesthetics of yoga provides a view to a technology as an experiential environment—be it that the

technology is one of the oldest—illustrating thus the “man-madeness” of a human being.

Why practicing yoga keeps attracting people instead of just using it as an entertainment? I propose, that through practicing yoga, one gets heightened everyday presence and satisfyingly intensified experiences of the everyday. Although, the aesthetic might not be the fundamental reason for practicing yoga in general, aesthetic experiences—sparks of yoga—empower the repetition of the practice—the fundamental premise of practice, in general. This way the aesthetic proves to be one of the key functions in modern postural yoga. I think that yoga’s popularization calls for reconsidering the aesthetics of yoga.

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